



The Shirukan aren't the only threat to the Starfire shard Raea bears...

An alien enemy has awakened to reclaim the crystal that was theirs, and those last survivors of a war that nearly destroyed Inar'Ahben aren't afraid to kill anyone who stands in their way.

An ancient monument to a mythical civilization on Earth may hold the key to unlocking the mystery, if it can be deciphered. Raea is running out of time to solve the most puzzling question of human history and resolve the conflict brought to Earth. If she fails, she may lose more than the Starfire...

Crystal Tomb

Starfire Angels Book 3

By
Melanie Nilles

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Ancient Mysteries

Talk about a major distraction from practicing her valedictorian speech.

No way. Raea stared at the computer screen, her breath frozen in her lungs. Her eyes fixed on the image of a round stone monolith with etched script in concentric circles around a central red stone. The caption said the object was found in the shallow waters off the coast of an islet west of Spain, in a location thought to be the site of the fabled civilization of Atlantis. According to experts, for more than twelve thousand years, it had rested on the ocean floor. It had existed before human civilization.

The headline over the picture said the monolith had disappeared three days ago from a tractor trailer hauling it with the rest of the Atlantis exhibits making their way to the next leg of the U.S. tour.

Scanning news headlines was a great way to procrastinate on practicing her valedictorian address and see if she should be worried about the Starfire, but Raea hadn't expected *this*. The writing was Inari and it was found on Earth dated long before the Starfire came to them. That couldn't be right. The dating must have been wrong. The Starfire didn't allow the Inari to visit Earth until six thousand years ago, about six thousand Earth years too old. How was that possible?

Sure, Inari were far more advanced than humans, but twelve thousand years ago was a long time. Why would they have been on Earth? *How* could they have reached it?

Something inside her itched to know. Maybe Elis knew.

Raea twisted in the desk chair to where he sat on the bed behind her playing with a ball of Starfire energy between his hands. "Elis."

An eye blink later, the lights dimmed around her. The room faded and merged into another. But the lights hadn't dimmed; her vision had. She stared at the same round stone, but not through her eyes...

Padina's reflection gazed back from the glass case. She studied the stone monolith on the other side, her brown hair hanging around the source of the view and the Starfire crystal hanging at her chest. Familiar script formed concentric circles of text from the center to the outer edge of the stone plate.

"No one knows what it means. Some speculate that it's a clue to the location of Atlantis," Scott said from somewhere out of the picture, which shifted to reveal his youthful appearance and the glasses he had always worn. "But it's supposed to be around twelve thousand years old."

The image blurred from movement and focused again on the round stone behind the glass, the flowing script clarifying in their pattern.

"Fascinating. Isn't it?"

Padina said nothing but stared at the monolith.

"Paddy? What are you doing?"

She waved him away.

"You memorizing it?"

The scene continued to focus on the stone with no word from her.

"Maybe I'll just wander a bit, until you're ready." Footsteps tapping on tile faded away.

After some time, the image shifted to reveal a larger room of display cases.

"Paddy." Scott stepped into the image. "Finally done with that thing?"

Scott's eyes drifted past her to the display and the scene shifted to the monolith once more. "Atlantis is just a story, but ancient wonders are interesting, especially when they seemed to know so much and lose it all. A lesson for generations to come."

"Raea...Raea."

She blinked away the vision and glanced down at the crystal hanging on her chest, the same Starfire shard her mother had worn. They did it again. The entities had shown her a vision from their memory of a day long ago. Her mother had seen the same monolith in a museum display.

"I'm all right." She turned aside to Elis, who knelt next to the desk chair, a look of concern from the deep purple eyes behind the wild black locks. "Just another Starfire vision."

"Because of that?" Elis stared at the image on the screen.

Yes, that. This time.

The Starfire visions came whenever they wanted her to understand something. Two months ago, it had started with visions of her mother, both on Earth and on Inar'Ahben before Padina fled to Earth to escape the Shirukan, the elite soldiers of the Shirat Empire. At first, the pain of remembering her mother in all the beautiful details had hurt, because her mother and stepfather had been dead for thirteen years. But Raea had grown to value the memories after accepting that she wasn't human like her friends and that she bore a responsibility even her mother had been reluctant to accept—protecting a shard of the powerful Starfire crystal. The visions had continued since then, usually when she least expected it.

"Mom saw it herself in a museum display, probably when they lived in Minneapolis." No museum in North Dakota, least of all the small town of McClarron, had the capacity for a traveling display like that, much less the security it must have required.

Apparently, security lacked since it had been stolen. Who would want an Inari artifact? Rather, who would steal to possess an artifact believed to be from Atlantis? Unless they were one of the twenty-one other Keepers on Earth—and Keepers wouldn't steal—they wouldn't know it was alien in origin.

Okay, so maybe a few hundred people with an obsession for rare antiquities *might* want to get their hands on it.

Whatever the case, the real thing was gone, but she had memories.

Elis rose to his feet but hunched over to gaze at the screen. His hand gently slid hers off the mouse and claimed it for himself. A click on the image saved it to the hard drive. While she watched, he pulled it up as a slightly larger image, but the writing wasn't as clear as the scene burned into her memory from the Starfire's revelation.

"According to radiocarbon dating, it's supposed to be over twelve thousand years old," she said as he gazed intently at the image.

"Over fourteen thousand Inari years."

Five Earth years to six Inari years, based on the shorter days of Inar'Ahben and a shorter revolution around the sun of their home system.

"What were they doing on Earth?"

Elis said nothing, leaning over the desk with an intensity in his eyes she hadn't seen in a while. He studied the image as her mother had in the vision.

Silence filled the small bedroom around them, his bedroom. Judging from the quiet, Evelyn Johnson must have fallen asleep. The old widow had provided him a home—including that room—on Earth for the last two years. Raea imaged her in her favorite recliner near the front window of her sitting room with her chin on her chest and her fingers twined at her middle.

But she grew impatient with the silence.

"Elis?"

Nothing. He stared at the image.

"What's it say?"

Still no response. And she thought her momentary visions were annoying. Enough of this. She poked him in the ribs and he flinched.

"What's it say?"

"Didn't you read it?"

"Not exactly. Someone's head is in my way."

A cute grimace of guilt twisted his mouth and he backed away. "Sorry."

And his eyes fixed on reading it again. Raea threw her head back against the chair and rolled her eyes. Typical.

"It talks about a war on the homeworld, an invasion by some other species; I'm not sure about some of the writing. It's old, even for us."

No kidding—fourteen thousand years. He'd said it himself.

"It sounds like the Miru knew about a compatible world far away and offered to take as many families as they could. It was inhabited, but from their exploratory studies, it was a perfect match."

A perfect match and the answer right before them—Earth. Then it was all true—the Inari had established a colony over twelve thousand Earth years ago, a colony remembered as Atlantis. She could accept that. But— "Who are the Miru? *What* are they?"

"Allies... sort of. One of our more advanced allies. We've never been able to crack interdimensional travel without the Starfire. They had ships that could for as long as we've known them. No one knows their homeworld or how to contact them, but they've always helped other species. From this—" He pointed to the image on the flat screen. "It sounds like they brought a few hundred Inari to Earth to save our species from destruction. It doesn't say why the outsiders attacked, though, only that they were destroying the homeworld when the refugees escaped."

"Obviously the invaders failed." Inar'Ahben was alive and thriving as a world.

He frowned and his eyes pinched as if focusing on part of the image. "Can you read that?" He pointed to the blurry inner ring around a central sphere of round red crystal.

Raea closed her eyes and recalled the image in perfect clarity from the Starfire vision with her mother. This was one time she was grateful for the unfading memory the Starfire in her genes gave her.

Raea studied the smaller characters clear in her memory but didn't understand more than a couple, and those didn't make sense. She'd only been learning to read and write the language of her species for a little over two weeks. "I'm not sure."

At a soft sigh from him, she opened her eyes. "The language is old. Things have changed," he said.

"But Inari were on Earth long ago, before the Starfire came to them."

Elis stepped back and sat on the edge of the queen bed filling most of the space in the room. His eyes shifted from the monitor, past her in the desk chair, to somewhere else. He wandered lost in his thoughts again, the quiet guy who had brooded around school and earned the nickname Creeper because of it, until he became a hero.

"The mystery deepens." With him as much as with the monolith.

Elis exhaled sharply but said nothing, his expression one of deep thoughts she could only guess.

Not even a glance? Not a kiss or a touch to acknowledge her?

He really was focused, but she could change that.

Raea move from the chair to sit on his thigh, forcing him to take notice. The monolith represented history past and gone; he didn't need to spend all his time worrying about it. This was the present with its own challenges and trials. Still, for once he didn't think about the Shirukan, the elite soldiers of the Shirat Empire, who had come after her for the Starfire; she supposed that was an improvement.

A warm hand slid around her middle, the security of his arm holding her close to the firm, fit body

beneath the dark shirt. Although she still wasn't sure about bonding permanently—sharing his pleasure and pain through a sort of telepathic connection that would build from physical contact—she couldn't imagine her life without Elis, her dark angel and the most sensitive and caring guy she'd ever known. Not even her friend Josh could compare, although he came close but only as a friend.

Raea laid her arms around Elis's shoulders, a shiver of anticipation coursing through her from the light trace of his fingers on her side.

She combed aside the black locks from his eyes, the soft strands slipping like silk through her fingertips. When she'd escaped from Inar'Ahben to return to her Earth home, he said he'd cut his hair if she really wanted, but by then she didn't want him to. It gave him a dark, mysterious look that fit him. Elis was the Dark Angel, after all. She couldn't ask him to change.

Her hand settled along his smooth cheek and she leaned close. "Don't think about it so much. It's old history, lost at that," she whispered.

"I'm not...anymore."

Exactly what she wanted to hear.

["I was thinking you need to study harder."]

What a way to ruin the mood. Why did he have to be so serious?

No. He teased her. Ooh! She'd wipe that coy grin from his face.

"You—"

While holding her tight, he pulled her down on the bed with him and laughed. *So clever, and weird.* He had changed so much since the Starfire brought them together.

All right. So...he'd taken her by surprise. That was unusual for him. Elis usually shied from too much intimacy.

