Red Sage Presents
Sphinx
RESURRECTED
CHRISTINE MURPHY

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Sphinx Resurrected

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By Christine Murphy

TO MY READERS:

Have you ever wondered about ancient civilizations, how they came to be, why they disappeared, and the strong breath-taking men who were a part of it? Do they still exist in secret and is their whole purpose for being is to protect the world against the enemy who would destroy it? Then enter into the domain of the Sphinx Warriors, protectors of the Earth, and the women who bring out their need, passion, and love giving them purpose beyond their destined role as Warrior. Welcome to the world of the Sphinx Warrior.

READER ALERT!:

Stormy and Michael are Joined in a ritual that is performed only between Power Mates among the Sphinx. Michael may be conflicted between his duty and his desire for Stormy but when it comes to his inner Sphinx he still finds himself hunting for her heat. Reading about Stormy and Michael will make Egyptian silk sheets and wet soapy showers more erotic than ever.

Prologue

Egypt, Near The Nile River, Pharaoh Khafra's Temple - 2500 BC

He stood with arms crossed and legs braced firmly on the stone balcony of the upper level of the temple looking out at the expanse of the Egyptian desert. Viewing the partially completed Great Sphinx of Giza - part lion, part human taking form before him, he considered his newly inherited position. A position which he had believed would not be sitting so heavily on his shoulders so soon. The blowing wind that increased in intensity with the passing of day into night brushed its fingers through his midnight black hair reminding him of a gentler time. A time when his mother was more stable and aware of her family and the responsibility of leading the protection of the known world was not his.

As his mind whirled with all the changes which had occurred over the past twenty-four hours, he observed the Great Sphinx as it crouched silently in the glittering pale sand. With its extended paws reaching out, it appeared relaxed but if alive could be in motion at the slightest provocation. Although not fully formed from the limestone it was emerging from, it was obvious it would be an imposing vision as the dedicated hands of the many masons brought to life the symbolic human, cat-like image. An image dedicated to those few men who were left to protect them and the known world from the darkest inhuman dimension. The image was supposed to be in honor of his fallen father who sacrificed himself in a moment of desperation to keep the darkness from winning and crossing over. To Michael, it was a stark reminder of what now was his duty as the last son of the last leader of the Sphinx Warriors.

Pharaoh Khafra slowly approached, stopping near the edge of the balcony as well, and looked out over his kingdom and the flowing sands. “Michael, my friend, there is no choice in this. You know they’re all looking to you for guidance and stability. Your father has bought us some time to regroup but until the final gate is found and

destroyed, we must go on."

Michael slowly turned and directly met his Pharaoh's eyes. "I know this to be true my King, but I'll not stand by and be protected as many have risked and given their lives to protect the Old Kingdom and our people. I know we're few now, but every capable Warrior and Power Sword must be ready. All must be a part of the fight if we're going to have any chance against the darkness and its determination to destroy this world and the Life Power."

"The Power Swords have been a great boon to us since their creation. In this we have a great debt to Joshua for finding the Sefu Elements which form the swords from the unique energy of each person's Life Force," Khafra replied seriously. "As long as you and your Warriors are able to access the Life Power, the weapons will be useful and you'll be strong enough to fight the Wraith. Without it, we are doomed."

Michael ran his hands through his hair while letting out a long exhalation of frustration. "Besides myself, a couple of the others are able to draw small amounts of Life Power from the Earth and share to sustain us. Eventually, though it won't be enough to keep us going. Ultimately, my mother is the only one who can sustain the Power and bless us with the energy at any level that will be sufficient to continue this fight."

Khafra shook his head, stepping closer to the granite wall at the edge of the balcony and stared into the distance of his kingdom towards the Second Pyramid. "How is your mother?"

"She's continuing to weaken, but still draws the Life Power and provides it in small amounts. It should sustain us with the supplemental abilities for those of us who have the capability. She's not the same without my father and doesn't seem to be able to hold it and transfer it as well. I must let you know her Power Keeper mark is beginning to fade as well."

Khafra sighed deeply and then placed his hand upon Michael's shoulder. "I'll confer with the Priestesses to see if there is anything we can do to ease your mother. It's as the Other World scrolls have foretold. Times will become dark and seem hopeless. However, there are also words in the scroll which describe one who will come and bring the light of the Life Power back to the Sphinx and bring

them back to glory."

"Then it will need to be sooner than later." Michael demanded. "If my mother's health continues to fail and we lose her, time will only tell how long we can hold the Gates." His voice faltered as he suggested the worse alternative, "Perhaps we should complete the four pyramids and use what Life Power is left to bring them on-line to destroy the remaining Gates.

"No!" Khafra gripped Michaels shoulder. "That would more than likely kill the remaining Warriors and yourself and not even guarantee any of the Gates would be destroyed. Besides, destroying all the Power Gates at once would destabilize this world, other worlds, and the universe. We must do what we have always done upon our planet and now here on this one. Protect it, our people, and the humans. The Egyptian Royalty will work with the Priestesses and we will do everything in our power to find the next Power Keeper. I promise you, with my last breath, we will find her!"

Chapter One

Yuma Desert, Arizona - Area 46 Research Complex – 2012

Located in the Southwestern United States and northwest of Mexico was the Yuma Desert, home of very little, if even sparse vegetation and the top secret Area 46 Research Complex. Those who worked and resided there simply referred to it as the Complex. The closest city to it was Yuma, Arizona, on the Colorado River and border of California. The city was where the majority of the employees at the Complex lived when not working endless hours on genetics research. Some even chose just to keep a room at the Complex versus commuting back and forth through the punishing desert. Stormy was one of those workers and she preferred to live most of the time there at the Complex. She had an apartment in the city but didn't stay there very often. Her hours were long and extensive and she preferred the work to socializing except for those few friends at work she liked to hang out with.

Her job could be tedious with the long hours of sorting, cataloging, and looking up requested information, such as the location of an individual who met a genetic profile. Still, she found it satisfying when she helped find a breakthrough and keeping busy most of the time kept her out of trouble, at least most days. Besides she had her best friend, Julie, who shared the cubicle with her and kept her entertained with antics on the days the tedium became too much.

Today could end up as an exception when it came to getting in trouble as she tried solving the mystery of her place of work. The mystery that always plagued her mind involved the strange comings and goings of the intermediary employees who were referred to as Gatherers. These individuals would surface from below ground via a platform elevator, gather requested information, and disappear back into the depths of the Complex. Where would they go with it? What would they do with it? Just what was going on down there in

the mysterious depths of the Complex?

To her disappointment, the everyday workers, like herself, were kept in the dark. What was actually going on was never revealed to them. The Gatherers, though, they knew because they were the connection to whatever was actually happening in the secret levels below. They were starting to surface more often like something big was about to break loose. Stormy could tell by the flushed, excited expressions on their faces, making their tattoos of an ancient Egyptian Ankh stand out, that it was something big too.

As a self-designated everyday worker, Stormy heavily contemplated the duplicity of the Gatherer title as she stared at a Gatherers' right cheek and the tattooed shape resembling a cross with a loop for the top piece. She repressed a yawn she would have loved to cut loose just to see the hilarious expression it would generate on the Gatherer's face. Instead, she simply continued to stare at his cheek.

The stern Guardian barked out his orders at her pointing his finger right in her face, “Where are the latest data printouts?” He scowled at her and Julie continuing in his tirade, “Why they continue to keep you two around is beyond me. You females are wasting my space with your caliber of abilities.”

Stormy was sure there were more life shattering events being prevented by the tardiness of the one document. “Yes, Sir, I’ll get right on that. Shouldn't take but a minute. My mistake. No more bathroom breaks for me,” she offered up in her usual canned ‘whatever’ response.

Today she added the bathroom comment just to see if she could get a rise out of the guy. But, as usual when she tried this antic, he stopped in his tirade, looked confused like he just didn't get it and demanded, “I’ll be back in five minutes and you better have the documents ready”. Spinning around, he stalked away and dismissed both of them like they were beneath him.

Stormy turned and faced Julie, who was still making faces at the Guardian, flipped her tangled dirty dish water blond ponytail over her shoulder, and rolled her sea green eyes. She muttered, “Gatherer, my ass. The man couldn't find his own ass if it was handed to him. If it wasn't for the money this job pays, I would have

walked away a long time ago."

"First of all, you would never leave this job just for the fact it gives you something to poke around in and try and figure out whatever mysterious project they're working on this month. Which, by the way, is going to get you vanished down into their hell level to never be seen again. Another casualty, you know, like the one guy, Keith. One day he was sure he found the key to all the happenings down there and the next he disappeared. They said he was transferred to Canada. Bah. That's such crap. No one could even find his forwarding address or any record of him." Julie teased with her usual half-hearted poking of their shared paranoia.

Stormy raised an eyebrow and shot back "Julie, you red headed twit, he got married and moved to Los Angeles. You know they don't like anyone married to work here. Weird, but true. I figured that out within a month of starting work here. I think all those Twinkies you keep shoving in your face are going straight to your head making it fatty."

"No, it's true, the married bit was the first cover up and when that didn't work, they started using the Canada bit. Anyway, the other reason you couldn't walk away is because there is no way to "walk" anywhere from here. You would need a transport and it takes forty eight hours just to get through all the red tape to get out of this facility on a transport. You won't even do that except for maybe once a month to make sure you still have an apartment in Yuma and to get all the bills paid. Otherwise, you would just stay here and camp out in the issued one-roomer with all of your books you like to read all the time. By the way, I noticed you haven't gotten any more soft copy books. Are you going electronic now?"

