

# **Soul Keeper Excerpt**

**By Cathryn Marr**

*Kartchner Caverns State Park*

*Benson, Arizona*

A dull roar shook the scrubby hillside around Dr. Michael Beck, causing the earth to roll beneath his feet.

“Yes!”

Elation coursed through him. He’d done it—begun the process by which his Watcher ancestors might escape their tomb and rise to take over the world, beginning with the western half of the United States. Glee filled him as he watched the Visitors Center collapse in on itself, sending up a gout of flame, followed by a plume of dust-filled smoke.

A shuttle bus, flung sideways by the blast, spilled screaming tourists every which way from its open sides before it was dashed against a field stone wall then swallowed when the earth cracked open beneath it. Beck crowed when the majority of the passengers were gobbled up with the bus. They would be the first souls his forebears would consume on their journey to resurrection.

Movement at the periphery of his vision drew his attention. Two of the bus’s female passengers—a short, squashy redhead of indeterminate years and a tall, elegant middle-aged blond—had been thrown clear of the explosion. They struggled upright where they’d landed in the scrub and turned to each other, looking shocked. Before they could move or speak, a wraith-

like fog issued from the fissure into which the bus had disappeared. It moved swiftly to cover the women, drowning their cries in seconds.

A sense of triumph ran through Beck. After years of preparation, he'd finally done it—fired the first salvo in a war no one but him had known was coming. Soon, the Watchers would rise, and he would become a god...

## Chapter One

*Any battle between “good” and “evil” intended to culminate in either a “day of reckoning” or an “end of the world as we know it” scenario necessarily involves four things: agents of darkness who have no idea WTF they’re trying to bring about; agents of light and right who say “WTF!” and oppose them; The Creator, who will deal out the reckonings regardless of who “wins”; and the shadow-bound agents of reason who understand too well what a Day of Reckoning might entail—and fear it. It’s worthy of note that an “End of the World as We Know It” endgame is unlikely to work out well for anyone...*

—from *The Lightway Codex, Introduction: Overview* by McCleron O’Connell, Indigo

Lightworker

The unearthly quality of her singing assaulted him even before the sound reached Luc’s ears. Doubling over in pain, he gasped and ducked into a flower-shadowed corner near the entrance to the lime green painted cinderblock storefront that housed his destination. Breathing into the pain in an attempt to contain it, he wrapped his arms about his head and ears.

The protective move failed. It was more than the actual sound that hurt him. Pitch, tone, and an indefinable otherness also came into play. The angelic essence—the sheer crystalline brilliance of the light, the power behind each note—drove wormlike fingers into his too-sensitive Ekoa Krillu brain, pierced every nerve in his system, rattled his teeth, then ripped free.

*Shit!* He fell to his knees. Since Kartchner had ruptured, the Brotherhood had been looking for ways to stop the oncoming threat by getting rid of anyone the Watchers would be most likely to feed on—and from whom they could gain strength.

To that end, Luc was being sent to “secure” all known “special” kids and adults. Senn Lawton, the liaison between them and the Council of Light, had suggested he might know someone who could help. He’d also said the woman he was sending Luc to could dance, but the bastard sorcerer had utterly failed to hint at Aurora Montgomery’s ability to incapacitate a potential enemy by singing a medley that ran from emo to hard rock to pop to country western, and show tunes to—Luc winced his eyes shut and wrapped his arms more tightly about his ears when her voice soared—a fucking sixteenth-century madrigal, for God’s sake. No wonder his search for the source of the temblors ended here. If her singing could fell him, it could no doubt disrupt the earth’s seismic core, too.

The song broke off as though interrupted by something or someone. The pain that ran through every vein, pore, and nerve lessened but did not entirely abate. Still, it was manageable. Grimly, Luc stumbled to his feet. No wonder Senn had told him *this* woman was the only one who could help him to rescue the child that underground whispers referred to as the Sixth Element. He owed the damn sorcerer a holiday in hell for not cluing him in on the full extent of Miss Montgomery’s abilities. Still, if those abilities helped Luc to protect the youngster he’d been tasked with finding...

Well, then the disturbing extent of discomfort she caused him in the process would be worth it.

He stepped through the building’s iron security gate and into the open door of Sunshine Dance Studio.

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Aurora Montgomery sensed him and the pain she'd caused him before he placed a foot in her doorway.

Skin crawling with the urge to flee from some kind of predatory presence, she abruptly stopped singing while she danced and pivoted to face the incoming threat. The sight of the huge, dark man paused at her threshold caused the air to leave her lungs in a rush. Easily over six and a half feet tall, he menaced the room by his existence in it. Aurora's breath went shallow.