Raea pushed herself up on one arm, her brown hair sliding over her shoulder to hang alongside her head. She could play along with this game. "School's out, I'll have you know."

"I know."

Not that again. Raea growled and her eyes narrowed, until he lifted his head to kiss her. She tried to pretend to be mad with tight lips but she couldn't when his kiss sent shivers of anticipation through her and touched the deepest desires of her body. He drew her back down beside him on the bed.

This wasn't the Elis she had known for two years and avoided. Had she known he could make her fly without wings, she would have asked him out sooner. He'd been nothing but sweet and caring to the point that he never asked for anything in return for giving her whatever she needed.

She would have done anything for him.

Oh, God, that felt good.

The hands sliding along her back and sides found all the right places to make her pulse race, which made her more agreeable. His lips pressing against hers stole her breath and inspired a pleasurable warmth which coursed through her and urged her to press against him for more.

As usual, he pulled away at that point.

He lay close so his breath blew warm across her mouth. So tempting.

"You're forgiven," she whispered in the hopes he would take it as a hint.

He lay in silence, his breath steady and his hands enticing her with the gentle massage along her side and hip.

After what felt too long, Raea frowned and studied his face. Something was wrong. She set her hand on his cheek to get his attention. "I was only joking." She wasn't mad. Surely he realized that.

Since her return from Inar'Ahben, she told him she would bond with him. He shouldn't be afraid anymore, but she had hurt him by almost rejecting him. Did it still bother him that much?

His eyes dropped from her and his touch disappeared from her side to her hand on his face, which he grabbed in his and pulled to his chest. Now she knew something was wrong. Her insides ran cold with dread. What had she done?

"Elis?"

His fingers rubbed hers and those purple eyes stared at her and through her at the same time. This wasn't right. Oh, God.

"Did I do something wrong?" *Say no. Please say no.*

"No." His fingers tightened around her hand.

Whew! But that still didn't tell her anything. "Then...what is it?"

He released her hand to softly comb the hair from her face.

The distant ring of the phone filled the silence as his hand slid down her shoulder to her back, and he pulled her close so her face tucked into his shoulder. She held tight to him, unwilling to let go for any reason. Everything felt right when they were together and nothing else in the universe could separate them.

"I would never do anything to hurt you," he whispered.

She swallowed the lump of emotions sticking in her throat, afraid yet eager to know what he tried to say. "I know."

His swallow sounded loud in her ear and spiked her through with dread. "Everything is happening so fast and..."

"Elis! Raea!" The shout from downstairs chilled the room.

No! Evelyn couldn't have worse timing.

"And what?" *Not yet, Evelyn.* She had to know what he meant to say. A million ideas raced through her mind, some of them bad.

"Raea! Debbie needs to talk to you!"

No! Not now. Her aunt had the worst timing. They were next door. Couldn't she wait?

His arms loosened around her. "It's not important."

Not important? But— What was he going to tell her? That he wanted a break? That couldn't be right. Did his cousin Nare get to him and make him more cautious? Was the idea of bonding to her now wrong? Was she moving too fast for him? *What?*

Elis sat up and pulled her up next to him. "You better take the call."

"Debbie can wait." Besides, it was probably another call to check up on whether she planned to come home for the night as an excuse to talk her out of sleeping with him. Sure, she'd stayed a few nights, but nothing had happened, at least nothing that involved clothes coming off. And it wasn't anyone else's business if something did. She was eighteen and done with high school, technically. A few more days and a stupid speech and she would be completely free, at least from school.

Debbie would still be there.

A wry smile crooked up his face—so cute on him she wanted to forget everything else. Elis might not be the hottest guy in that town, but he was cute and loved her, or at least she hoped that's what he was trying to say. He'd never had any trouble before. Geez, each time he kissed her was like it was their last breath.

Maybe it was. *No. No. No! Don't think that.*

"No, she won't. You know that."

Raea huffed out her frustration and stood. Damn. She hated that he was right. He was always right.

This checking up on her by her aunt had to end. She wasn't a child anymore; she controlled her own life. "Fine." This was the last time her aunt would interfere; then he would finish what he intended to say.

His hand grasped hers, stopping her from storming down the stairs. To her relief, he stood with her, a calm look on his face. Her anger melted—he'd always had a soothing effect on her—and she led him by the

hand out the room and down the stairs with her. Maybe she wouldn't be so hard on Debbie. Maybe.

Leaning on her cane for support, Evelyn stood at the bottom of the stairs with the cordless handset. Her cheeks sagged with age and her back hunched from years of osteoarthritis. The short curls of gray outlined a friendly face inspiring guilt in Raea for her anger.

Evelyn put the phone to her cheek. "She's right here, dear," she said and handed it Raea.

Raea took the handset and lifted it to her face, glancing at Elis a step behind her for the calm strength he offered. His fingers tightened within hers momentarily and relaxed, releasing her frustrations.

"Debbie."

"Oh, good. Raea. I'm glad you're all right."

Her aunt sounded relieved, as if she'd been deeply worried. Not good. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I know; you're with Elis. But the message on the machine—"

Uh, oh. Her stomach knotted. "What message?"

"He said he called on behalf of a Matthew Stein. He sounded out of breath as if he'd been working out...or running."

Raea grimaced and looked to Elis. Matthew Stein had been the bodyguard of Mister Torres, the protector. Elis had used the abilities of the Starfire to link to Torres's mind for the secrets of the Eye, an amulet protecting a fifth shard of the Starfire crystal from detection.

"What did he say?"

"I think you should hear it for yourself...both of you. He mentioned you and Elis. Raea, you're not in trouble, are you? I mean, besides the Shirukan?"

"I don't know. We'll be right over."

"Good. Hurry, before Mike gets home. You know how he feels about all this."

Yeah, did she ever know. Her uncle Mike had never thought much of her, usually ignoring her and favoring his own two boys. He had become grouchy since all the attention by Nina Russet, the reporter who had nearly exposed her secret two months ago. Mike knew nothing about what Raea was, and she'd prefer to keep it that way.

"Be there in a few." Raea clicked off the phone and handed it to Elis, freeing her hands to open the foyer closet. In one hand, she lifted her cheap slip-ons and in the other Elis's sneakers.

"Is something wrong, dear?" Evelyn stood in the doorway between the foyer and the sitting room.

Elis took his shoes and sat down at the bottom of the steps to put them on. Raea slipped her feet into her shoes while he was still tying his laces.

"I don't know. Nothing we didn't expect, I guess, but it could be trouble." Torres and Stein had come to them because they had lost contact with other protectors of the Eye. They didn't want the knowledge of its location lost. Elis now possessed all of Torres's knowledge. If someone knew he had visited them...

This could be trouble. Big trouble.



Elis followed Raea across the short lawn of adjacent yards to the blue-sided house next door.

Across the quiet street, a couple cars parked at the curb in front of the gray house. An unfamiliar dark van across the street gave her the creeps.

Raea caught it in a glance as she ran up the cement steps to the front porch and the door with the full-length oval pane of decorated glass and matching sidelights. Anxious to get away from the creepy van, she yanked open the door and entered the main floor with the vaulted ceiling.

Buddy's nails clicked on the laminate in his excitement to meet her, his long tail whipping behind him. The chocolate lab skidded to a halt and squatted, his tail sweeping the floor. She reached down to rub his head and to stop him from jumping up on her. "Hey, boy."

"Raea." Across the main floor, Debbie stood by the answering machine next to the stainless steel fridge. She sounded almost relieved.

Raea slipped off her shoes and hurried to meet her aunt. "Did Dave or Eric hear the message?" Although she and Elis had been exempt from finals, like many of their senior class, it was after school hours. Her cousins could be home at any time.

"No. Dave's still at track practice and Eric's with him."

Good. She didn't need them overhearing.

Debbie pressed a few buttons on the machine and a raspy voice echoed from the speaker: "Raea. I hope this is the right number. My name is Jeff Richards. I'm a friend of Matthew Stein. He said to call if anything happened to him." He let out a shaky breath. "I don't know how to say this...They found his body last night...He and his friend, Doctor Torres, disappeared several days ago. He worried someone was watching them. I...I can't believe..." His deep breath blew over the speaker. "I don't know how you're involved, but if you know something, please call me..."

"Already got it." Debbie handed her a paper with his name and number.

The voice on the machine ended and the recording clicked off.

Raea stared at the paper in disbelief. Torres was right—someone was after him, the tall Hispanic man who had come to them as a protector bearing the location of a fifth shard of the Starfire on Earth. Stein had been his body guard. Who could have done this to them?

They'd only found Stein and he was dead. What happened to Torres?

"Raea, what's going on?" The worried look on her aunt's face shifted from her to Elis. Those perfectly plucked brows pinched together in concern. Oh, man. She hated keeping secrets from Debbie, even if her aunt had kept a very big secret from her. This wasn't the same, though.

"I...It's..." Dear God. What could she say?

"You're better off not knowing," Elis said calmly.

Exactly. Thank goodness he could think on his feet.

But those crossed arms were bad. Debbie wasn't buying it. The worry was there, but overshadowed by the household boss. So not good. Raea swore her insides turned to gel.

"Trust me," Elis said.

Debbie looked from one of them to the other, her lips twitching indecisively until her eyes fixed on Elis. "All right. I know you have your reasons, but *please* be careful."

So, she took Elis's word over Raea's? *Figures*. The two had been in collusion not to tell Raea what she really was until the Starfire made her wings grow out two months ago. This was so unfair, but it wasn't worth

arguing.

"We will," Raea said with more confidence than she felt and tucked the paper into her jeans pocket. Elis's hand on her waist gave her a boost and she put a hand over his.

A sudden knock on the door stole her breath. Man, she was jumpy. *Calm down.* Just to be on the safe side, she reached for the machine and held the delete key until the computer voice announced, "All old messages deleted."

A moment later, another knock on the door nearly stopped her heart. Damn, talk about paranoid.

While Debbie crossed the open floor to the door, Raea glanced down and caught a sight that made her heart jump from her chest. "Elis!" He'd forgotten the fingerless gloves to hide his Starburst marks. If word got out that they had the same marks, there might be some uncomfortable questions.