Of course, she liked her books. It wasn't like she had a life. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't find anyone to keep her interest for very long or they just got tired of her. She just couldn't find the one person who would take her breath away. Stormy was about to deliver her usual spiel of how she liked the smell of paper and actually owning something besides electrons was important to her when she heard a commotion coming from the outer hallway.

"Crap. Look at what you did now. You distracted me and our great Gatherer is coming back and I don't even have the documents

pulled up that he needs. Once again, I'm messing something up. I better not get another ass chewing or I'm hanging you out to dry for all the junk food you smuggle into your desk."

Diving down into her seat, she quickly typed in her user name and password. Her fingers were clumsy as she tried to rush and it took her three times to get the information accepted. One more time and she would have been out of luck with her user information needing reset again.

She typed in the requirements in her document listing, but the item didn't show up. Had she mistyped? Again, she tried with the same results. She slapped her palms down on either side of the keyboard in frustration, stuck her tongue out at the monitor and growled, "If it's not a Gatherer harassing me, then it's a co-worker distracting me, and for God's sake, who's making all the commotion in the hall? How am I ever supposed to get this stuff done? Julie, maybe we should just go on a break and try again in ten? What do you think?"

When no response came from Julie, Stormy turned and found her friend's chair empty, "Oh, great. She's left me to deal with the fall-out." No sooner had the words left her lips, the commotion from the hallway suddenly crashed through the main office door only thirty feet away, drowning her thoughts. It sounded like the banshees of hell had hurtled into the office with the sound of Julie screaming over top of the cacophony of chaos.

Every hair on Stormy's skin felt like it was standing straight up. The strangest sensation of déjà vu came over her. "Oh, I don't think so. No one touches Julie."

Pushing back from her desk, she sprang to her feet. She rounded the corner of her cubicle...and came to a dead stop. Her eyes didn't quite compute as co-workers were scattered throughout the office area. Most were wearing panicked expressions, cowering, and just trying to escape the chaos. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see two of her male coworkers trying to reach one of the phones on the cubicle nearest them. Under her breath, she mumbled in disgust, "Yeah, it might be a good idea to call security now, you idiots." All in all, none of them were being affective in their actions.

And where was Julie? Right in the middle of it all, trapped

between three of the largest, muscle bound, and definitely armed males she had ever seen. All three appeared to be of the military variety but definitely not any of the security guards Stormy was familiar with in the Complex. They were dressed to the teeth in black boots, black military fatigue pants, and black t-shirts, and all were carrying some sort of weapon—a sword maybe? Around their throats were some type of devices that were fashioned like a collar.

She had never seen these men before, but there had been whispers in the rumor mill occasionally of appearances of armed men who appeared to be military. Stormy had even overheard one of the Gatherers refer to them as Warriors. If she remembered right. Sphinx Warriors maybe? Could these be the mysterious men they spoke of in such hushed respect?

As she focused in on their faces, she noted all three were scrutinizing Julie like they were searching for some unseen treasure in her. One of the males, with strawberry blond hair, spoke urgently, warning, "Michael, we're out of time. If this is not her, we must go. This is too dangerous and is going to lead to more complications than we need right now. Arik was insane demanding we do this. The Elders are going to make us all suffer."

"No!" barked the dark-haired male Stormy identified as Michael. "We're here now. We must find her. We'll not have another chance." As he said this, he approached Julie, pinning her with his stare, but he didn't seem to be happy with what he was seeing.

Poor Julie would have already melted into a puddle on the floor if not for the two enormous hunks holding her up.

"You need to let her go now. I have called security and they'll be here any minute," Stormy bluffed. *Oh geez, is that my squeaky voice? Some bluffer I am, sounding like a mouse. And yes, it looks like I'm the screwed bug now.*

All three men turned and focused on her in a way she had never felt from anyone before. Most people didn't even notice her. She was just a hazy presence to them. These men, however, seemed to see her in total crystal clarity and focus. She even swore they were leaning closer to her although no one had moved an inch.

Which didn't last long, because suddenly three things happened. The two men let go of Julie, which of course led to her puddling on

the floor. The dark-haired Michael quickly approached Stormy, grabbed her by both arms, and spun her to the nearest wall. He pressed her back against it hard and got true and close. Finally, Michael barked, “Guard and Protect”, with the other two men positioning their backs to his and raising those deadly looking swords into a fighting position. *Who is going to save me now?*

Of course, maybe I don't want to be saved. Michael was now not even a breath away and was taking a slow perusal of her. Was it her imagination, but was it every inch? *Boy, he must be disappointed unless he is looking for more than an ordinary house mouse with plain hair, plain skin, plain eyes, blah, blah, blah. Okay just look at his eyes.* Anything to stop her nervous inner babbling.

She glanced up into his eyes finding them to be an extraordinary dark blue. The color reminded her of where the Earth's sky blue touched the outer reaches of the planetary atmosphere right before it became the dark black of space. His facial features were chiseled and masculine, but not overly harsh and with the most gorgeous mouth she had ever seen on a man. His dark midnight hair looked soft making her want to run her fingers through it. And so tall, he seemed to be six feet or more in one package deal.

What is wrong with me? I’m in a dire situation here and I’m thinking of climbing up the man. I have to have lost a few bolts here.

“My Khenti”, the blond-haired male called out. “Joshua is right. We must depart now. I believe security is coming now. We must not have any more of an incident than we already have. There will be hell to pay for this clean-up.”

The dark stranger, Michael, sighed heavily and met Stormy's eyes. She saw regret. “I know,” he answered back to Joshua. He leaned in even closer looking deeper into her eyes. She felt like she was falling into the depths of her imagined outer atmosphere where she could almost touch the stars. She felt his breath gently against her lips and, for a moment, wanted just one taste. She wondered what his kiss would feel like and wished she could find out, especially if she was about to meet her end.

Could anyone just lose their breath from the presence of another, she thought? She felt his hands tightening on her upper arms as he

blinked and so slowly moved back those precious few inches, but he didn't release her. "It's her. Give me one more moment. I have to try and start the genetic Transformation. I don't want the Elders interfering or they will end up killing her."

Okay...Stormy realized this was definitely not the time for day dreaming. She could feel those dreams begin to mutate into a nightmare realized.

"You need to let go of me right now. I don't know who you are or why you're doing this to me. I'm no one to transform or whatever you're talking about. You have no right to touch me. Let go of me!'

Michael suddenly refocused on her eyes as if he was trying to mesmerize her into submission. The only thing keeping her from complete panic was the compassion in his eyes and his look of heart wrenching regret. "I'm sorry, but we need you. You'll save us, and in saving us, you will save your world."

She was dumbfounded, what could you say to that? Once again, he shifted his hold on her. His left hand held her in place by her neck, not hard enough to bruise or cut off her air supply, but she definitely wasn't going anywhere. Both of her hands encircled his wrist holding on, although if he wanted to strangle her to death, he could have already done it.

His other hand reached into his pocket and removed what appeared to be a circular flat device, crystalline, with an engraving. She couldn't identify what it was because he pressed it against her forehead, with his thumb in the center. Pausing for just a moment, he whispered for her ears alone, "I would do this in your place if I could but I can't. I'll make it up to you even if you can never forgive me. I'm sorry more than you know."

With a shaking hand he pressed the center of the device. Stormy heard a click, and felt a sensation like a bee sting in her forehead. In that one moment everything changed. Her universe shifted, and an instant torment became the center of her existence. It grew until nothing existed except a pain which felt like every cell in her body had shards of glass ripping through it.

If it weren't for the strength of the Warrior entrapping her against the wall she would have hit the floor.

****

He couldn't believe they had really found her with the odds stacked against them. But they had and here she was, the woman who could save them and bring the Life Power back into their lives. There was a problem though. Michael could instantly tell something was terribly wrong and the simple Transformation communicated from their Guardian Arik, was quite simply a lie. If he lost his new-found tiny Power Keeper now, not only were he and his men finished without her, but he would make sure the first person who met his end would be their Guardian.

He could tell she was in excruciating pain and in trouble, but any other human would be unconscious, if not dead already. Even though she was small in stature and held herself like she was unsure of her own presence, he could tell from the first look into her eyes and the pool of her Life Force she was extraordinary and strong. He just prayed she was strong enough to get through the Transformation.

Already she was extremely pale and clammy, with her eyes closed tight, and every muscle locked rigid. He didn't think she was even breathing. When he saw her lips turning blue, Michael could feel his panic begin to surface. *Can't lose her.* He would give her his own Life Force if he could, but didn't know if her human form could even take it.

"Michael, are we ready to go?" Joshua was shifting restlessly with the advent of someone triggering the alarm system. "Times up."

"Damn it, Joshua, we have a problem. Arik lied and I'm going to kill him. She's not breathing. It would be better if my sister were here as she would know what to do. I have to try and stabilize her system before we can move her. Can you at least give me a couple of minutes? Otherwise we're all screwed anyway?"

"Shit," Jacob muttered, "If we're screwed anyway, I say we go for the two minutes. Rather go down with some action than slowly dying from lack of Life Power."

"Good." Michael shifted his grip from Stormy's neck and captured her around the waist with one arm, drawing her close to his body. She immediately grabbed his shirt with both hands in a death grip. He placed his other hand gently on her chest above her heart. Her entire body convulsed now. It was so rigid and her heart

rate beat faster than a rabbit's. He didn't see how she could take much more.