*Sexy and disturbing.*

The thought skirled upward through every nerve ending, scorched its way from her toes to the base of her spine the moment he set foot on the scarred hardwood of her studio floor. From the base of her spine, the notion skittered into the fine hairs at the nape of her neck. *Sexy and...*

*Disturbing.*

She caught her breath when the word pulsed erratically, erotically, in her veins.

*Disturbing...disturbing...disturbing...*

It vibrated through her, speared unexpectedly to the tips of the breasts that plumped against her brightly colored dance bra. The word—the promise—plundered her lungs before it plummeted into her belly.

Wariness flitted through her. At the age of twenty-six, she'd never experienced anything that came close to resembling this sensation. And now that she was...

*Mate...couple...breed...*

On the other side of the room, his nostrils flared. He turned and took in the dim room with a single glance before settling on her. His eyes flashed, lips parted, tongue flicked out to taste the air.

Her breath shuddered in her lungs. He took an involuntary step toward her, caught himself, and stopped dead. His eyes narrowed. Aurora struggled to capture her runaway breath as her first impression of him revised itself. He was not merely sexy and disturbing. He was sexy, disturbing, and *dangerous*.

She'd put money on that last being his most prominent characteristic, especially among those who knew him.

She didn't.

It felt like she did.

Very, *very* well.

*I don't do demons, hell spawn*, some part of her whispered.

Shocked, she slapped the notion down, but not before he lifted a scarred black brow and shot a thought back at her: *Have you ever done anyone, angel?*

Aurora stopped breathing. Damn. He'd heard her. He'd *heard* her. She'd always been able to "hear" others, to project thoughts back for them to take in on some unobtrusive, internal level. But other than some of the disabled, disadvantaged, or challenged children with whom she worked, she'd never met anyone able to hear her the way she "heard" them, as though carrying on a mental conversation.

*Telepath*, something deep inside her said. Only not, exactly. Intuition informed her he was far more.

She swallowed. *Crap*.

Beneath the studio's floor, the earth rolled gently, as though in portent.

*Psi. Inhuman. 'Krillu*.

*Fallen*.

Throwing up her mental and psychic shields, she backed deeper into the studio, away from him. Maybe he'd come to the building that housed her dance studio to see someone else.

He hadn't. She knew even before he took a second, determined step toward her that he hadn't come into the Haight for anyone but her.

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Luceire took in the lithe form of his quarry, and the first thing that flared through the lingering pain of her song was a savage growl of satisfaction.

*Mine.*

He squelched the disquieting hunger to possess, to conquer—and to be conquered by, which unsettled him—the petite but voluptuous creature. The well-defined muscles of a dancer enhanced her curves, accentuated breasts, thighs and buttocks he wanted to fill his hands with.

He winced when his cock hardened, reminding him of just how long he'd been without. Members of the Brotherhood of Shadows took an oath of celibacy along with the vows they made to cleave only unto their mission to protect humanity. That meant that psi vamps—and specifically the Ekoa Krillu—like him did not mate at all. Not permanently, anyway. They fed on the life force of anyone or anything willing—and sometimes unwilling—to share with them. That included the emotional energies exuded by individuals and mobs as well as the residual energies that lingered any place that had seen vast amounts of passionate activity like dance halls, theaters, poverty-stricken neighborhoods, and battlefields. They definitely did not pair off with anything they considered *kine*, or food.

No, if a psi vamp was wise, he maintained a herd of willing partners, alternating among them in order to keep his resources healthy and available—much the way experienced sanguine vampires kept a coterie of chattel willing to regularly donate blood. This woman definitely

impressed Luc as the energy source to end all—if he could figure out how to get close enough to feed from her without dying. Except...

She turned toward the mirrored wall behind her as though searching for an escape. The movement showed him her nipples through her neon pink sports bra. Again, the musk that soaked her dance shorts drenched his nostrils, saturated his taste buds; his already engorged cock swelled to embarrassing, agonizing proportions. He hissed in a breath.

She was not merely sustenance, he realized with sudden clarity. She was downfall, sure as the moon, bright as the sun. She was the stuff of life itself, the substance every 'Krillu since the Fall craved. Life energy, pure and simple. Every fiber of his being wanted—no, *needed*—to possess, protect, surround, and invade her.

*Mine.*

Even as he fought against the knowledge, his feet took him toward her.

She danced gracefully, agitatedly, another foot away—and started to glow.

Stunned, Luc checked his instinctive pursuit, shielding his eyes with a hand. *What the hell?* Even as he watched, her aura intensified, surrounding her with vibrating shades of pink, yellow, and indigo. The concentration strengthened until it was almost opaque. Then a sudden burst of power flung him backward, across the studio threshold, through the lobby door, and across the sidewalk to land flat on his back on the cracked asphalt of the San Francisco street while every fire hydrant within a thousand yards blew open and spewed water down around him.