He slid his hands into his jeans pockets and met her eyes with a smooth grin as Debbie reached the door. That was close.

Debbie peered out the sidelight with a frown a few seconds before opening the front door. "Oh. Anita."

Anita? As in Anita Cross who lived a block west and south in the old Seidel house? Anita Cross who hardly talked to anyone, who was hardly ever seen because she was always on some business trip or another? For that matter, why did she even bother with a small town in the middle of nowhere? Airfares were much better out of the bigger cities and the closest airport was fifty miles away.

With her arm looped through Elis's, Raea led him across the floor to satisfy her curiosity.

"Debbie. Sorry to bother you, but I thought with the valedictorian under your roof, you might want some help for Sunday."

"Oh. Ah...thanks for the offer, but we should be good. You're certainly welcome to join us, though."

"Really, it's no problem. I thought I'd at least offer some of my folding chairs."

With Elis beside her, Raea stopped a few feet behind Debbie and waited.

The woman at the door *was* Anita Cross. Raea had seen her a few times around town. Like those other times, Anita smiled, her angular features seeming to blend in strict lines matching the pressed business suit and short blonde hair. A hint of crows' feet showed her age in the outer corners of dark blue eyes.

"Raea. Congratulations!" Those eyes shifted up to Elis and the smile never faltered. "And Elis Jasheir. This is a pleasure. Congratulations to both of you on your achievements."

"Thank you." Awkward. Raea looked up but Elis showed no hesitation or discomfort. It was a well known fact that they were co-valedictorians. Still, Raea wanted out of there. They had unfinished business requiring privacy. Not to mention if she had to hear any more details about the graduation party Debbie planned she was going to hurl; she just wanted to hang out with her friends.

"Thank you," Elis said.

Anita glanced down, the corner of her lips twitching up in a sly grin. "Birds of a feather...You two seem perfect together."

Okay, now things were getting weird. That old saying was too coincidental, or maybe it was just part of her paranoia.

"Anyway." Anita's attention refocused on Debbie. "May I come in? I'd really like to talk to you about helping out. In fact, I insist."

"I, ah..." Debbie's voice trailed off as Anita stepped past without an invitation.

Sheesh! Talk about pushy; nearly as bad as Nina Russet pushy. The memories of that woman ate at Raea's patience, stifling her in annoyance. Anita's step inside left her and Elis an opening, and she had to get out before she lost her patience.

"Excuse us, please." All the aggravation the reporter had caused only made her want to scream. Anita probably didn't mean to be intrusive, but who knew what she wanted. Raea didn't need to embarrass herself

being rude, not to mention enduring the lecture Debbie would probably give her on hospitality and respect. Anita wasn't Nina, or so she tried to tell herself.

"Really, I want to do all I can to help." The look she gave Debbie made Raea uneasy. Time to split. "We'll go so you can talk."

Elis said nothing but pushed the storm door open.

Idiot. After a poke in the ribs from her, he shoved his hand back into his pocket, leaving her to shut the door behind them.

Her eyes caught Anita's, but the woman still smiled pleasantly and stepped inside with Debbie, closing the door between them.

Too close, and something about it made her wary.

With Elis's hand clasped in hers, they hurried back across the lawns to the old yellow house. She couldn't wait until the graduation hassle was over and they could go back to their semi-normal lives. By Sunday, that whole street would be full, mostly with Debbie's family coming to congratulate Raea.

Elis leaned close. "You're worried."

What? Oh. "Yeah." *Thanks for stating the obvious.* She bit her tongue on the retort. He wasn't the one to snap at. That woman was. She'd only encountered Anita a few times and she'd always been pleasant. So what made Raea uneasy about this time? "I'm probably jumping at shadows. All that's happened and stuff. It just...I don't know."

"I know." His hand in hers calmed her. He knew, but he'd suffered too. He understood.

They opened the door and closed it tight behind them. ["Don't say anything to Evelyn,"] he whispered.

Why not Evelyn? Elis surprised her with that. ["What if someone comes looking for us, for *you*?"] Shouldn't the old widow have some preparation? Elis was the one with the knowledge about the Eye.

After he kicked his shoes off into the foyer closet, she stepped out of hers and closed the closet door. Now to go back to something better, she hoped. He locked his fingers through hers and led her up the stairs.

"Elis?" The age-cracked voice came from the front sitting room.

Damn.

He paused on the squeaky step with a wince. "Yes, it's us."

"Is everything all right, dear?"

"Nothing to worry about."

The steady tap of the cane announced the old widow's approach before she appeared from the direction of the dining room. "All right. Dinner will be ready soon."

Food! Exactly what Raea's stomach needed, if she could tolerate eating. Between Elis's unfinished business and the news of Torres and Stein, it seemed more inclined to knot up than accept food. Any other girl would love to have Raea's appetite, or lack thereof, but other girls didn't go out flying nearly every night or burn off those calories using Starfire energy faster than one could blink. There were some advantages to being a Keeper.

"Thanks, Evelyn." Elis gave her a quick smile and led Raea up the stairs to the bedroom, where he closed the door—perfect—and took the desk chair at the computer—bummer.

If she thought something was wrong before, that was nothing to now. He was in seriously distracted mode. "You better not be searching again for information about Pallin's contacts." She shuddered at the memory, disgusted that she had ever fallen for those good looks and charm. Thank goodness for Elis being there to save her.

Elis said nothing, his eyes on the computer monitor.

"Elis?"

Not even a glance, but those inviting lips she'd rather have against hers pressed together so they paled.

You know you're in trouble. She crossed the room to see what held his attention and recognized the image on the monitor—one of the most famous bridges in the world. That was definitely San Francisco.

Not again. Couldn't he let it go for now? Just because the PO Box for Pallin's contact had been in San Francisco was no reason to obsess about it, especially not now. They had bigger problems in the present.

The landmarks on the monitor changed.

Okay. Now he confused her. "What are you looking for?"

In the light of the monitor, his cheek muscles tightened for a second. Typical Elis—kept his thoughts to himself until he was ready, like with his interruption to their make out session earlier, or when he knew she might be upset.

On the screen, images of landmarks scrolled up, past an ancient city in ruins to something she recognized. Who wouldn't recognize the pyramids? "What are you looking for there?" Definitely not Atlantis. Sand dunes, maybe, but not a lost Inari city.

"You're going to practice opening a portal tonight."

Raea blinked and staggered back. What? "Why?"

A second thought caught her breath and set her heart racing. "Are we going home?" Inar'Ahben! She missed the homeworld and she'd only spent a few days there her first and only time. At least she knew how to find the shifting currents traced by the Starfire in previous portals, mostly as a means to return home if the Shirukan came again. All she needed was an excuse to go. She could open a portal to the homeworld with hardly a thought now.

"Not this time."

Her excitement deflated. "Then why?" She didn't like that look on his face; it meant he worried, and when Elis worried, something really was wrong. Suspicions gnawed in her mind when this came on the heels of the message about Stein and Torres.

"Because it's harder to create a portal to another point on the same world."

On the same world? On Earth? He must have been kidding. Right?

No. She knew that determined look he wore.

And the image on the monitor told her where. "Giza?"

"It's the closest landmark, something easy to focus on."

She sat down on the bed, her head racing with ideas of why he would want to go to Egypt. Only one answer fit, but she had to hear it from him. "To what?"

He swiveled in the desk chair. ["The Eye is in the desert. I want to find it before anyone else does. Sooner or later, one of the protectors may break. If not..."]

["I know."] He didn't have to finish, even when speaking Inari. "If not" possibilities made her nauseous again. That mission almost five thousand years ago should never have left a Starfire shard hidden on Earth.

Yet she couldn't argue that either. It had been safe for almost five thousand years; four thousand seven hundred and some odd Earth years to be more precise. The Inari had fought over the power of the Starfire throughout their history, so stashing pieces on other worlds was logical.

["It's been moved over time. In his mind, Torres thought it was originally given to the Scandinavians, but it traveled south and fell into the hands of the Romans and from the Roman Empire ended up in Egypt. Somewhere along the line it went from being known as the Eye of Odin to the Eye of Horus."]

Odin... The Norse God. Of course! That was it! Scandinavia was where the Inari mission to Earth had taken the Starfire shard in the amulet when they were attacked by humans at their original destination. And she thought Inari hated the cold. Maybe not so much, or maybe they used that to deter anyone who came after the Eye. ["Vodin! General Jakoru Vodin, from my vision... Vodin. Odin."]

Elis's lopsided grin eased the tension of the moment and made her heart ache for his kiss and, with it, the

desire to forget her life could be anything but normal.

Elis pursed those sweet lips. After a few seconds, he mumbled, ["If Vodin left the Eye to the Scandinavians, who was Horus?"]

Damn, those eyes were gorgeous, but they stared at her as if expecting something other than what she really wanted. ["What?"]

["Torres said Rafael returned...Rafael Horus? Sounds right for an Inari name."] His eyes dropped to her chest. Not that she disagreed, but she suspected what she would rather be doing wasn't what he had in mind. His eyes focused on the pendant, the shard she wore on a chain around her neck. Of course.

["Were they present on that mission?"]

Ah! She got it. He wanted her to ask the entities of the shard she wore. Usually, the Starfire entities popped up a vision of something appropriate when they thought she needed it, but not this time. Strange that they hadn't.

Purple eyes behind black locks stared at her expectantly.

["All right."] Why not? She wanted to know too.

She slid back to the head of the bed so her back rested against the wall, folded her legs into a comfortable position, and closed her eyes. A second later, she found the resonance from the pitch of the crystal's energy in her DNA. It warmed through her, enabling her to connect to the entities of her shard.

Voices whispered incoherently, through feeling rather than true words, and synchronized into agreement.

THERE IS NOTHING. The meaning shot through her. They knew nothing. They could only know if they were present to witness events. Another Crystal Keeper could have been there, but that one hadn't borne her shard, if that was the case.

Raea let the resonance fade and opened her eyes to Elis sitting next to her. ["They don't know."]

["Or they don't want you to know."]

There was that. It wouldn't be the first time the entities withheld information from her when she wanted to know something but they didn't think she was ready.

Elis's hand slipped under hers, their palms together, and he locked his fingers with hers.