He closed his eyes and began to seek the energy patterns of her Life Force. This was one of the gifts unique to him. Although, he didn't have the healing gift of his sister, he could regulate the energy patterns of a person's system to assist in their healing and dampen any pain the person was experiencing.

Michael delved into the depths of her very being. He knew as soon as he encountered her Life Force. It was incredible, powerful, purely her, and the only thing which was keeping her going through the chaos in her body. He wished he could have more time to bask in the amazing experience, but he knew he had no time.

As he aligned his Life Force with hers, the pain hit him so strongly it almost brought him to his knees. *How is she standing this?* He felt the jagged knife-like crystalline pain attacking every one of her cells. Her system was in total chaos. He could feel muscles stretching, changing, and swore he could feel her bones popping.

He knew he was doomed to even try and stop what was happening to her. However, if he could at least regulate it for a few minutes, slow it down, take away some of the pain, and then they could get her back to the depths of the Complex where his sister could work her magic. At least, he hoped. As he sunk every bit of his being into hers, he captured the pain to himself, absorbed it, and dissipated it away from her. At the same time he picked up the energy waves of the Transformation and began an integrated weaving of his own energies to hers to slow down the changes, smooth them out. He knew it was only temporary and if they didn't get moving they would run out of time to get her back to the medical section where his sister was waiting.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, he felt her relax, if not completely, at least enough for her to breathe. Her breaths came quickly, almost in a panting pattern, but now there was air actually getting into her system.

"Thank the Ancients". He opened his eyes, weakened as if he had just gone through battle, light headed, and feeling like he needed to be the one to lie down and rest. He was astonished when he looked

down and her eyes were open. Open but wrong. Her pupils were mere pin-pricks. Teardrops glittered in her eyelashes as she looked up at him and amazement crossed her face even in her torment.

"I felt you...," was all she got out as her eyes closed, her head dropped to his chest, and all muscle tone seemed to leave her body. She would have hit the floor, but for the fact he had a firm arm around her. He quickly lifted her up in his arms... *She is so slight*... and knew he had bought them some time, but not much, and at the cost of paying later when his Life Power crashed. He turned to his Warriors and although still out of breath barked, "Time to go, now."

His two Warriors jumped into action to clear the way to get their leader, who was about to collapse, and his precious cargo they were taking back to the medical facility of the Complex. The Warriors sensed when Michael had used his Life Power to help the Power Keeper. It had glowed outward and been magnified when he had joined with her Life Force. They all had the capability to detect this, but this was different than before, something new.

The trip through the many corridors was never so long, especially with the circumstances of traveling areas they were not completely comfortable with. The Wraith battles, which were becoming more frequent and violent, leaving the Warriors low on Life Power, didn't help. Most of all, there was very little time to get their newly found Power Keeper back to the medical clinic before the temporary reprieve Michael had established from the Transformation came to an end.

Finally, down the last of the upper level corridors and around a blind corner, they arrived at the hidden Complex elevator. Normally, this elevator couldn't be seen as it incorporated some of the higher technology of the Egyptians and the requirement of the user to have the unique genetic patterns of the Egyptians or Sphinx to operate it. Today, however, it was visible and available to Michael and his warriors for the task at hand. With a quick touch to the outer control panel, the silver doors opened quickly and silently. All three of them, with Stormy in tow, maneuvered into the elevator. Joshua and Jacob quickly reflexed their hands to shift their Power Swords back into their Sefu bracelet form before fully entering the elevator.

Not nearly soon enough, the elevator reached the necessary level and the doors whisked open. All three Warriors were out and running through the hallways reaching medical in record time. Michael could feel movement again from Stormy and her heart rate was already beginning to accelerate at an alarming rate. Her restlessness heralded the end of the small reprieve in the Transformation he had been able to achieve.

Without hesitation all three of the Warriors and their precious female crashed through the clinic doors. The occupants were normally used to the antics of the Warriors, but on this occasion with their unique patient, all came to a halt. Michael quickly moved to one of the patient cubicles while scanning the clinic floor for his sister.

“Alexandria, I need you now!”

Chapter Two

For a moment she had been in such a peaceful place with warm arms surrounding her, a deep masculine voice speaking encouragingly to her, and a steady heart beat near her ear. If she could only stay in that place of comfort forever, but it was not to be. Shredding, ripping pain beyond anything she had experienced before assailed her. Her heart began to pound and her muscles started to spasm.

She was back in the terrible place where her entire world was consumed by great crystalline knives stabbing her everywhere from within. Stretching, popping, just dying. From the darkness of torture, she felt a soft surface beneath her body as she was placed on a bed and the warm strong arms of comfort left from around her. She couldn't see but sensed blinding light. She couldn't speak but could hear herself screaming endlessly. Her body was tearing apart and her soul being lost forever. For just a moment, she could hear her blue-eyed Warrior trying to calm her and calling out desperately, "Help her!"

Her world was consumed by darkness, pain, blinding light, and the struggle to stay alive. Vaguely in the back of her mind she heard an upset feminine voice, "I don't know. I've never seen this. Her cells are phasing back and forth like they can't stabilize. Get the technician over here. I need some additional readings..." Losing the battle to stay conscious, Stormy faded back into her oblivion.

For a time she simply floated in nothingness lost even to herself. Foggy distorted voices came to her from unseen faces. Something had happened to her but she couldn't remember. Except for those eyes. Those dark blue eyes from the heights of heaven reaching out to her to come back.

She didn't want to return from the darkness, though. Coming back only meant more terrifying agony. When the tremendous torture hit her body again, screams were torn from her throat and more screams. *Is that me?? Please someone...* Light seeped in

between her burning eyelids and the presence of the never-ending, soul-consuming pain returned. In the background were many voices including the man she'd heard the others call Michael. He sounded upset and concerned.

She tried to reach for him. "Please...," slurred from her parched lips. Warm hands grasped hers. Strong hands. A deep voice spoke near her, "I'll kill Arik for this. Can't you make this stop? It's tearing her apart."

"I'm trying." from a distant feminine voice. Stormy gasped as a pain worse than all the others combined swept her towards the nothingness again.

Hanging on by a thread, she felt the strong grip of someone's hand grasping hers. Once again she heard the deep mesmerizing voice so near her, "Stay with me, Power Keeper. You can do this."

She was certain she couldn't take anymore but for this man she would try. She tried to open her eyes but the searing light burned them. The taste of blood in her mouth had to be a bad sign. Her body tingled from head to toe as her nervous system began to shut down. Stormy just didn't have the energy to fight anymore and she curled in on herself. Her heart slowed and picked up a dangerous irregular beat. An urgent feminine voice called, "Michael, you must join with her completely this time. It's the only way."

Strong hands brushed her heated skin. She barely made out Michael's reply, "I can't. It is unforgivable. I have already taken everything else from her."

"You must." Urged the soft feminine voice again, "She'll die and we can't lose you or the Warriors. Please....." Stormy couldn't focus further on the conversation as she gasped for breath when another streak of lightening-tinged pain sheared through her brain. It shot down into her spinal column and out to every nerve ending that existed in her body.

Warm arms surrounded her again, not just physically, but deeper at a level inside her no one had ever touched before except by this Michael. It felt like he was working his magic again. The wicked pain fought him in a battle she couldn't see either one of them winning. In the end, though, she was mesmerized by his ability to find the jagged pieces of her and put them back together using the

threads of his own existence. She sensed his desperation and so many other things he hid so well. Whatever her fate, she knew she was happy he was with her as she slowly faded into a restful oblivion. As the blessed darkness closed in again, she could only wish she could have had more time with this unique man.

The darkness she slipped into this time was different from the previous. She floated without discomfort or pain and felt a warm presence watching over her keeping her safe. Time seemed to have no meaning in the darkness of this oblivious sleep, but eventually she found her way back from the depths. Slowly, through many layers of a hazy mist, she surfaced. The after-effects of whatever had happened to her had to be similar to being run over on a busy interstate and topped off with the last vehicle being a bus. The good news was the horrible razor sharp pain was gone. Her vision still seemed a bit fuzzy and every part of her body was sluggish. It was difficult even to want to move from her position in the comfortable bed. Barely holding her eyes open, she managed to scan her surroundings. She was relieved when she spotted the familiar face of Michael sitting near the head of her bed in a corner of the small patient room she was in.

He was sleeping with his chin dipped into his chest and his tall body slouched into the small visitor's chair. Stormy wasn't sure how long she had been unconscious or how long Michael had been there with her, but he looked exhausted. Circles were around his eyes and he had a growth of facial stubble. His dark black hair was in disarray as if he had been running his hands through it several times leaving the strands sticking up this way and that.

The whole image made him look much younger and less of an imposing figure than when she saw him initially in her office. How long ago was that? Time and her world had been turned on its side. She wanted to reach out and feel the warmth of his skin, but again, her vision began to narrow and blur. Jolting back awake, she took several breaths to calm herself. She had expected to be ravaged by crushing pain again, but it was not there to torment her.

The sound of distant laughter of a young girl or what sounded like a young girl was what captured Stormy to awareness of her surroundings. In turn, there was a low rumble of a deep voice

conversing and asking questions of how the young girl was feeling and if he could get her anything. He also asked how the power keeper was doing. Stormy recalled hearing those words before but didn't know what they meant or when she had heard them. Whatever had happened to her had left a few cheese holes in her memory. With the thought of food, her stomach let out the loudest growl and whoever was on the other side of her cubicle walls heard it as well. Both of the people who had been speaking became very quiet.