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Mouth agape, Aurora stared after the airborne man. She looked at her hands, held out in front of her in a warding gesture she didn't remember making. Waves of lightning-like energy

pulsed around her fingers, flaring between her and the studio entrance in a visible stream. Her mouth worked. *What the—*

No. Whatever had happened, whatever that was, it hadn't come from her...

Had it? No. It couldn't have. Not ever. Such a thing wasn't possible. Perhaps for one of the special children, the "crystal ones" she'd lately started to work with at her day job at Kate Cavanaugh and Associates, Pediatric Therapy, could have done it, but surely even that was unlikely. Had to be. And yet...

She looked from her hands to the still-vibrating double doors on the other side of the room. The track of pulsating sparks was beginning to subside, but the implication was undeniable. Just as Kate and Solaya had told her, apparently, she had *gifts*.

And they were coming into their own.

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He hadn't realized Luceire Garard was back.

For the space of a breath, consternation flooded Savitri Nousaine. He was the underworld master of the city—and had been since before San Francisco had been the Spanish settlement Yerba Buena. Nothing and no one got within a thousand-mile radius of his city without his knowledge—especially no one who bore the unique energy signature that came with having trained with him. And Garard had trained more closely with him than anyone before or since.

Which had made his break from Nousaine's patronage and his subsequent admission into the Brotherhood of Shadows a betrayal of proportions equal only to Mephisto's original break with heaven.

He switched his senses outward, toward where he could feel Garard's presence. Faint seismic activity centered on the site, causing him to narrow his eyes. Garard had found the girl

Nousaine had been feeding from since her energy had appeared on his...radar...six months ago. At the moment, she was seriously agitated. But until she'd reacted, he hadn't known Garard was anywhere near the city.

It disturbed Nousaine to realize that the Brotherhood seemed to have worked out a means to mask their energy signatures so thoroughly. Still...

He placed his fingertips on a north-facing window of his vantage point at the top of the Transamerica Pyramid. Shutting his eyes, he reveled in the burst of energy that had kicked Luceire Garard out the entryway of Sunshine Dance Studio onto his keester—a move that was surely responsible for causing the 'Krillu to drop his guard, bringing him to Nousaine's attention.

The ability to keep an eye on San Francisco in its entirety was only one of the advantages of owning space at the top of the city's tallest building. The greatest benefit, however, came from the building's design itself. The energy absorbed by the quartz crystals embedded in the surface of the pyramid's concrete pillars and blocks acted as a tuning fork of sorts, amplifying everything that came to him—especially when he was able to physically touch the stone. The amplification allowed him to control the metropolis, feed some of his hunger without having to make one-on-one contact with his victims the way most psis had to.

Sometimes, yes, he did that for the sheer pleasure of the hunt, the incredible high that came from descending on his prey and consuming it whole. But that was the basest part of his nature. The part in which he reveled, in the rare event that no one was looking.

On the other hand, he never made contact with the building's quartz-encrusted exterior when it came to feeding, even from a distance on the woman who'd just pitched his greatest enemy into the street. The power she hadn't yet realized she carried would have been too much even for him to safely absorb.

Nousaine had been spying on Aurora Montgomery since the death of her father six months before. That was when she'd first come to his notice—the first time she'd experienced emotions strong enough to shock him into an awareness of her.

The first time, he'd quickly realized, she'd gone unshielded by the force of her remaining parent's love.

Her grief allowed him to prey psychically on her, absorbing her vitality by attacking her dreams with nightmares and feeding on the life-giving energy the traumatic visions created as she fought them. The force with which she'd expelled the strongest and most accomplished of his former protégés was formidable, sweeter than anything he'd ever tasted—and he'd sampled a lot of *prana* through the millennia. It kept him intensely alive, made him stronger than any other existing vampire, psi *or* sang.

It made him hungrier, too. That was why he'd fastened his attentions on Aurora the minute she had come to his notice.

The pleasure of devouring the nearly manic vital forces of his wealthier clients had long since diminished in value for Savitri. The energy he pulled from their pretty, petty lives sustained him, of course, but the flavor palled. His clients' essences lacked spice, spirit, vigor. The longer he fed on them, the more like him they became. He'd fed on many of them for so long that their souls had shriveled and blackened to a point near nonexistence. In order to fully satiate his appetites, he would need to completely drain them of life.