"Elis! Raea! Time to eat!"

Perfect timing...almost. Amid all this distraction, she hadn't forgotten her hunger.

Elis slid off the bed, his hand still locked with hers, but Raea used it to stop him, a question on her mind seeking an answer before anything more could interfere. "What were you going to say earlier, before we were interrupted?"

Normally she'd think that bashful reddening and avoiding her eyes cute, but right now it did nothing but aggravate her.

"It's...not important," he said.

Like hell it wasn't! "Yes, it is, or you wouldn't have said anything...Bonding. Hello?" Need she remind him? Only because of Nare's interference had she learned of that little detail of Inari relationships.

He grimaced. "I'm sorry about that, but this isn't the same... Evelyn's waiting." He pulled on her hand.

She resisted his urge for her to stand. "Elis." He could make things so difficult when he wanted.

He said nothing.

Fine. Whatever. She'd pry it from him later. For now, she slid off the bed with him, her hand still in his, and grabbed his shirt to pull him close before he walked off. "You *will* tell me later."

"When the time is right." After a quick kiss, he led her out.

When the time was right? That confirmed it—what he said *was* important to their relationship. What could he be holding back?

She'd find out soon enough, and hoped she wouldn't regret it.



{"No wings."}

Rikku Ronur Kalas hissed contempt at the confirmation by his underling, Kin Silur. No wings. Then they couldn't be Inari.

He was so sure he had the right ones after talking to people and learning about those closest to the angel sightings, which could only have been of Inari.

He'd have to report back to *Kan Rikku* Nakor Surik with nothing. With the temper of the young commander, Kalas would probably lose his head.

Returning with nothing was not an option. They'd stay until they found the "angels".

If these two weren't Inari, who else could be causing such a stir in the community?

He would find them and the Inari would pay for the trouble they had caused his crew.

{"Their bio signatures indicate they aren't human."} Nakor Rik, the third member of their team hiding in the van, showed him the scanner's readings. The frozen images of the two crossing between houses showed their internal anatomy.

Impossible. They looked human on the outside.

Rik was right—Kalas hated one of the Nakor clan being right, but the scanner didn't lie. Although they scanned the two from across the street, the imaging of the bodies of the couple showed respiratory and circulatory systems matching what he had seen of the Inari. Those two weren't human.

But what had happened to their wings? Or were these two something else? Hybrids perhaps?

There was something different about them.

The human faces of his underlings indicated surprise, but the break of brown "skin" into spines along Silur's neck revealed the dark green of his natural Risaal form for a second. The youngest would need practice holding his camouflage, which was one reason Kalas often left him out of sight from humans while he and Rik went out among them for information.

{"They look Inari internally."} Rik tapped a finger on the screen, which changed and showed an image of the moment they scanned them but manipulated to see all angles. {"Externally, they could be human."}

Perhaps all was not lost.

{"Close enough."} Kalas gazed at the images, memorizing the features of the couple. {"We'll go in after they've gone to sleep and take them."}

{"What if they don't know?"}

Kalas clamped his teeth a moment, fighting the urge to let his emotions break the human camouflage he wore. Silur would ask that. He was young, and Kalas would excuse his impertinence...this time.

Kan Rikku Nakor Surik would not forgive him for disturbing the humans and possibly alerting the enemy to their presence.

But the humans were a violent race also and could be blamed for trouble. That made the answer simple: {"Kill them."} They still had the human to torture about the Eye.



Lights Out

Oh, bliss! Oh, joy! Oh, rapture!

Whatever. She had to lay off the thesaurus—one of the joys of memorizing everything like a living recorder, and she could live without that.

Freedom was definitely the right word.

Three days since they last flew felt like an eternity. This was what Raea was meant to be, not a valedictorian writing a stupid speech.

She didn't want to speak in front of her whole class, much less the whole school *plus* family and friends of everyone. Joy—so not.

And what had Elis done? Nothing. He'd convinced the Principal, Mrs. McKeen, he couldn't say anything more that Raea could say better. Wimp. He just didn't want to speak in front of everyone, although the whole school would probably pass out from hearing him actually speak. That would make it so worthwhile.

Ah, well. Too late now. If she had the chance, she'd gladly let someone else take her place. Such was her life. A speech was better than facing the Shirukan any day...maybe.

Forget it. Why did she even worry about it? Now was the time to fly and forget about graduation.

She'd probably trip on the steps to the stage where the podium was. She'd be laughed out of McClarron. Or she'd forget something or slip up. *Something* would go wrong.

Fly. Don't think.

Warm air currents from below lifted her to the starry night sky, but she flapped higher. This was flying!

Elis looped up and spiraled to level off facing her. Show off. Okay, so *that* was flying. He would always be better; but he'd grown up on the homeworld flying all the time, while she'd spent most of her life without wings having no idea of what she missed. Now she couldn't get enough.

He passed close over her, the shift in the air currents forcing her to make adjustments in the angles of her wings.

Fine. If that's how he wanted it, then she would give him something to think about. He could follow her.

Raea folded her wings and dove, the patchwork of farmland below growing larger while the wind of her dive pulled tears from her eyes.

["Raea."] Elis's voice came through clear on her tri-comm with a hint of concern. Unlike a phone, the small communications device linked to her auditory nerve, which meant a clarity overriding all interference. She hardly noticed the device attached along her cheek in a line from before her ear to nearly the corner of her mouth. His voice sounded like he was right beside her, and she could almost imagine he was.

Except she shot towards the ground like a missile with the air rushing past her ears. It thrilled her like the dropping ride at big amusement parks.

["Pull up. Pull up. Pull up..."] He mumbled the words, but he might have been whispering them in her ear.

No way. She could do this, and she would prove it. After her trip to Inar'Ahben three weeks ago and the race against the Shirukan, she had more confidence in her flying skills.

["Raea!"]

All right, all right. Just a little more.

That farm below grew fast. All right. Time to break her fall.

At the opening of her wings and the sudden twinge of pain through her back, she gasped. Catching the air like a parachute strained her back muscles and only slowed her fall.

Great. Raea flapped hard to regain her altitude, the farmyard growing but more slowly beneath her. Each stroke of her wings sent a sharp pain through her back muscles.

Om! Om! Om! Maybe Elis was right. He was always right. Damn him.

Idiot! She should've listened to him and pulled up sooner, before she accelerated to such a speed.

Slowly, she climbed again, Elis next to her.

["Are you all right?"]

["No."] She sucked in a breath through her teeth at the twinge of pain with each flap. ["You should have warned me."]

["Would you have listened?"]

No, but that didn't mean he couldn't have tried harder. Against the star-sprinkled sky, she could see nothing of his black wings or his body, dressed all in black and dark colors as he was, and only a somewhat lighter area of his face. She imagined an expression somewhere between hurt and worry. Damn. Elis was way too good at guilt-tripping, and he didn't have to say anything or even be visible. ["Okay, probably not."]

He stayed with her, climbing from the scattered farms shrinking on the grid of fields and pastures below. She recognized the L pattern of the shelterbelt around one with the placement of two big pines near the ranch-style house, which stood across the yard from a corral and barn.

The Lake house. The family had been murdered while their son was at college. Pallin had murdered them to clear a place to keep her until he returned. Pallin had fooled everyone into believing he was a simple exchange student. If they only knew what he had really been and what he had done. The Shirukan had come for her twice—Pallin being only the first—and they would come again.

It all returned in vivid detail with the realization of where they were.

"Oh, God."

Raea stared, too stunned to say anything more, her mind bombarded by everything from two months ago; yet she had been unconscious the whole time Pallin had hung her by her arms from the floor joists in the basement of that house, waiting...

Black wings lifted from the shadow at the top of the stairs. Elis stepped into the light, exchanged words with Pallin, and they fought.

When it ended, Elis untied her and lowered her to the ground, tears trickling down his cheeks. ["You're safe now."] He kissed her cheek and held her close. ["I'm sorry."]

With her cradled in his arms, he carried her out. He paused frequently, his breathing heavy and his side bleeding. 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.

The first time she realized Elis cared for her to the extent he would risk his life. That memory from the Starfire she considered one of the dearest. He was her life now.

Amid the memories, she discovered she couldn't move her wings and something squeezed her waist. For a second, she panicked, but the present rushed back and calmed her.

Elis.

Oh, God. He could have been squeezing out a sponge; the tears poured out of control in that instant of realization, her emotions overflowing with them.

["Don't think about it,"] he murmured. ["He's gone. I won't let anyone hurt you."]

He knew what bothered her. His memory was as precise as hers, except he had fought for her and had been injured by Pallin, all for her.

["I know."] Raea glanced down at the shrinking farm, reassuring herself that the past could no longer hurt her. Elis lifted her higher, his arms secure and strong, a wall blocking the outside world and the pain it could wreak on her.

At a gliding speed, she twisted to face him in flight and tucked her wings close to her back. With her arms and legs around him and his arms around her, she buried her face in his shirt to dry the tears. The faint musky scent of his body filled her with peace and the good memories of being with him, burying the bad memories haunting her nightmares. His arms tightened around her, but his wings flapped harder. She should separate to spare him the work, but she needed him close, and in the sky, they were truly alone and where they belonged. He never complained or loosened his hold—Elis never would—but worked harder.

["You'll never be alone."] His whisper came through softly on the tri-comm. ["When they come back, I'll be here."]

When, not if. The Shirukan would be back; they had both accepted that, although neither of them liked it.

Raea reached around him under the jacket and pressed close so his heart beat in her ears. The wind blew strands of hair loose from her braid to tickle the exposed side of her face. Her angel, Elis, was there for her, as he had been for nearly two years before she learned the truth. She felt selfish for wanting him all to herself, but he had come to Earth for her, not to save the world.

["It's time to practice,"] he said quietly. ["We're far from everything."]

She twisted and saw the yard lights of farms below on the grid of dark earth and grassy pastures. She could no longer tell which one was the Lake farm.

In his arms, she turned again, her wings to his chest. He held her middle while she focused on forming the portal. The resonance warmed through her, illuminating the Starburst marks on her palms and backs of her hands and the crystal shard hanging at her chest. Raea focused on the pyramids and the desert and let the Starfire entities guide her to feel the weight of the energy of their dimension connecting to the matter of another place. It pulled at her and surrounded her with an almost tangible thickness pressing under her skin and burning through her body. The entire universe opened to her at once but focused on the destination she sought.