Soft footfalls moved across the outer room and approached Stormy's doorway. A slight woman who was barely more than a girl walked into her room and to the foot of the bed. She was quite short, reaching five foot three at the most, with dark black hair swept back into a long pony tail and dark blue eyes which were lined with dark eyeliner. The color reminded her of Michael's eyes. She had on a long white lab coat with a stethoscope around her neck. As she approached Stormy, she smiled at her as a friend would.

"Hello. I'm Alexandria. I'm the healer here, or perhaps what you would call a physician. You've been unconscious for seven days, but you're much better now. I'm sure you can tell your energy level is much higher. Many of us have been taking turns staying with you and monitoring you, including the Warriors. They were worried and hovered so I had to put them to work elsewhere. I know you have many questions so I'll try and answer as many as I can, but first I would like to take a look at you and get you something to eat."

Stormy returned her smile and felt safe with Alexandria. "Thank you. Yes, I would love something to eat as you can tell from my stomach's complaints."

Alexandria nodded and approached her bed side. She called over her shoulder, "Maria, please get me a tray from the kitchen for Stormy. Thank you." Alexandria then explained, "I'm going to touch you. Don't be afraid. I will not hurt you. It's the way I assess my patients to see how they're doing, not just visually, but at a deeper level. It's one of my gifts which I can explain to you as we go."

"Okay." Stormy wasn't afraid but more curious than anything. She was shocked she was unconscious for that long. Whatever had

happened had made her seriously ill. Many questions were plaguing her mind as it appeared she had passed into a world that was much more than what the everyday person would ever experience.

Alexandria reached out and took Stormy's hand in both of hers. A warm whisper of energy flowed through her hand, up her arm, and branched out within her body. The warmth was barely there, but she could still detect it. "That's amazing. What are you doing?"

"You can feel that?" Alexandria seemed a bit startled. "I'm surprised. It's not a bad thing, but just unusual. Most of our people can't sense when I use my gift to examine and heal them. Although in your case, I guess we're going to be having a lot of unusual moments and first times with you. What I'm doing is looking at your cellular level and your life force patterns to see if anything can be re-aligned or restored. I can't heal like I used to, unfortunately, which limits me, but the usual medical techniques are available and I'm quite practiced as a physician. I have to say once Michael stabilized you, your system was able to balance and restore itself. It was quite amazing."

Just as Stormy was about to let loose with the questions, her food showed up. However, it wasn't Maria who brought it, but one of the tall serious looking Warriors who had abducted her from her office. She wasn't sure what to do, so simply looked at Alexandria with concern.

"Oh, thank you Joshua. I'll take that." The whisper of warmth withdrew from Stormy's arm and hand. Alexandria released her and turned to Joshua with no fear but with obvious affection. He reciprocated the look. Alexandria removed the large tray piled high with all sorts of delectable smelling items and brought it over to Stormy. She sat it on her bed tray and removed the cover. "Stormy, this is Joshua, one of the Sphinx Warriors. Although he appears big and gruff, I can tell you he is soft at heart.

Joshua stepped up to the end of the bed and inclined his strawberry blond head. "It's an honor to meet you, Stormy, protected Power Keeper. I wish we could have been introduced under better circumstances earlier, but the situation is dire."

Stormy opened her mouth to say how anything could be dire enough to make those circumstances necessary, but Alexandria

stepped up quickly, took Joshua's hand and stated firmly, " Enough for now. Let her adjust and I can answer some of her questions. There's no need to get into those discussions at the moment. In any case, it should come from Michael and perhaps Arik, if Michael hasn't done him in".

Joshua considered for a moment, kissed Alexandria quickly on the forehead, and quietly left the cubicle. Alexandria stared after him looking slightly disappointed until the sound of the outer door indicated he had left the medical section. She then turned and came back around to the side of the bed to sit in the nearby chair.

"Sometimes the Warriors are a handful, but they have been through a lot for a long time and are good at heart. Someday I hope it can be better for them, better for all of us. Anyway, eat and I'll start with a few basic things I'm sure you're curious about."

Stormy nodded as her stomach let out another loud growl. Everything looked beyond good. Her senses were assaulted by the scent of noodles covered in gravy and pieces of beef and mashed potatoes. Bread with butter, corn, and a piece of chocolate cake completed her heavenly meal. It seemed too much, but her stomach wanted to say otherwise, and did. Quite loudly.

She reached out to take her fork and saw there was something quite different about her skin. She examined her hands and arms. Her skin was no longer the usual blotchy white during the winter or red from the summer sun. It now had a golden glow, healthy looking, as though it had been kissed by the sun and appeared to have a slight shimmer as if she had powdered it with makeup.

"Yes, that was the first thing I was going to mention," Alexandria began. "Your physical appearance has been enhanced as the Sphinx genetics have been activated. Your body has become stronger, more agile, and faster. You'll be able to do things you never could in the past or have imagined. You'll be able to draw energy from the Earth and the living things around you into yourself. This energy is called Life Power and when you share it with the Warriors this gives them the strength for battle and to heal themselves. You may even have other capabilities we aren't aware of yet. The injection you were given caused the hidden inactivated genes in your DNA to become active and make these changes."

The Egyptians as a whole and the Warriors have been looking for you, forever, and I do mean forever, as in centuries. I know you're probably confused, angry beyond measure, especially at Michael, but without you, we didn't have much hope left. Michael and the Warriors will die and in turn there will be no one to stop the Wraith from destroying life as you know it here on Earth." Alexandria picked up a mirror from the bedside table and extended it to Stormy.

Arching an eyebrow, Stormy replied, "I don't know what all that means and I really don't know how I feel. This is all beyond me, I guess."

She took the mirror from Alexandria, looked into it, and gasped in surprise. The image looking back at her couldn't be hers. Could it? Her reflection was absolutely beautiful. Even on her best day she couldn't have come near it. The skin on her, face, neck, and shoulders was smooth, flawless, sun-kissed gold. Her hair was a radiant golden blond with slight curls and slightly longer than before. Her eyes, which were so bland before, sparkled with life. The color was a combination of green and blue reminding her of the ocean along the reef on a clear day. She just knew there had to be a huge price to pay for something like this.

She quickly turned the mirror over to escape her new image and handed it back to Alexandria. Picking up her fork she stabbed into a piece of meat, sighed, and shoved it into her mouth and chewed. Hard.

The first mouthful of food she nearly choked on because she was so irritated with the new expectations being placed on her shoulders. Especially with demands as bizarre and unbelievable as they seemed.

She huffed, "I don't know if I can stand up to everyone's expectations just to let you know. That's not me and it never will be. I can't even help myself on a good day, but go ahead, lay it on me."

Alexandria eagerly dove into the information she had to share, "All-right, I'll try and give you the summary and I'm sure Michael and Arik will give you the details. First, the Egyptians are not originally from Earth and the Sphinx isn't a myth." Stormy choked on her potatoes with this statement.

"Yes, yes, I know, but it's true. Well, before the time of Pharaohs and the modern thinking of man, the Egyptians didn't exist here, but in the 46th Star Cluster from the Milky Way. That's the reason we decided to include Area 46 in the name of the Complex, by the way.

Pausing momentarily, Alexandria drew in a deep breath and dove back into the story.

"Anyway, the planet they were from was called Athenia, a beautiful planet of lush forests, vibrant flowers, clear waters, and a plethora of animal life. With the Egyptians lived the Sphinx Warriors and the Egyptians at that time were called Athenians. The Warriors protected them as they were a peace loving people, but occasionally problems occurred so they needed that protection."

Stormy looked at Alexandria wondering if the woman was out of her mind, but she appeared to be quite serious. "Okay..." She thought perhaps she was in some form of hysteria but waved her fork for Alexandria to go on anyway.

"Unfortunately, the Athenians' and Sphinxes' peaceful existence couldn't last forever. A Dimensional Gate opened upon the planet and what emerged can't even be described. We call them the Wraith and the only thing they want is the Life Power or what humans call life but at a higher level. One touch from the Wraith and someone not capable of self-protection experiences a quick and agonizing death. The Wraith would have completely destroyed their world if not for the Sphinx Warriors. They were able to fight the Wraith back through the Gate but at a huge price to their numbers. There was nothing left of the planet so the Athenians had to move on."

Gesturing with her arms, Alexandria encompassed the room, "Since the planet Athenia was basically destroyed, it was decided that what was left of the Athenians and Sphinx would travel until they found a hospitable planet. Which brought them to Earth.

She smiled momentarily and dropped her arms to her sides. Looking down, the smile disappeared as she clasped her hands tightly in her lap.

"Their peace here was brief though as the Wraith eventually found Earth with the opening of another Gate. The Athenians would have left but their technology was gone and the humans had grown

on them. They could not leave the planet and leave the humans to die at the hands of the Wraith. So, the Athenians and Sphinx traveled to Egypt where the Gate had first opened. The Gates were obviously dangerous, so to try and contain them, great pyramids were built to surround them and the newly named Egyptians developed a whole civilization to support the Sphinx and the fight against the Wraith."

"If the Wraith were so powerful and dangerous, how could the Warriors hope to win against them?" Even though Stormy wasn't completely convinced of the story Alexandria was weaving, her desire to know more about Michael and his life burned within her. Besides, it could be all true with the way her world had suddenly been turned upside down and the changes in her body which couldn't be explained.

Shifting in the chair to a more comfortable position and brushing a stray strand of hair behind her small ear, Alexandria continued, "The Warrior's ability to fight effectively against them is based on their unique capability to draw the naturally occurring Life Power from the planet, store and change it within their bodies into different abilities such as fighting, healing, directing bursts of energy, and so on. On Earth, however, only the female Sphinx could draw the Life Power and eventually discovered they could transfer it to the Warriors. Although, the Sphinx is extremely long lived and strong, battles and time have taken their toll." Alexandria's words trailed off as she began to look uncomfortable.