Getting rid of the bodies of prominent persons, however, was problematic. Savitri had been forced to seek sustenance elsewhere—specifically, from the misery that lived in the nighttime streets in some of the more extreme parts of the city. Like some of the clubs inside the Tenderloin or within the violence of Little Saigon. But the energies of indigents and whores,

street urchins and partiers, and even the do-gooders who trolled for them in an attempt to provide them all with better existences were stop-gap at best. The altruists were generally passionate about their cause, at least for a while, but the energies of the other night cattle were too often polluted by drugs or alcohol, the potency of their spirits sapped long before Savitri went near them. If he didn't watch himself when he fed from them, he could easily go through five or six a night. That many dead or dying bodies led to questions and investigations Savitri had no desire to encourage.

But Aurora Montgomery...

Again, Nousaine savored the flow of emotion, of power, that came from her. Feeding from her chi could sustain him for centuries if he could keep her alive that long. It could make him the most powerful Ekoa Krillu who'd ever lived. Would ever live.

In ecstasy, Savitri flattened both hands against the windows in the four-sided, quartz-caked pyramid that faced in her direction and sucked her in.

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A few miles away, a boy wearing a troubled expression, a bright blue superhero cape, and a knitted orange slouch hat looked across the bluff to where the narrow pyramid scraped the city's sky. Hair so fair that it appeared white haloed his head when he plucked off the cap. Troubled, he scrubbed a hand through his flyaway hair, trying to ease the static electricity itch. His insides jittered, making him feel squirrely. He hated being exposed like this, hated being out in the open where anyone could pick up his thoughts, maybe find him. He didn't want to be what *they* told him he was. Warrior. Protector. Guardian. *Indigo*. But he couldn't *not* be those things, either. That thing in his head that scolded him about right and wrong, said he had to do this. Didn't have to like it, just had to do it.

Anxious, he slanted another glance at the pyramid's spire. Something evil watched the world from that building, and he didn't want whatever it was to notice him before his work on this plane was finished.

Hunching into himself, he took an uneasy sideways step along the grassy headland. A low rumble signaled an oncoming earthquake, and he shifted his weight, riding the earth's roll the way surfers might a wave. As the temblor subsided, an unhappy huff of exertion caused him to turn his attention downslope. A few feet below, a heavily pregnant girl somewhere between fourteen and sixteen slouched against the hillside, attempting to catch her breath.

"C'mon, Mag," the boy said, his tone anxious. "Medics leave the Care Village early. We have to move. Need to get safe before the locusts come out."

"S'not easy haulin' this belly around these hills, Fish." The girl called Magpie sounded irritable. She patted her stomach then tilted her head back to look up at him. "You got any water and some candy? Baby wants French fries, but the other might help."

Fish glanced from her to the distant triangular tower with misgiving. The "baby's" constant desire to binge on French fries was a danger no one had cautioned him about when he'd stumbled into this assignment. Not only were French fries not healthy for Magpie, but they cost money he often didn't have. Some of the locust-like vampires and the others, the ones that fed on energy, had set up outdoor, banquet-style canopies in parks the city's homeless frequented. The food tents were available later than anything run by human providers, but they always reminded Fish of a docu-vid he'd once seen of farmers feeding livestock, fattening them up before leading them to slaughter. French fries and other forms of potatoes were usually available at those places, but it was a trick to get in, grab some while they were hot, and get out without the bloodsuckers or energy feeders catching him and eating their fill. Most of the vampires adhered

to a “catch, feed on, and release” philosophy in order to maintain the food supply, but there were a few...

Fish shuddered. He hated vamps, more now that he was tasked with keeping Magpie and the baby she carried safe. Carefully, he patted the various pockets stitched into his cape until he came up with half a Kit Kat bar and a piece of hard candy, then walk-slid down the hill to hand them to her.

“Can’t stay here.”

“I know.”

She shoved the chocolate into her mouth. Chewed and swallowed before unwrapping the hard candy and popping it onto her tongue. Then she dug her heels into the incline and attempted to hoist her ungainly self erect. Failed.

Sighing, Fish reached down and locked elbows with her, then pulled her up. The faint tremor of an aftershock caused them both to stagger. After an unsteady moment, Magpie was on her feet. She supported her belly with one hand while steadying herself against Fish with the other.

Torn between carrying out the task to which he’d been born and running far away fast, Fish stood still for a moment, listening hard. There it was. Beyond the threshold of human hearing, out of the range of even dogs, someone screamed.

And screamed and screamed.

Frightened, he grabbed Magpie’s hand and dragged her up the slope. No way could they risk going to the mobile shower units in the Haight today. Something was coming, and it was big, dangerous, and final. He had to get Magpie and her baby out of sight, out of hearing, out of peril, and keep them there.

No matter what.