The wind picked up around the black ball forming in the sky, and lightning flashed around it.

Dear God! She was doing it. *Stay focused!*

The energy collected in the expanding orb while she maintained the resonance, until the black ball exploded in a burst of lightning that left a black disk. The wind whipped around it.

Elis dropped slightly, leaving her heart in her throat, and parted from her. She struggled against the wind, her eyes on the disk. ["I actually did it."]

["I knew you could."]

["You're too trusting."] At least of her skills. Then again, she *did* have guidance from the entities teaching her how to focus their energy for different tasks.

She'd have to scan the internet to see if news of a black hole over the pyramids showed up. Then she would know for sure she had done it right, and it would likely happen, at least among scientists. Since returning from Inar'Ahben, she had applied herself fully to understanding the interdimensional portals formed by the entities. No more getting taken away from Earth and getting stuck.

Although he flapped away from the portal pulling them towards it, Elis looked like he floated on a breeze. Amid the shifting currents of air, Raea flapped hard to keep her place, let alone focus on the resonance to maintain it.

["Now, let it fade,"] he said.

Let it fade. Right. Easier done than said, which had surprised her the first time she had opened a portal. Raea shifted her focus to flying, releasing the resonance to nothing.

Slowly, the disk shrank, the gravity lessening while she watched, until the black disk collapsed in upon itself and disappeared, leaving the wind to settle.

A familiar song played from her pocket—her cell phone ringer. Who would be calling now?

One idea jumped ahead of the others; pulling out the cell confirmed it.

["Josh?"] Elis passed overhead, but his voice sounded right next to her because of the tri-comm.

["How'd you guess?"] It wasn't like her friend wasn't obsessed with watching them while they were flying or fascinated by her emerging abilities with the Starfire energy. And it wasn't like he didn't watch them every single night. Nope; nothing of the sort.

Raea flipped it open and cut off the song. "Hey, Josh."

"Was that you?" He sounded far too excited.

"Yes. I opened a portal."

"Wicked cool, Raea! I could see the lightning from here and could kind of see you."

Great. Just what she wanted to hear—that she was exposed. Then again, Josh watched with binoculars and had a heads up from her where they would be, and at least it came from him and not a stranger.

Still, he had other things to do and she didn't like every move being watched. "Shouldn't you be studying?"

"Yeah, but...you know...It's always more fun watching you guys."

Of course, but sometimes she wanted a little privacy, like when she broke down. "Procrastinating?"

"Sort of...Okay, yeah. Um, how do you remember the sine versus cosine again?"

So predictable. "SOHCAHTOA. The sine is the opposite side over the hypotenuse—"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. I remember now. Thanks, Raea."

"You're sure?" He sounded like there was something more.

"Yeah. No problem." He cleared his throat. "I just wanted to congratulate you on the portal. You know I love that stuff."

"Sure, Josh. Good luck on your final tomorrow." His only final, but their math teacher ended up grading so strictly that all but a handful of trigonometry students nearly failed, Josh included.

"Thanks...um...All right. Take care. I'll see you...sometime after finals." He clicked off, and she tucked her phone back into her jacket pocket.

Poor Josh. He was barely passing trig, one of two classes he needed for college. She'd tried to help him, but he hated studying. Now he had no choice.

["He should try basic math back home."] Elis sounded amused, like he smiled. She could imagine how advanced Inari children were expected to be. No, she dreaded it. They were far more intelligent than her, and the way Elis talked about physics theories studied by humans being close or wrong in some points only exaggerated how far behind she was for growing up on Earth. She would be no better off than a young child if she returned to Inar'Ahben.

["Speaking of home..."] She glided towards the eastern edge of the town sparkling with street lights. ["I think we should be heading back. That portal will have attracted some attention besides Josh."] And they had attracted angel watchers to the town.

Elis hesitated to answer but glided level with her so their wingtips nearly touched. ["All right."] His gentle voice came through on the tri-comm. Or was it disappointment she heard?

["You just wanted a practice run, right?"]

["We're not ready to go around the world yet. Tomorrow maybe."]

["Tomorrow?"] As in already?

["The sooner we retrieve the Eye, the better, but it will take some timing and preparation. Egypt is seven hours ahead. We'll have to time it so we arrive in the dark hours of morning. It's too late now."]

["Can't we wait until after graduation?"]

["We've already waited too long."]

He was right, of course. Elis was always right. They'd waited while she learned to control opening a portal to a designated point. He couldn't do it, or they'd have retrieved the Eye last week. Only a Crystal Keeper with the power of a shard could make that connection. Since she could do it now, nothing could stop them.

One thing still bothered her, something he hadn't explained. ["Once we have it, what'll we do with it?"]

Silence. She waited, questions growing in her mind. Did he have a plan?

They approached McClarron's glowing lights.

["Elis?"]

["I don't know."]

Great. He didn't know. Well, that made it better. ["So we're supposed to wait for the Shirukan to discover it when they come again?"]

["No."] The word growled from his throat.

Then what?

An idea tickled her mind. He wouldn't. Would he?

That had to be it. He'd said he would never let them hurt her again. ["You want it to choose you as its Keeper."]

Silence again.

That *was* it!

["We have to find it before whoever is taking the protectors learns its location."]

Uh, huh. There was more he wasn't telling her. He could go dead silent when he had something on his mind, or when she was close to hitting the bulls-eye.

Elis angled down.

That was it, huh? Not a word. She'd hit pretty close to the mark, but he wasn't getting off that easily. ["Hey. You didn't answer my question."]

Still nothing. He continued down.

Raea followed him, determined to get her answer, although she was sure by his tight lips that she was right. Still, she wanted to hear it from him.

Elis headed towards a field about a mile northeast of town, where they'd taken off. Sure, they'd have some walking, but it was a nice night, and the walk would give her time to pry out an answer. Besides, the field across the street from town that they'd used all spring was a field of green sprouts. Their footprints would be obvious trampling the plants night after night, and the farmer probably wouldn't be too happy about it.

The flapping of large black wings reached her as Elis touched down. She followed behind, slowing her descent with the flap of her brown wings while stretching her legs down to touch solid ground.

After landing, she stepped up to him and grabbed his jacket sleeves, intending to hold him until she had that answer. ["Well? Am I right?"]

Even in the dark, she could tell he looked away to the outline of the nearest line of trees beyond the gravel road where they stood. Raea reached up and, with her hand on his cheek, turned his head. She couldn't see his eyes, but the shift of his cheek muscles under her hand came from his indecision. What was he afraid to say? ["Tell me the truth, Elis,"] she said softly.

["Yes! Yes, I hope it chooses me."] He reached up and covered her hand with his, the fabric of his black gloves giving way to skin at the ends of his fingers. Desperation contorted his face in the darkness. ["I can't help thinking if I'd had a shard two weeks ago, I could have come after you myself. If the Shirukan come again, I'm stuck here...I won't let them take you away, Raea."] His voice softened in the end, touching her

heart with the sincerity and pleading in his tone. ["Never again."]

Her insides fluttered to hear him tell her how much he loved her, but he neglected one important argument against it. ["If you have a shard, you'll be a target too."]

In the quiet of the night, the sound of him swallowing told her he understood the consequences. ["We'll be together."] His fingers tightened around hers while his other hand settled on her back and held her close. Her wings lifted with the rush of pleasure his touch inspired.

Yes, they would be. There was that. ["Thank you...for being honest."] He had never lied to her, but he was a master of withholding information. ["That's all I wanted to hear."]

Elis leaned close and she welcomed his tender kiss in the chill of the night. For a few seconds, the rest of the world disappeared.

When they parted, he pressed his forehead to hers. ["Help me retrieve the Eye."]

Doubts crept up her spine with the chill of the air. ["What if it rejects you?"] And knocked him out or, worse, killed him? The Starfire entities could be very selective about their Keeper. ["I won't lose you."]

["I'll be all right."]

["I don't know, Elis..."] Losing him would be like cutting out her heart. He took too many risks for her liking. She couldn't let him do this, but she couldn't let anyone else get their hands on the Starfire.

["Trust me."]

She wished she could this time. He'd been right before, but this was different. The Starfire entities had shown her what they would do to protect themselves from the wrong hands, and that included death. She couldn't imagine them rejecting someone as good at heart as Elis, but she didn't want to risk it.

A thought initiated a touch of the resonance warming her and made the marks on her hands resting on his chest glow so she could see his face. Damn that pleading look. He knew she couldn't resist. She wanted to deny him but could see no other choice.

["All right. We'll go tomorrow evening and get it. You'll have your shard and be a Crystal Keeper."] If it accepted him. Now she understood why his father had never allowed him to try his shard—Naolis didn't want to lose his son. She didn't want to lose the man she loved. The risk of rejection was more dangerous than the Shirukan; at least with the Shirukan, they could fight.

He kissed her again but she hesitated to return it, afraid of what she'd just agreed to.

Afterwards, he whispered, ["I love you."]

She loved him too much, if that was possible. The next twenty-two hours would be torture on her, but he was right—they had to try. She hated him always being right when they faced risks, but he didn't understand this risk the way she did.

She had twenty-two hours until evening tomorrow, and maybe, just maybe, another answer would come to relieve the burden of her worry.

For now, all she could do was worry about the outcome.

Elis stepped back from her and stretched his wings.

The fingerless black gloves hid his Starburst marks, but the light of them outlined his hand from exposed trails on the undersides of his index and middle fingers and his wrists. Black wings shrank behind him.

Time to head home. Raea found the resonance and focused the power on her back, clenching her teeth to keep from screaming in agony at the rapid condensing of muscle, bones, and tissues.

Afterwards, she let out her breath, which she'd sucked in and held through the transformation. "I wish that got easier. How do you do it—make it look easy?" He never showed any signs of pain from the transformation. Then again, neither had Nare when she visited. Was there a secret they hadn't told her?

Elis took her hand in his, his fingers twining through hers, and shrugged. "I've been through worse."