Stormy was fascinated with the history and background being described to her. She could tell Alexandria had been a part of all of this, both the good and bad and parts were making her upset. She wasn't sure what to believe or not believe. It sounded so strange, but she knew she wanted to hear more about the mysterious Warriors.

"Alexandria, please continue. I need to know these things if it doesn't bother you too much."

Giving her a half-hearted smile, Alexandria began again, "Unfortunately, Warriors fell in battle. The female Power Keepers were few and eventually burned themselves out and died until there were none left. I wasn't old enough to effectively help and just

ended up causing damage to myself as you can see."

Alexandria pointed to her petite body with a grimace and then clasped her hands in her lap. "Because I tried to help at too young of an age, I burned myself out and am now underdeveloped both physically and power wise." She shook her head in disgust.

"Anyway, Michael's father knew they couldn't continue that way forever. He thought he had found a way to destroy the Gates, but in doing so died in the process, and unfortunately, not all of the Gates were destroyed. Michael had to step up as Khenti, or Leader, of the Warriors after his father died. It was now his responsibility to lead the Warriors. Two Gates remained and Michael and his Warriors attempted to destroy those some time back bringing it down to one. It was warped and ended up re-opening here."

"Stormy, there are only seven Warriors left to fight this battle and they're desperate for a Power Keeper to keep them sustained. You must understand the desperation in what has happened. It's not right, I know, to put this type of thing on your shoulders, but there it is all the same. They need you."

Stormy realized she was down to only her cake and had basically shoveled through all the good food without really tasting it as she had adsorbed all of the information Alexandria had been sharing. She carefully placed her fork down on her tray and closely studied Alexandria and how young she looked and wondered what harrowing responsibilities she had gone through in all this.

"So what you're telling me is the Sphinx and the Egyptians have been around since before the time of the Pharaohs?"

"Not everyone. Only certain Egyptians with traces of Sphinx DNA are long lived such as the Elders and the Guardians. The rest have normal life spans like humans. All of the Sphinx are almost what you would consider immortal, although they do eventually die or pass if they're seriously injured. It takes a lot for that to happen, though. Without a mate, they don't live as long either."

Alexandria suddenly became very pre-occupied after this statement, staring out beyond the door of the cubicle.

"I'm sorry if I touched on something difficult." Stormy apologized sincerely. "It sounds like you have lived a long life yourself. I'm sure you have gone through difficult times as well. You

said although you were young, you had the Power Keeper abilities?"

"It's all right. I took no insult. You wouldn't have known," Alexandria turned to Stormy and smiled sadly. "Yes, when I was much younger, barely out of my teenage years, I realized the dire situation the Warriors were in. I began to gather Life Power and transfer it to the Warriors even when I was told I was too young. As you can see, it prevented me from finishing my growth to full maturity and my abilities began to fail. I finally could no longer gather the Life Power in amounts which could be transferred. I could still heal for many years after, but eventually this also began to fail. I'm now limited to being able to stabilize and perform small amounts of healing. Otherwise, I rely on what you would call modern medicine techniques."

Stormy considered this and further asked, "There were no other Power Keepers found?"

Alexandria shook her head, "There were some promising findings, but in the end, the females were either too elderly, had died from some other cause, or simply vanished and couldn't be found. Your discovery was by a bizarre chance because we decided to start testing those who actually worked for the Complex. We just happened to find you."

Looking at Alexandria in puzzlement, Stormy demanded, "Why did you or the Warriors not ask and explain what was going on versus basically abducting me? It would have been a little less traumatic and definitely hard to believe if I hadn't gone through this, but I usually have an open mind."

"From my understanding, the Elders planned on this, but wanted to do the procedure differently and keep you separated from the Warriors. Arik got wind of this and understood it would have more than likely ended your life. Through his studies, he could see you would need a Warrior to help you through the transition of your genetics and even then it was iffy. It was basically a high risk mission to acquire you before the Elders did." Alexandria explained.

"Who are the Elders?" Stormy remembered they were mentioned as living in the Complex but didn't remember them being mentioned as existing in Egypt.

"The Elders are what is left of the ancient Egyptian royalty. They

have control of everything and helped establish this facility through their contacts in government and make the rules." Alexandria looked toward the door and lowered her voice.

"Until recently, the Elders were in harmony with the rest of the population and the Sphinx, but one of the main leaders of the Elders died and the current leader, Turin, is much darker than any Egyptian who is here. He has caused discontent, made changes which have negatively impacted life here, and time and again, risked the Warriors. Michael went against him because of some of his practices, threatening to leave and establish our own Sphinx location. When that occurred, Turin demanded the Warriors be collared to control them and their abilities and nothing has been the same since except for the unending struggle to stop the Wraith."

Stormy was shocked and appalled. "That's slavery! How can they do that? They can't do that. The Warriors are defending them and this world from certain death and this is how they repay them? Why would Michael even allow that to happen?"

Alexandria looked sadly at Stormy, "I don't know all of the reasons, but I know the main one was the Elders had the results of a positive genetics test and wouldn't release it to the Warriors. They did it to find you."

Stormy couldn't believe it. She had been upset about her abduction and being changed and now she discovered Michael and his Warriors had given up even more, their freedom, to find her because of some over-controlling Elder. As if their lives were not desperate enough. *This is all too much.*

She closed her eyes and suddenly felt excessively tired, wanting just to be able to lean against someone to take all of the craziness away. As her emotions became overwhelming, a tingling sensation started along her skin making the hairs stand up on her arms and a warmth to travel along her nerve endings. She wanted to draw upon it and wrap herself in it. Anything just to feel safe and warm. The sensation continued to build but leveled out as she sensed a presence.

When she opened her eyes there he was, Michael, in all of his masculine beauty looking directly at her as if he were starving and ready to consume her. He stood in her doorway with his hands

fisted as if trying to hold himself back. Not moving, not breathing. She felt every inch of him vibrating with energy that could explode at any moment but for the fact of his monumental control. Finally, she sensed him relaxing little by little but he didn't move any farther into the room. She didn't think he would ever move or say anything, but finally he did.

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Michael turned to his sister, "Alexandria, I know you're sharing some of the history and current events, but perhaps you shouldn't ramp her up too much. I could feel her across the Complex and I don't think she needs to be drawing any Life Power at this point. Do you?"

Alexandria returned her brother's stern look and shot right back, "Brother dearest, first of all, don't be rude. Ask Stormy how she's doing. Secondly, she needs to know what's going on here and as quickly as possible. Arik is going to supply her with additional information also. That's if the Elders allow it." She stated with a bit of sarcasm.

Michael sighed, ran his hand though his hair and turned to contemplate Stormy. He hadn't meant to be rude, but damn, every one of his Warriors, had been on edge since she had been brought in. None of them knew if she would survive and when she did, it was a crazy miracle. Here she was, this angel they had been waiting for...well... forever. What he had had to do to make sure she had survived to be there for them still plagued his thoughts and wouldn't let him rest.

The Joining of his Life Force to hers had been the only way. Normally, the Joining was reserved for when the one and only mate of a Warrior was found, but this situation had left him no choice. She didn't appear to be any worse for wear, but it was playing havoc with his entire system. He could feel every breath, movement, energy flow through her body, especially at this close range. The desire to touch her was overwhelming. No wonder his mother and father were always inseparable. How was he ever going to tell her what he had done? Worst of all, he could never truly have her to himself.

Why am I even considering that anyway? When his Warriors

needed the Life Power she would collect, they would all have as much access to her as he would. By the Ancients, as if things weren't complicated enough.

Michael moved closer to the bed stopping himself from getting too close, although it was all he wanted. To be closer to her.

"I apologize, Stormy. As you well know by now, it has been pretty chaotic and we're all a bit short with each other these days. I'll try and do better. I hope you're finding it comfortable now and feeling better."

He meant it too. He did want to do better, to make her happy, and to make sure she was being taken care of and protected. Especially with everything she had already gone through. He was just edgy and tense around her and had to hold himself back. If he didn't keep a distance between them he would end up on the bed with her. The pull from the Joining he had to do to save her was playing havoc with his system already. All he wanted to do was touch her. He swore every one of the cells in his body was vibrating in her direction.

He thought she must have sensed the restlessness in him because Stormy quietly spoke to him, "It's okay, Michael. Alexandria has explained a lot of what is going on. You and the Warriors have been through a lot. I just hope I can meet with everyone's expectations."

He smiled briefly, "I'm sure you'll do just fine. You're stronger than you think." Although everything in him wished to stay, the beginning of the headache that was the price for his actions earlier in the day was kicking in. Because of the possibility of the Dimensional Gate opening up in the next week or so, he had been in the Garden Dome trying to draw what Life Power he could from the Earth as the other Warriors had been doing. He really hadn't had enough time to do it properly as he had been too busy with defense planning and then concerned over the energy he had detected coming from Stormy. In the end, he just hadn't drawn enough Life Power for himself and now would pay.

Michael rubbed at his eyes feeling the exhaustion taking hold. He knew if he looked in a mirror he would have circles under his eyes. The only sleep he had gotten was a few moments sitting by her bedside when her system finally settled and he felt she was stable

enough for him to relax for a moment. He watched her for a moment longer truly seeing she was so much better and now he was the one who needed to rest and recover. Perhaps she knew this because she was shifting on the bed to get closer to him. Any moment now she would be close enough to touch.

Even his body ached for her touch. Only she could ease his weakness and Transfer to him the Life Power he so desperately needed. He was certain she sensed his need as all Power Keepers could, but he knew he must leave before he inadvertently triggered her ability to draw the Life Power. In her current state, she was by no means ready. A new Power Keeper could be unpredictable not only in how she could or couldn't control the draw of the Life Power but also in what other innate abilities came with it. She could be dangerous until fully trained. Michael needed to leave, but every inch of him wanted to stay and touch her.

As he was losing the battle of staying away from her, one of his Warriors showed up at the door bringing a reprieve to Michael's agony. It was Joshua and he didn't look happy.

"Khenti, we need you urgently in the Planning Room."

Alexandria looked more than concerned. "Is it the Gate?"

"No, it seems we have a break from it, but we need a group meeting due to some complications. Nothing for you to worry your pretty head over," Joshua replied.

Alexandria just shook her head, got up from the chair and directed both of the Warriors from the room into the outer clinic area. There were a few additional comments exchanged, Stormy couldn't quite make out, but shortly, the Warriors were gone and Alexandria returned to her room.

"Alright, those men can be quite a whirlwind sometimes and Michael is right. I shouldn't over-tax you at this point. We'll continue to make sure you're getting plenty of food and rest over the next few days, run some additional tests, and then work on getting your physical stamina back up to speed. You'll need all your energy and strength, so once you have been established in your own living quarters and settled in you'll be ready for training. During the rest of the time here, we should get Arik to come with the e-scrolls. You can do some additional reading beyond what I have told you. It

just never slows down here, unfortunately."

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True to Alexandria's words, every day Stormy had blood taken from her for different blood tests, checks of her DNA, and she was fed more food than she could possibly consume. Even when she thought she was ready to get up, Alexandria forced her back to bed and made her sleep more. Stormy thought she would explode from all the food, felt like a human pin cushion, and straight out stir crazy from being stuck in her little cubicle.

The occasional escape into the outer area of the medical clinic just wasn't enough. When Alexandria did finally allow her to get up, she would monitor her on a treadmill, collect additional samples of blood, and then hook her up to some type of high tech wireless electrodes to monitor her electrical output.

Finally, Alexandria gave her a break and invited her to assist in the computer research. It was exhilarating to finally be released from bed rest and use her brain for data research again. Alexandria was also teaching her some of the basic assistant procedures for whenever someone was brought in for care, such as helping to clean cuts and scrapes, burns and other minor injuries. She was happy just to have another person to talk to again when she needed more information about this strange world or just wanted generalized girl talk. Anything to keep her mind occupied.

She thought the most fascinating aspect was the DNA discussions and comparing her "human DNA" results with her new "Sphinx DNA". It was amazing she had survived with the descriptions Alexandria had given her of her Transformation. How she had ended up with Sphinx DNA evidently went way back in the overall history of the Sphinx and humans. As Sphinx females had been fewer and fewer, the Sphinx males had begun to interact with other races. Egyptian or even human females were just as intoxicating and addicting to them as another Sphinx female. It was unexpected that a human could conceive from a coupling with a Sphinx, but it did happen from time to time. The majority of live births from these couplings rarely generated females with the abilities or longevity of the Sphinx. From the research, it was discovered the Sphinx DNA had bonded with the human DNA in an

inactive state and with the proper protein mixtures introduced could activate this sleeping DNA.

Of course, it was uncertain it would work and only with the intervention of a powerful enough Sphinx like Michael, could the female's system be stabilized for her to survive. The DNA basically unwound, disassociated into its new structure and reformed. This had been the torment Stormy had gone through and if she could get her hands on the original creator of the serum protein, she would have choked him or her.

However, as fascinating as all of this was, Stormy wondered what her life would become now. She realized her slight reprieve with Alexandria had to be coming to an end soon. The new adventure forward as to her new duties in helping the Warriors had to begin. True to her thoughts, her small fish bowl existence ended a couple of mornings later.

As she was entertaining herself at the computer examining some of the DNA samples Alexandria had given her, she experienced a disturbance which affected her entire system. One moment she was peacefully scanning the results and the next she was suddenly consumed with chills that tore up her spine and raised the hair on her neck. Something wasn't right. She was being stalked.

"So, this is the precious Power Keeper who has the entire Complex gossiping. You look like you're recovering well," a dark voice sneered from behind her.

Stormy quickly stood up and faced the main entrance door. Standing there were two men. Both were as tall as the Warriors, but the similarity ended there. One was muscular with sandy brown hair and friendly light blue eyes, similarly dressed like the Warriors in military fatigue pants and t-shirt, but they were a dark tan versus the black the Warriors wore. He had an Ankh upon his right cheek similar to the Gatherers, but instead of being a black tattoo, it was a part of his skin and had no color other than the sparkling diamond affects which brought it out. She thought this must be Arik, the Guardian whom she had heard Alexandria talk about.

The other man was a tall dark figure, skinny, with black hair and black eyes which seemed to absorb the light and not release it. He was clothed in a royal blue robe. To say the least, he was just plain

creepy, but even more so as he carried an aura of malevolence about him. Everything in Stormy screamed to move away from him. There was something dark in this man. He could take away everything from her. Her light, her life, her soul.

The dark man indicated with his thumb the Guardian next to him and mocked, "This is Arik, our local expert on our Warriors and I'm Turin. I'm sure you've heard of me. I'm the Elder who is in charge of the Complex and it's my immense pleasure to finally meet you." He stalked closer to Stormy reaching out to touch her.

Stormy's fight or flight mode was in full force now. Everything in her was still screaming not to let him touch her. He wasn't right. Very wrong. She was almost hyperventilating being cornered by him. *Need to get away from him now!*

Something shifted in her system and a tingling started at the bottom of her feet, working up to her ankles, and up through her legs. She wasn't sure what was going on, and didn't know why, but she was desperate with a need to escape. Even more was her desire for Michael to be there with her and make whatever was happening to stop.

"I didn't know the Elders came to this area of the Complex. It was my understanding it was difficult to meet any of you."

"This is true. But for you, I would make an exception. The Warriors are quite taken with you and you have not even gifted them yet. I should see for myself what level of energy you hold. I may even have you housed in the Elder's living area. Wouldn't want you to be burned out too quickly at the hands of the Warriors," Turin returned as he leered at her.

Turin came closer to her, reaching out to touch her. Panic spiked and the sensation of ramping up continued. What she didn't know was if she was more willing to escape or slap the man. The nerve he had to think he had the right to touch her in any form. Slapping him would probably get her into more trouble than she wanted to bargain for. She could only think of Michael and more than anything wanted him by her side. Turin touched her arm and the sensation of invisible claws digging into her shot up her arm. Her head was going to explode. All she could do was scream in her mind....*Michael!*

Chapter Three

Just as Stormy called Michael's name in her mind, he was suddenly there, barging his way through the door and positioning his body between hers and Turin's. At the same time, he deftly removed Turin's hand from her arm. The brief glance of her face told him she was in terror from Turin's presence and her natural instincts had kicked in for self-preservation. He had been able to feel her from the distance reach out for the Life Power to protect herself even though she hadn't been trained on how to do it yet. Any later showing up and it could have been a catastrophe.

Michael reached behind his back and took her hand in his. He drew her up against him, so he could be close to her and feel her presence but still keep her out Turin's reach.

"Elder Turin, I'm surprised you have graced us with your presence. It's unlike you to not announce your desire to visit us so we would be ready for you," Michael indicated pleasantly. "We could have been better prepared for your arrival. Perhaps gone over some of the new approaches for the defense of the Gate."

"Ah, yes. Your defense plans. Arik had indicated you and your men have been working diligently on new ways to fight off the Wraith. I'm sure you'll do just fine in your approach." Turin started to work his way around Michael to see Stormy, but the look on his face must have made Turin think better of it. At least for the moment.

"I'd heard the Power Keeper was doing quite well and only wished to meet her in person. As she is of great importance to us, I saw no reason for formalities. As it appears she is doing quite well now, it's my understanding she will be released from Medical?"

Alexandria moved over next to Stormy, "Yes, she's ready to go. I was just finishing up the final report. However, I caution against any quick movement forward on her training until we determine her abilities are stable."

Turin smiled at this. "Yes, we wouldn't want her starting too

soon. I believe our people would benefit just by her presence for a bit. Perhaps we can make her comfortable in quarters in the general population for a while so she won't feel pressured to step up too soon," he said slyly.

Michael knew what Turin was trying to do. He was trying to separate Stormy from the Warriors. He made a snap decision he might pay for later but didn't care. Stormy was theirs.

"She'll be staying in the Warrior's section. We have room for her and she needs to learn us and our ways if she is truly to become one of us. She'll stay in the Master Quarters, there is plenty of room."

Turin barked out, "That's inappropriate! Unless you have claimed her already, perhaps? I thought she was to be a Warrior, not a breeder. Or maybe I was mistaken. We can always change her duties."

Every muscle in Michael's body tensed at the inappropriate and unwarranted insult Turin had just delivered. He heard Stormy gasp behind him as the insinuation hit home. He thought, the ass, she wasn't a thing to be bartered over, especially by the likes of a man like him. Michael wanted to rip the Elder to pieces but when Stormy brushed up closer against his back, he instantly calmed down. He squeezed her hand to reassure her bringing it around closer to his side and turned to glare at Turin.