Yeah. That might make a difference. He'd suffered enough in the last few years—losing his family to the

Shirukan and being beaten by Pallin and nearly killed. While it didn't explain Nare's apparent lack of pain, Raea could understand his perspective.

She squeezed her fingers around his and started towards the lights of the town ahead. Someday she'd figure it out or gain a higher pain tolerance, but not that day.

In the quiet prairie night, their steps crunched on the gravel road leading to the highway into town. They were only a mile or two out, based on the section line grids she'd made out while in the air, and she'd grown familiar with the landscape over the course of the last two months and their frequent flying.

In a nearby pond filled with fresh runoff from the spring rains, frogs croaked their lonely song, while in the eastern sky, the moon rose as a pale crescent.

What a lovely night. She adored this—a beautiful, quiet night on the prairie. Better yet, she shared it with Elis.

The crunching of gravel in the calm of the evening alerted her to a vehicle approaching. Funny that she hadn't seen any headlights. Caution tightened in her chest. No one drove without headlights, except someone causing trouble. Had someone been watching them? Had they seen the transformation?

Angel watchers! The crunching stopped and a couple doors opened and slammed shut.

Elis halted next to her, his fingers tightening on hers.

A shadowy figure moved through the pasture to her right, and her heart stopped. Someone had been close enough to see them, but she hadn't noticed anything unusual. This was so not good.

"Hello?" Raea called out to them and squinted through the dusk to make out the shadows of the face there. It appeared to be a man in dark clothes, but he didn't move casually. Rather, his every movement hinted of a liveness and control unusual for anyone she knew.

Her heart stopped when he lifted his hands. In the weak moonlight, the shape of a gun pointed from his outstretched arms.

At the sudden forcing down by Elis, she gasped. A fraction of a second after the click of a trigger, something pinged off the gravel.

"Elis!" Her mind raced, but this wasn't a Shirukan weapon—they used energy weapons, not projectiles like this.

"Run!"

The sound of car doors and voices came from behind, while Elis led her away at a run from both threats.

Shouts rose from behind with the tromping of multiple pairs of feet.

A couple seconds later, Elis stumbled and fell.

Oh, God. No. This couldn't be happening.

She halted next to him and grabbed his arms to help him up. "Elis. Come on." He put one leg under him, his every movement sluggish. "Hurry up," she grunted with the strain of his weight.

A second later, he fell back to his hands and knees. What was wrong with him?

Something poked her in the shoulder. Instinctively, Raea reached to scratch it, but her fingers stopped at the fuzzy end of a small dart. She pulled it out as Elis collapsed at her feet and a wave of dizziness swept through her. She dropped to her hands and knees amid the spinning of everything around her, including the multiple feet surrounding her.

Strange voices spoke in a language she couldn't understand and faded into nothing.



A New Threat

{"Get them in the van."}

Kalas stood at the open side door of the van and watched as Silur in his natural form moved like a shadow assisting Rik to lift the male. Both Inari lay unconscious on the road but would soon be on the way to their base, which they'd moved to a remote area of North Dakota to be closer to their target. How convenient that most of the area was remote. Even better that the two had left the town for the countryside. It made his job almost too easy.

The darts proved the two were Inari, although the wings had confirmed it. Inari physiology was sensitive to certain substances common on many worlds, including Earth. The alcohol would knock them out for several hours, sufficient for their purposes, and it had been readily available. Humans consumed the substance in large quantities with little effect, quite the contrast to the Inari sensitivity.

The two Risaal rolled the male over in the van and returned to retrieve the female. After his underlings dumped her inside with the male, Kalas stepped in with the others and closed the back doors.

He sat down near the female's body while the others took their positions within the vehicle. {"Take off."}

Silur buckled into the driver seat and drove off into the night.

Amid the mild bouncing, Kalas looked down through the dim light of the van's storage area. Interesting that these two had been able to shrink their wings. It explained how they hid among the humans. Did all Inari have that ability? Was that why they couldn't find them? How many more could there be on that world?

And what of the marks on the female's hands?

Under the glow of the interior light of the van, Kalas bent over the girl and lifted one of her hands while Rik secured the male's hands in thick binders.

Odd. The aquamarine marks looked like something had exploded in her palms through the back. They tapered into winding rays ending at her fingertips and just past her wrists. Had all Inari developed this or was it some tattoo or individual mark of this one?

The male wore gloves, but gloves could be removed. Kalas had to satisfy his curiosity.

After Rik finished shackling the male's wrists, they switched places in the tight confines of the van's cargo area. Kalas pulled the gloves down from the wrists. The cool of a moment of shock breaking his human camouflage passed with regained control. The male had the marks too.

Rik paused before fastening the shackles on the female. {"What is it?"}

{"I don't know."} Kalas grabbed the female's hand and compared it to the male's where he pulled the glove back. Not identical but very similar. What did it mean?

{"Get her secure."} Kalas let go of the hand so the young officer could finish his task.

After securing her hands, Rik's eyes went to the female's face, or something near it. {"What's this?"}

He reached a human-looking hand towards the pendant.

The moment his fingers touched it, it shone with an intense glow and Rik shrieked, his human camouflage failing to his natural Risaal form.

{"What are you doing?"} Silur peered back over his shoulder.

The van swerved, throwing Rik against the door, where he lay unconscious. Thrown by the sudden swerve, Kalas fell over the couple.

Tires screeched to a halt and Silur unbuckled from the driver seat. Standing hunched over between the driver and passenger seats at the front, he searched the scene until his eyes fixed on Rik. He stepped over the

Inari couple's feet and checked for life signs in his colleague.

{"He's alive."} He turned to study the couple. {"What happened?"}

Good question. Kalas regained his balance next to the couple and clicked the shackle into place around the female's wrists to secure her. They wouldn't be escaping any time soon. How had they attacked Rik? All he did was touch the crystal.

He touched the crystal, and the crystal reacted.

Impossible. That kind of power had only been observed in one crystal and this...this was far too small to be the same. But he had to know, preferably without risking his life. {"Scanner."}

Silur looked about and reached down for the metal box, which had landed partly under Rik. He pulled it out and handed it to Kalas.

Careful not to touch the crystal, Kalas held the device close to it and adjusted the detectors. The readings matched those of the *D'Nmar* they'd been searching for. This was it.

But it wasn't all of it. The *D'Nmar* was said to be a cluster about the size of a fist and dangerous to the touch. This was one point half the size of the girl's smallest finger and she wore it like jewelry. What had happened to the crystal and the Inari?

He moved the scanner. While the readings descended from their levels of the crystal itself, the radiation signature was still there.

{"Strange."}

Silur leaned closer. {"What?"}

{"Drive. Let me worry about this. Get us back to base."} Their xenobiologist could analyze this more closely, but he suspected what she would say.

The young Risaal in human form jerked away and hurried back to the driver seat, obediently buckling in without another word. A few seconds later, the rumble of the engine changed and the movement of the van made Kalas push to keep his position over the Inari couple against forces that wanted to leave him behind.

Kalas moved the scanner up and down each body, but the crystal readings didn't change. That must have been an error. According to what he saw, the Inari had absorbed the crystal's energy. Maybe that would explain the phenomena they'd witnessed while watching the pair flying. He'd have to discuss this with their commander, yet neither of them was an expert. That was Dar Lorel's position as the xenobiologist. She'd have her chance to study these two.

Kalas sat back at the rear of the van, confused by the data but intrigued by the possibilities. The couple was secure and the dose of alcohol would keep them out for a while. He could relax, but he wouldn't. They had a two hour drive to their destination, an old missile silo in a remote area of eastern North Dakota. Until then, he would defend their prisoners with his life. They were far more valuable than he had first suspected.

Claws formed of the spines around his fingertips, ready for slicing into the couple in the van. The desire to exact his revenge for the crimes of the Inari's ancestors ached within him.

Not yet. They needed the couple alive to explain what had happened to the *D'Nmar* and the Inari.

Kalas was patient and could wait until they had what they wanted. He was *Rikkū*, the second in command. The time would come *after* the Inari translated the writing and, with the discovery of the crystal, answers about its fate. The Inari had obviously done something to it.

They had also learned some new tricks. The strange phenomena in the sky had proven that.

These two were no ordinary Inari. They had evolved.

But they would suffer for the crimes of their ancestors.



Finding a Lost Past

The monolith with its concentric rings of Inari text stared at her, the central dome of red glistening under the lights of its display. The image zoomed in on the central ring of text. Certain characters clarified in the view, a statement shimmering with blue-green.

After some time, the image blurred into a haze of color and light without focus but swirling and twisting as if alive. Thoughts coalesced from the thick of writhing colors, translated by an unconscious mind from the vision.

ALL OF US. INTERCONNECTED.

OTHER UNIVERSE, UNAWARE. UNAWARE...

AS IT SHOULD BE.

WHY?

Through the colors in light, scenes wavered, slipping past and slowing to reveal strange worlds. A winged creature hovered in the air, a dozen tapering tails hanging from it, seemingly unaware of the writhing colors passing through and around it. A light flashed but the tails tangled around a dot of another creature and pulled it to the body.

SO FLEETING. SURREAL.

WHAT IS IT?

MORE COME.

Flashes of light continued, sometimes taking shapes lasting more than a microsecond, strange shapes, some humanoid, which dissolved into the haze of colors.

BLENDING. ALWAYS. THEY CONSUME, GROW, FADE. SHARE.

Other scenes zipped by as flashes of light added to the colors.

ONE CANNOT EXIST WITHOUT THE OTHER. INSEPARABLE. ETERNAL.

WHAT IS IT? *The question repeated into a chorus.*

EXPLORE. DISCOVER. LEARN.

YES...

WE GO.

Lightning flashed and sizzled around a rip through the light.

PAIN!

A chorus of anguish rose up and the colors bled through the gash until it sealed. Beyond the haze but seemingly within it, a crystal floated.

THEY SURVIVE. *The thought echoed through the mass of consciousness with a sense of satisfaction and relief.*

THAT UNIVERSE IS LOCKED. WE CANNOT EXIST FREE.

EXPLORE. OBSERVE. EXPERIENCE.

SO BE IT...