One to not let things get out of hand, Arik stepped up to placate the Elder. "Sir, it would be beneficial for Stormy to be among the Warriors. It will help her adjust and make things easier on the overall group. I'm sure Alexandria will keep an eye on things with her level-headed thinking. "

When Turin didn't give an immediate response, Arik continued, "All will be well and I'll be sure to turn in a report as you requested. I'll work out the details with the team, but right now we have your inspection you requested in the Weapons Room. You wished to see the new metallurgy techniques?"

At the mention of the Weapons Room, Turin's focus was quickly changed. Everyone knew he had an intense interest in the different techniques and used this upon occasion to steer him away from his violent outbursts. A level-headed Elder, he was not. Michael suspected Turin would never have gotten into the position he was in

without inner help. Something stunk among the leadership and it would only be a matter of time before they figured it out.

Turning away from the small group, Turin started for the door. “Yes, yes. I must see what Joshua has been developing. It’s always quite fascinating.” He paused without turning around, “Arik, I will expect the report ASAP and we will discuss further actions for Stormy and her position here.”

Turin opened the door and brushed through with Arik in tow. With his sudden departure, the tension in the room deflated like an overfilled balloon that had just been opened up. There was a collective sigh from everyone. Michael could feel Stormy relax behind him and his own inner beast calmed down with Turin’s departure. He sighed and watched as Alexandria returned to her microscope muttering, “What an ass.”

Michael chuckled and turned to Stormy still holding her hand. “That’s putting it mildly.” He drew her closer to him looking into her eyes with an intensity only he could direct at her.

“Are you alright, angel? Unfortunately, Turin can be overwhelming to say the least. Whatever you do, don't be caught alone with him. He’s unpredictable.”

“I’m fine. Just a little shaken.” Stormy replied.

Michael didn’t know if he believed her or not. She still looked a little pale and shaken. He still felt the adrenaline rushing through his system somewhat and he was used to Turin’s crap.

He watched her take a deep cleansing breath and listened to her as she tried to convince him with her words, “Don't worry.” His little Power Keeper lifted her chin. “I wouldn't be caught alone with the man. He gives me the creeps. And did you feel that? I can't explain, but it was so dark, the aura coming off of him and when he touched me I felt like he was taking a piece of me.”

Michael saw red simply by the fact Turin had been touching her. It almost sounded as if Turin had been trying to draw Life Power from her, but the man couldn't because he was just an Elder. He would have beaten him within an inch of his life if he knew it wouldn't cause a huge incident for him and his Warriors. He tilted her head up so he could get a good look into her eyes. He wanted to make sure she was truly alright.

"I'm relieved he didn't hurt you. You've come so far in such a short time in your recovery. I couldn't bear the thought of any type of relapse. I'm just glad I was able to get here so quickly."

As soon as he said it, he could see she had caught the fact he had made such a quick appearance when she was in trouble. He could literally see the wheels turning in her mind.

"That's right. How did you know I needed you?"

Michael smiled, but couldn't meet her eyes. He looked towards his sister, "I could sense you were in trouble. It's one of my gifts allowing me to know where you are, and, at times, what you might be feeling. If it's something which triggers your abilities then I can sense it as well. As I said, it's just one of my abilities. I have a few that are useful, although I must be careful of when and how I use them or the Elders may decide to activate the collar."

Appalled at his last statement, Stormy demanded, "I still can't believe you allowed them to Collar you and the Warriors. I understand it was to bargain to find me, but now you're enslaved. Why don't you remove them and be free? Michael, this is so wrong." She reached out to his throat as if to touch the ugly black crystalline Collar and would rip it off of him if she could.

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Michael quickly grabbed her hand grasping it gently in his. He turned it over, placing a soft kiss right on the pulse of her wrist. Stormy gasped and felt the movement of his lips through every inch of her body. He then drew both of her hands to his chest and captured them there under his palms.

"This is something I don't want you to worry yourself over. I promise there is a method to the madness. I'll explain everything to you in time. We'll be released from these soon enough. Never fear. I want you to focus on your settling in with us, going through your training, and getting up to speed on the history of why we're here. Not worrying over the Collar."

As Michael finished his explanation, Alexandria moved up beside them, "Stormy is ready to go. I really can't find any more instability in her DNA. She's adjusting well, and now needs time to get used to all of this. If you really mean to house her with you, then I would do it now, before Turin gets a step up on you and ends up finding a way

to move her into the general population. If that happens, it will be difficult to ever get her back with us."

Alexandria turned to Stormy and directed her to a large duffle bag sitting on one of the back work tables. "If you're ready and are agreeable to what we propose, then you're more than welcome to join us. I know I would love to have another girl to hang out with." She smiled with such excitement in her eyes. How could Stormy say no?

"I hope you don't mind but I took the liberty of gathering you some items to get you started. Whatever you need let any of us know and we'll get it for you. As a Power Keeper and Sphinx, you're refused nothing as you protect all of us. Caleb is our acquisition expert on getting anything, so just let Michael or me know and we'll pass the word. Once you meet Caleb, you're more than welcome to get what you need directly through him. If it's something female related, just let me know and I'll take care of it." Alexandria winked at her.

Stormy smiled. She liked Alexandria. As far as moving in with the Warriors, she hoped she wasn't jumping in too quickly with both feet and getting in over her head.

"Yes, I'm definitely agreeable to the living arrangements and I'll feel safer being closer to Michael and all of you."

She turned back to Michael uncertainly, "I hope you really don't mind as I can be a pain to live with sometimes."

"I'm sure we'll do just fine. You'll be an angel as compared to some of the Warriors." He released her hand and gave her a gentle push towards the bag. "Go ahead and change. You have to be tired of running around in scrubs. I'm sure Alexandria has provided you with what you'll need."

Excited to be moving to the next chapter of her new life, Stormy quickly went over to the large duffle, threw it over a shoulder and went back into her cubicle. She placed the bag on the bed and began to go through what Alexandria had provided for her. The woman had definitely thought of everything. Inside the duffle were silk underwear and the softest night shirts in a multitude of greens and blues and pinks. Alexandria had even provided her with workout clothes, tennis shoes, three bikinis—*okay*?—socks, soft lounge

shirts and pants in more colors of the rainbow. Everything she needed or even wanted was stuffed inside the depths of the duffle. Among it all were several outfits with boots which looked suspiciously similar to what the Warriors wore. Also included in the collection was a large toiletry bag containing all the items any female would need including shampoos, conditioners, perfumes, lotions, hair brushes, ponytail holders, barrettes, and more.

With her inspection of the duffle completed, she repacked all of the items except what she needed. She quickly stripped off the scrubs down to her underwear and put on the black fatigue pants and black shirt. Although similar to the design of the Warriors outfits, there were a couple of differences. Her black shirt had silver scroll work around the collar and around the edges of the ends of the short sleeves. The pants belt which she ran through the belt loops and clasped in front was black with the same silver scroll work on it. She donned a pair of black socks and her black boots, which were surprisingly comfortable. To finish up, she brushed her hair, braided it, and secured it with a silver tie. Satisfied, she took a deep breath, picked up the large duffle and left her temporary cubicle for the last time.

Stepping back into the main medical area, Stormy slowly walked back over to Michael. She felt so much better in the new clothes. They fit her body perfectly. She could tell Michael liked them as well as he watched her every move like he was stalking prey.

“Those are perfect! You almost look like a true Warrior ready to do battle.” Alexandria walked a circle around her and then stopped before her pulling out one of her electronic devices from her pocket. “I need to do one more check on you before you go.”

Stormy set the duffle down and stood quietly while Alexandria did her scans. It didn’t take long, and once Alexandria was done, she moved away to take a look at the results. At least that was what Stormy thought she was doing. Sometimes she just couldn’t tell if what Alexandria was seeing in her devices was good or bad.

Looking over to Michael she could see he was deep in thought. He still watched her every movement. It made her feel self-conscious. She reached down and retrieved the duffle ready to get out of medical and see her new home.

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Patiently, Michael had waited for Stormy to make her reappearance from out of the cubicle. The other side of him had wished she would hurry because his thoughts were getting away from him as he imagined how she looked peeling off her clothes. Her skin would be glowing and her long hair would be cascading down her back. He would be running his hands over her skin, through her luxurious hair. Damn, he had to get himself under control especially if she was going to stay with him. He couldn't be jumping the woman at every turn.

He wished he hadn't had to Join with her in order to stabilize her system during the Transformation. Not just because it wasn't fair to her to bind her to someone she may not want, but because at this time in all of their lives, having a mate was just not going to work. He had to try and repress himself no matter what the cost.

Once Stormy had stepped out of the cubicle, she then stood quietly letting Alexandria examine her. Once the scan was completed, his little Power Keeper stood there just biting her lip for a moment. That tiny action caused Michael's self-directed pep talk to desert him. Every cell in his body began to vibrate just for her. If he didn't get a grip he was going to embarrass himself, which was unacceptable considering how old and how in control he was supposed to be. *Great Ancients, how can anyone make a Warrior outfit look so freaking sexy.*

Michael stepped up to Stormy and took the duffle from her, easily slinging it over his shoulder as if it weighed nothing. He then looked to Alexandria, "Any special instructions, sis?"

"No, nothing specific. Just don't push her too hard. This is going to be a learning experience for all of us. And don't let the other Warriors overwhelm her all in one day either. I'll meet up with both of you and the others during the evening meal once I'm done here. I do have other patients to take care of you know." She waved them off and picked up one of her charts as she walked across the medical facility and into another area of cubicles.

Michael looked down at Stormy taking her hand and entwining his fingers with hers. "Ready?"

"Yes." He like the way she breathlessly said the one word.