The scene shifted beyond the haze to a world of magnificent cities and willowy beings of a roughly humanoid shape which seemed to float over the ground with the light of their sun shimmering behind them.

ALWAYS SHIFTING. ENERGY COMES AND GOES. WE GIVE. WE RECEIVE.

WHY?

ETERNAL CO-EXISTENCE.

EXISTENCE DIFFERENT BUT DEPENDENT.

YES...

EXPLORE. LEARN...

A mass of light and pain sent thoughts shrieking in the moment the universe seemed to collapse, until one of the

willowy beings glided near.

Voices screamed a pounding rhythm through Raea's head. *Oh, God. Make it stop.* Her stomach twisted and a knot tightened in her throat. She curled up on her side, aware in that motion of a hard floor beneath her. She was going to hurl if things worsened.

Reality crashed through the intense emotions of the Starfire entities. Their voices faded to the background with the clear rush of memories of those last moments before the blackness.

Those last moments—the prick and the chase...

"Elis!" She opened her eyes to darkness and twisted to search around her. Damn her head. Even a slight shift revved up the throbbing a few notches to force her to lie still. The cold, hard floor caused pressure sores in her shoulder and hip on the side she laid upon, and the musty smell of still air enveloped her while she waited for the pain in her head to fade.

She lay in a dark room in which the only light came from a slit at the bottom of a door, or that's what she assumed it was. "Elis?"

Crystal fire. Where was he? He better be all right.

Where was *she*?

This had to be a dream. Then again, it was no stranger than the last two months of her life, and she definitely had not been dreaming. "Elis?"

Still nothing.

Raea tried again to sit up, this time pushing herself more slowly and noticing the tight cuffs on her wrists limiting her movement.

In the faint light, she saw only the outline of solid metal securing her wrists unlike any handcuffs she'd ever seen.

She wiggled her wrists and braced the bar on her knee to pull back. Something squeezed her wrists and she dropped her knee.

"Owowowowow!" Damn, it pinched! The cuffs tightened on her.

Okay, so not wiggling out of those. She'd never heard of cuffs that could tighten when one tried to get out of them, like some high-tech version of a Chinese finger puzzle. Whoever held her had some fancy gadgetry. Worse, they had Elis somewhere else.

She had to find him. If they hurt him...

No, she refused to think of that. One way or another, she would see him again.

"Hello?" Was anyone near? From the acoustics, the room was small and probably solid cement, like the cold floor. "Hello! Is someone listening?"

Nothing. Not even movement outside the door.

Mindful of the cuffs, which had loosened with the ceasing of her struggles, she pushed herself from the floor and stood. If the door was there, that meant there had to be a corridor or room on the other side; she doubted the door went out into the open.

A little disoriented by the darkness but able to measure her closeness by the line of light, she inched towards the door with her arms out before her. Cold metal greeted her hands, which fumbled along until she discovered a door knob, which refused to turn. She was locked in, but she still had her senses and pressed her ear against the door to listen.

Silence.

Was anybody listening? Did they just lock her wrists and throw her in?

Was she going to die there, forgotten and alone?

No. They'd kept her alive for something. Maybe it was the Shirukan. Maybe they'd come back for the

Starfire already.

A moment of panic lifted her hands to her chest.

Whew! Still there. The smooth facets of the crystal contrasted the soft curl of black down feather from Elis she still wore with it.

They must have been on Earth still, because no one had opened a portal except her and she was certain it hadn't gone anywhere except Egypt, and the door had a knob, unlike Inari doors, which slid open.

Too bad she couldn't open a portal in confinement. Unfortunately, the gravity produced would destabilize the structure around her. If Elis was there, she couldn't allow that nor leave him behind. She would find him first.

He'd better be alive.

Wait. Her tri-comm and her cell. Her hands reached up, but as she suspected from the cold on her cheek, it was gone. She fumbled to reach her jacket pockets but they were empty. Damn. Her captors had thought of everything.

She was alone, but that didn't mean she had to take it quietly.

"Hey! Heeeeyyy!" She pounded her fists on metal—definitely a door, which encouraged her further. Metal hurt, though, so she banged the cuffs on the door with the secondary hope that it might break them. "I'm awake in here. Hello! Someone answer me... Is someone there? Heeeeyyy!"

After a series of hard pounding, the cuffs tightened, forcing her to stop.

Crystal fire! She sucked air in through her teeth until the cuffs loosened, easing the pain they inflicted. She was starting to sound like Elis. That should make Josh happy—he always scolded her, Linds, and Jess for cursing. If she cursed like an Inari, it wasn't as bad to him.

Whatever. She would just be glad to see Josh again.

The cuffs finally loosened after she stood still for a while.

Footsteps approached from outside the door. The shadow of two feet moved in the slit of light. About time. Now she might learn who held her and where Elis was.

Raea stepped back a moment before the door opened out. In the blinding light, she squinted and lifted her hands up before her to shade her eyes.

"Out." The order snapped in a rough voice.

As her eyes adjusted, she lowered her hands and blinked. The light wasn't too bright, especially with the gray, cement walls; but it could have been the sun after she'd awakened in the dark room.

"Where are we going?"

"Out." A man in a brown uniform and cap motioned with some sort of handgun.

No wings, then not Shirukan, unless they were still on Earth where the Shirukan would hide their wings, which could explain the different jumpsuits. This one didn't seem like one of the elite soldiers, though. One way or another, she'd find out.

Raea stepped out and a second man in a similar brown uniform closed the door. "Where are we going?"

"Walk." The first man motioned with his gun past the second man, who stepped back to the wall, the gun in his hand aimed at her.

Raea never wanted to see another gun in her life—lately they were always pointed at her.

Her nerves bristled with anxiety. *Calm. Stay calm.* If only she could. At least when she'd faced the Shirukan, it hadn't been at point blank range. She took a deep breath to calm the pounding of her heart. She would not fear the Shirukan. She could escape, if given the right chance.

Like they would give her another chance.

She might not escape but she could hope Elis did. Even that was unlikely; he'd sworn to never leave her. *Pessimistic much, Raea?* She'd have to change that someday, after she escaped with Elis.

At an intersection, the man behind her shoved her to the corridor on her right, which ended at a large, heavy door with a thick alphanumeric designation of "B-1" painted in white in blocky, western letters and numbers. They had to be on Earth yet.

"Inside," he said.

He must have been blind; the door was closed. "How?"

The wall near her moved. Man, her eyes were really going buggy from being in that dark room.

No. It wasn't her eyes. The wall really *did* move, but it wasn't the wall. A humanoid shape moved to a box on the wall, but that shape could have been the wall; it matched perfectly. Okay, this was too weird, even for her life.

The door clicked and slid aside, grinding on its tracks.

Raea watched the shape seem to merge back into the wall before her eyes. "What the hell?"

A nasty jab in her back sent her stumbling forward into a tall cylindrical room.

Her breath stopped at site of the object standing in the center. This totally had to be a dream. The large stone disk stood taller than her with familiar glyphs in concentric circles around a central red stone about a foot in diameter. She'd seen it before but couldn't believe it stood in front of her now.

The Atlantis monolith!

She turned around to the soldier with the gun, questions piling in her brain and stumbling over her tongue.

At the click and lumbering creak of a door behind her, she whirled.

A trio of people stepped in with two shadowy creatures bearing weapons.

"Welcome, young Inari." The man who spoke with the accent stopped before her. He wore a business suit, his dark hair cropped short to form a shadow upon his scalp in more of a military style cut than any business fashion. He also stood with a confidence reminding her of Pallin. She hated this man already.

He strode towards the round stone propped upright in the center of the chamber, his hand going out to the metal lining the edge. "Magnificent. Isn't it? When I saw it, I knew this was the key."

Yes, it was magnificent, but it wasn't the most important consideration on her mind. "Key to what? Who are you? Where's Elis?"

He stepped around the monolith and his lips twitched into a smile. "I suppose it's only fair, Raea."

Her heart froze and her mouth went dry. He knew her name and he knew what she was.

"I am *Kan Rikku* Nakor Surik, commander of the Nakor 3rd Fleet of Ch'tor."

What?

"I see confusion...I've learned to read human expressions. Ah, but you're not human. You only pretend to be."

Learned to read human expressions? That phrase alone sent a cold shiver down her spine.

"Your kind is similar to humans, a great advantage for hiding on this world. As you can see, we're much the same that way—masters of camouflage." He motioned to the shadowy figure behind him. It stepped into the light, a hideous flat face with four vertical slits where a nose should have been and a head on which lines of spikes tapered to a bulb near the back.

In seconds, more spikes emerged from the dark green skin and flattened together, changing color as they transformed, until a woman in a body suit stood where the shadowy shape had been. Angular features gave her a severe appearance.

"Unfortunately, we were never able to mimic Inari wings, or we might have infiltrated your world to steal back what your so-called emissaries of peace took from us." He stepped close, his eyes dropping to the crystal as he reached out, but his hand stopped short of touching it. Too bad. She would have liked to have seen him knocked out by the Starfire.

His hand dropped, his human lips pressing together momentarily in an expression of contempt, while the "skin" on his neck broke and shifted for a second—definitely not human nor Shirukan. He straightened and took a breath and the skin reformed from the spikes.

What kind of aliens were they? "What are Nakor?"

He stood erect, his head held high. "The ruling clan of the Risaal homeworld, or we were." He hissed something under his breath and turned away. "We were before you *thieves* stole the *D'Nnuar*."

Thieves? He was mistaken. "I didn't steal anything. I don't even know what the *D'Nnuar* is."

Yikes! Talk about saying the wrong thing. He whirled on her so fast her heart jumped into her throat. His eyes blazed with contempt.

"You bear a shard like gaudy jewelry but feign ignorance?"

Jewelry? The only shard she wore as jewelry was...*The Starfire!* She looked down to the pendant. No, he was wrong. "The Inari have had the Starfire for six thousand years. There's no way..."

"Try twelve thousand." A dark menace glimmered in his eyes as they slid over her, his lip curled in a snarl. This commander was not a man to be trifled with.

Twelve thousand? Okay, now she was officially lost. What the hell was he talking about?

She bit her tongue on the question and waited, curious that he returned his attention to the monolith.

A monolith bearing Inari writing, which was about twelve thousand years old.

He watched her, those eyes burning through her in growing anticipation. Damn! He studied her reaction, a sly smile spreading upon his human face. God, she hated him watching her like that.

"But it's in the past. You're here...now. You will translate this for me."

"Me? I can't translate that." Elis had just started teaching her two weeks ago, after she returned from Inar'Ahben. In light of the last few weeks of cramming by teachers to squeeze in what they could before the year was up, she had lost time. Sure, the perfect memory helped with the tests and work, but she still had to read and take the time to do her schoolwork. Inari was far more complicated than she had expected and demanded a lot of her time. She might have been able to speak it, but reading and writing were completely new challenges, on top of learning to create portals.

A sibilant hiss escaped him, the skin on his neck breaking all the way up to his face, revealing the flat features beneath. The others stepped back like they expected him to explode or something.

In a blur, a clamp tightened around her throat. Raea gasped and struggled to pry off the hand at her throat, but the cuffs hindered her efforts and her nails had no effect.

"You *will* translate the writing, Inari, or I will squeeze the life out of you."

Spots danced in her vision and she gasped for air. "I...can't...read it...all...I need...need Elis." She couldn't swallow. She couldn't breathe—he crushed her windpipe. Oh, God. He was going to kill her!

The hand loosened before she passed out, but the moment he released her, her knees buckled and she collapsed to the cold floor, gasping. Air. Even stale air never felt so good filling her lungs. She gulped it as if starved, her throat aching and her chest hurting.

"Bring the male."

A door clicked and scraped open and feet tromped out.

"Perhaps seeing her mate suffer will encourage cooperation."

What? No! They had Elis and would kill him if she didn't cooperate; but she couldn't. Why wouldn't they listen?

"I can't—" Raea coughed. "I can't read Inari as well as him. I was born here, on Earth. I just started learning to read Inari two weeks ago." All her other training had taken priority, until her visit to the homeworld.

The irritation in her throat set off a coughing fit lasting an eternity. It ended with her breathing hard and

her eyes blurred from tears she wiped away. These creatures were strong, and their commander was quick to lose his temper.

The commander squatted before her, once more wearing his human appearance. "Thieves and liars."

"I'm not lying!" Raea coughed and pushed herself off the floor. Why wouldn't he listen? It was like his mind was already made up. It *was* made up; he'd already condemned her. She had to try to get through to him. "It's true. Elis came to teach me about being Inari. I was raised on Earth to believe I was human. I'm still learning. I can read some of the script but not all of it. Elis was raised on the homeworld. He knows the language better."

Too weird. The man's pupils weren't round but something like a triangle now that she looked closer. Raea shook the thought away, along with the intensity of his cold stare. He was alien; enough said.

Kan Rikku Nakor Surik—whatever kind of name that was—stood up with a fluid grace not normal for a human but probably normal for his kind. Man, this was too weird. She'd never imagined aliens like this, but she'd never expected to *be* one herself.

"You and your mate will translate the script for me."

What was so important to him if the monolith was Inari? It intrigued her, but rightly so. She was Inari. That monolith was a part of her species and its past culture, a recording of events from before the Starfire came to them and a confirmation that they had been on Earth long before Heffin's Gate allowed them passage across the universe. It had nothing to do with anyone else.

The Inari must have known about Earth before Heffin's Gate was operational. That's why it was so easy to find this world. It wasn't a new discovery at the time but likely sought after.

The room blurred and faded behind the sharpening of another scene. Good. The Starfire would answer the questions jumbled in her mind. She focused on the scene for whatever information the entities had to impart...

An explosion of light faded into a clear scene. Several Inari stood in a room of green marble panels and cushions upon the center of the floor around a white column.

["That was merely a small demonstration of the crystal's power, Lady Dieri."] A woman in a plain brown flightsuit with lighter brown wings and short-cropped hair stood nearby.

Another woman stepped forward wearing black pants accented in silver and a matching waistcoat open along her chest exposing a white blouse and an intricately crafted silver choker at her neck. Exquisite in the refinement of her features, the lady slightly opened her deep blue wings matching her long hair. A delicate silver chain hung across her forehead bearing a shimmering drop of a gem in the center.

["You believe this power can be harnessed and focused?"] Dieri asked.

["Yes, my Lady. This was only a small model of what I had in mind."] The woman in brown brightened with enthusiasm, her wings lifting slightly. ["We can create a portal large enough for several ships to pass through. With it, we can mine other worlds for the resources we need to grow. We will no longer depend on the Abben in the oceans below us for materials or need to trade off world or rely on others for our defense. We can depend upon ourselves for the first time."]

Dieri stepped closer, her blue eyes as brilliant as her hair, and fixed on the view as if staring through it into her own thoughts. ["Might we finally find the lost colony?"]

["It is my hope, my Lady, that this will expedite those efforts also."]

Sadness overshadowed the hope which had glimmered moments before from the lady's face. It haunted her voice. ["Seven thousand years, Matres Heffin Sarees. Time means nothing. We depended on the Miru; we still do. They took our ancestors to another world we have not had the power to reach. They claim to have found nothing upon returning and will search no more. What happened to the colony? That is the only question remaining."]

Dieri straightened, her wings tightening to her back. ["I will sponsor your project, master engineer. Organize your team, while I make arrangements with the Abben for the materials for this project. May it be the last time we call upon them for such resources."]

The woman in brown dropped an arm to her waist and bowed her head. ["Thank you, Lady Dieri. You have given this world new hope."]

The lady's lip twitched minutely but settled into a stolid confidence by the time the other woman stood up. ["No. The Starfire has done that. I only hope we find what we seek."]

"Raea!"

She blinked away the vision. Heffin's Gate. She had seen the key decision to begin construction on the machine created to harness the Starfire's energy into portals to travel to other worlds. Was the lost colony the same mentioned on the monolith? Is that what they wanted her to see—that they had found Earth because they were looking?

"Raea."

Her heart nearly stopped at the familiar voice. *Elis!* She wanted to run to him and lose herself in his arms, but the weapons threatening them halted her feet. Her insides ached for just a touch. "Elis."

Across the chamber, he stared at her from above the muzzle of the gun at his chest.

"Now then, young Inari..." Surik's arrogance made her want to spit in his face. He said something in that strange language and the "woman" with the gun stepped away from Elis. "You will both stay here until you translate the script."

Good. Relief poured into her—they would leave Elis alone.

Behind the black hair over his eyes, Elis's brows pressed down with his frown. "Why? What script?"

Surik motioned with his arm to the monolith, which faced away from Elis.

Hesitant at first, Elis stepped around and joined her. At her side, he halted and stared. Silence overshadowed him for several seconds, until he looked at her.

In answer to the question in his eyes, she could only shrug.

"Where did you—" Elis stiffened and turned to the commander. "You're the thieves."

The commander's camouflage faltered with his anger. "You are the thieves, Inari. We seek only to reclaim what is ours. You will tell me what it says."

"Why?"

Not good. Raea leaned closer and bumped him in the arm. ["Don't test him. They have guns."]

Too little too late. The commander pulled his weapon from the holster at his side. "You will tell me because I order it, and because if you don't, one of you dies."

Shadows played on Elis's cheeks with the clenching of his jaw. Although their hands were shackled, Raea reached her hands towards him to clasp his in hers. His fingers tightened around hers, but his eyes fixed on the commander. "All right," Elis calmly said.

The commander lowered the weapon. "Read, Inari."

With a hint of caution in his movements, Elis shifted his eyes from the Risaal to the monolith and led Raea towards it. Standing before it, he released her hand to reach up toward the stone and trace the script. "This will take time."

"Time means nothing to me," Surik said. "You will stay here until you tell me the secrets of the *D'Nnuar*."

What did the monolith have to do with the Starfire?

Elis said nothing but studied the script. Each symbol was no bigger than two inches with the innermost tracks around the red stone being half the size. Now that she saw it all closer, Raea realized the stone showed signs of erosion, but some of the etched letters went deep, revealing the smooth gleam of metal in the

deepest grooves.

Raea reached to the inner tracks, the segment the Starfire had highlighted in her vision. They had recognized something special about it, but she couldn't let these creatures know. ["I saw this in a vision. I think the Starfire understands something."] She spoke in a low voice but in the silence of the chamber, she could have been shouting. The Risaal made no sound or movement to threaten them.

Starting at the gap separating two symbols, Elis traced each one. ["This doesn't make sense. This character means 'in darkness' while this indicates the mind or head. And this...this talks about a fire and burning cold."] He frowned and continued around the tracks. "Translating is one thing, but the meaning is something else entirely."

"Figure it out." The commander motioned to the others. A shadowy shape looked up, and Raea saw why—a glass window overlooked the room. They would be watched.

The door scraped open and the aliens departed, leaving her and Elis alone.

In that moment, Raea pressed against him, her cuffed hands at his chest. Relief poured in when he dropped his arms around her, his warm breath blowing along her head. ["Don't ever challenge him again. Promise me."]

Stupid cuffs. She wanted to hold him more than ever but she could only press close to him, his steady breath and heartbeat loud in her ear against his chest.

["Who are they?"]

["They call themselves Risaal, and they're definitely not human."]

The warmth of his breath disappeared.

Raea looked up; he focused on the window above and the face of the commander staring coldly from behind it.

["Have you heard of them?"]

["No."] Elis lifted his arms from her, his attention returning to the monolith.

After a long silence from him, she stepped away and around the stone. The back bore only a few roughly etched characters. "*Kita youal visborun etzi.*" That couldn't be right. Those ideas made no sense together.

"Swallowed by darkness."

Raea peered around and met Elis's eyes. "But what does that mean?"

"I don't know."

She returned to his side and studied the script on the front. ["Is it the same darkness mentioned here?"] Her fingers traced the character near the center red stone about the width of both her hands together. In fact, if she put her hands on it...

The resonance burned through her and the entities shrieked in her head.

"Raea!"

The Starfire entities drowned out Elis's voice, until she found herself lying on the floor with Elis looking over her.

"Raea."

Someone make the room stop spinning. She was going to hurl. Oh, God. Spots mottled in her vision until they blotted out Elis's face. Everything vanished.

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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. 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.melaniemilles.com.

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