Michael drew her along beside him, easily guiding her and managing the large duffle. They passed through the large double doors of the medical section into the outer corridor of the Complex. The floors in the long hallway were covered with tan tile which looked textured. The walls were also the same tan color with no decorative items to break up the monotony. Michael began to describe the Complex as they moved down the hallways.

"You're already familiar with the upper most floor of the Complex where you worked before. Basically, that is our superficial outer mask, so to speak, but it does the job of steering away unwanted attention and keeping humans from learning of our existence and what we do. If we were found out, more than likely it would bring an end to our civilization and our ability to protect everyone from the Wraith."

"The rest of the levels below here in the Complex belong to the Egyptians, be it the general population, the Elders, Gatherers, Guardians, or the Warriors. The first level is the living area for the Elders, Gatherers, and Guardians. Trust me when I say, if at all possible, don't have the opportunity to visit there. If you do have to go there, it's usually for something unpleasant or downright boring."

"Do you have to go there?" Stormy inquired.

"Unfortunately, yes. As leader, I have inherited that honorable duty," Michael sardonically indicated. "I keep it to an absolute minimum or just plain ignore them when I'm called if they are too pompous." He winked at her.

"Anyway, the next level down is the General Living Quarters. This is for the majority of the Egyptians who are our working class and keep the Complex running efficiently. The third level is the Main Dining and Gathering Area. It's used for meetings of the population, emergency gatherings, and of course dining. The Warriors will occasionally dine there but most of the time we dine in our private dining room or quarters. We're currently on the fourth floor which is a large medical clinic as you have already seen."

Michael paused as they reached a large elevator after making several turns down the main corridors. It was about the size of a

freight elevator but more technical looking.

He pressed the outer button with his thumb and indicated, “The elevators and other areas are activated by thumb print. This is to prevent unauthorized personnel to enter areas which they aren’t supposed to enter or would be dangerous for them to enter. Plus it protects our privacy from the workers up to and including the Elders. You’re already in the system and have access to anywhere you would like to go.”

At that moment, the large elevator doors opened revealing an interior of more tan-colored tiles and tan elevator walls. He heard her sigh and figured she was of the same mind as him. The surroundings here were bland, making it easier maintenance and cleaning wise, but would drive a person insane from the sensory deprivation after a while.

Michael pulled her into the elevator behind him and drew her near his side. He activated the elevator once again with his thumb and as the doors closed he looked down and smiled at Stormy.

“Don't worry; there are homier surroundings than what you have seen so far.” The doors closed and the elevator vibrated slightly as it moved to their next destination. Once they were under way, Michael continued with his description of the Complex.

“The fifth level is the Warrior living quarters and the sixth is the Garden Dome. I’m taking you there now. You’ll find it enjoyable. The rest of us do and it’s the one special area that’s for the Sphinx only. It allows us to unwind and center and draw what we can of the Life Power. The seventh level is for training and weapons and the eighth level for planning and surveillance. The surveillance area has an extensive collection of computers and is Ethan's domain. The lowest level is the Staging Cave. It’s where we go when the Dimensional Gate is preparing to open. It’s our battle ground where we fight the Wraith for the good of this world.”

Yes, he wished the great responsibility of defending the world from the Wraith and keeping his people and the Warriors alive could be lifted from his shoulders. But what could he do? It was his duty to be the Khenti, the leader of the Sphinx Warriors. He watched her reach up and place her palm against his cheek.

Michael closed his eyes for just a moment, enjoying the wonder

and warmth of her touch. It was unlike any touch he had ever known in his long life, and he gave himself up to the sensation if only just for a moment. Too soon, the elevator came to a stop and the doors slid open. He opened his eyes, taking her hand in his, placing a kiss on the inside of her wrist and entwining his fingers in hers again.

"Come on. I have something to show you."

He stepped out of the elevator gently pulling Stormy along behind him. From the elevator they entered into a small alcove which faced a double set of doors. The doors were set back and made of frosted glass. Michael pressed his thumb to another sensor and the double doors soundlessly slid open. As they stepped inside the next alcove, there was another double set of doors much the way a bird aviary was built so a person had to pass through two sets of doors to get into the inner area. Unlike the first set of doors, the second set was clear. Michael heard Stormy draw in a sudden breath. The view was absolutely awe-inspiring and breathtaking.

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Stormy was completely enchanted as she stepped through the now open second set of doors. She looked out into what could only be described as a huge dome roughly the size of eight football fields. It housed the most gorgeous site she had ever seen. There were plants and wildlife everywhere. She took in the scenery of foliage with its every shade of green, from dark evergreen shades to the lightest lime green. Trees of water-oak, maple, palm, fruit, and fern, just to name a few, were interspersed in harmony. Plants were just as numerous and were scattered among the trees and ranged from strawberry plants with their luscious red fruit to pink flowering shrubs. A multitude of flowers tantalized the sense of smell from birds-of-paradise with yellow and orange bird shaped heads peaking from large dark green leaves to roses with blooms of white, red, and lavender.

She spied butterflies of blue and yellow flitting among the blooms and humming beside them were fat bumble bees showing only interest in gathering their nectar. Small rivulets and pools of water were scattered under the canopy of trees. The plink, plink of water drops could be heard as they fell into the puddles below. She

could hear the sound of ducks quacking and the skittering of other animal life that was unseen.

Since the location they were standing at was higher in elevation at its starting point, Stormy had a view of pretty much the whole area. There was a stone and dirt pathway which led down away from the entrance and eventually descended down into the main level. The outer circumference was where the larger plants grew and tapered down to smaller plants towards the center. The center of the Garden Dome was a large field of lush green grass. Toward the back wall was a gentle waterfall appearing to come from the rock walls of the cliff which scaled up and disappeared in the condensation towards what could be called a sky. As the waterfall cascaded down it fell into a large pool of water which could easily hold a hundred frolicking people it was so large.

Continuing to hold her hand in his, Michael brought her down the path farther into the gently swaying plants to lead her to the field of lush grass. She was intrigued by the fact that even though they were indoors, there seemed to be a slight breeze. She tilted her head back to enjoy it as it played across her skin. As she looked up she noticed the strange ceiling which appeared to be more of a sky. She couldn't detect any lights, but a sunlight equivalent shined down upon the entire dome area bathing it in golden light. Taking a deep breath, she enjoyed the sweet scented air and what certainly was the peace Michael had described when he or his Warriors came here. It sank into her soul giving her a slight reprieve from the craziness she was currently living.

Michael guided her along the central path. Enjoying herself, she examined each corner of the dome daintily moving between the plants discovering the wild-life and the small private coves. Some coves sprinkled here and there had small tables and chairs for conversations, reading, or just to enjoy the view with a good drink or book. Other coves had double hammocks strung between the larger trees for napping or for entertainment purposes when one had the presence of the opposite sex with them. She felt Michael watching her with pleasure as she took it all in. As she tilted her head back and closed her eyes, he halted their forward progress as they were in the center of the grass field anyway. Sprinkled in the

lush green grass were tiny multi-colored wild flowers. Michael laid the large duffle down among the flowers so it was out of their way.

Stormy opened her eyes to find Michael standing directly in front of her. His dark blue eyes intense on her face and his fingers still entwined with hers. He took her hand in both of his and toyed with her fingers, “So what do you think?”

She looked around at all of the beauty shaking her head, “It would be difficult to express all this in simple words, but it is extraordinary. I can understand why you come here to relax and get away from it all. I must warn you, you may not be able to pull me out of here. How do you do all of this underground?”

“It’s only possible due to what little technology which survived from our original civilization. The lighting you see mimics the actual sun's rays and the cycle of light matches the rotation of the planet from night to day and the changing of seasons. We’ve adjusted it only to the point that it’s more tropical and doesn’t have the extreme temperature ranges which can occur in true nature. The moisture is generated as condensation in special cells on the ceiling and then through changes in internal temperature allowing the moisture to be released much like rain with the help of Ethan's computers. The breezes are generated by the circulation system. “

Stormy pointed to the waterfall, “What about that?”

Michael smiled at her, “That’s natural. Nothing man-made. The underground waterfall was found while the Complex was being built and incorporated into this. Many of us enjoy a swim from time to time for exercise or just to float around for the rare relaxation. The other thing that is purely natural is the rhythm of the Life Force which is here. Because the plants and animals are real and pure with very little intervention from human hands, the Life Force here is very powerful. You should be able to feel it.”

At his words, Stormy looked out at the plants and concentrated on what she had vaguely felt from time to time before. She noticed it especially during times of stress as her body had searched out for some type of protection. She detected what could be described as a low level hum similar to a low base setting in a song. It flowed from the life around her naturally seeking her out and making her feet tingle. She desired to feel more. It was a compulsion drawing her.

She couldn't resist and making a decision to pursue more, she looked at Michael and gave him a look between mischievous and challenging. She removed her hand from his grip and abruptly sat on the ground. With Michael looking on from his standing position, a quizzical expression on his face, she unlaced and removed one boot and sock followed by the other. She stood back up just inches away from him, "I feel it and want more."

Stormy closed her eyes and once again reached out for the rhythmic energy. She found it quickly, focusing on her now bare feet and the feel of the springy grass under them. As before, she could feel the tingling in the bottom of her feet and suspected it would begin to spiral up along her legs. The previous times had been in stress and she really didn't recall controlling it herself. This time she wanted to see how far she could take it.

Taking a deep breath, she reached toward the Life Power as she would reach to capture water from a moving stream. She wasn't sure how she knew to do this but just went with it. The Life Power was there, but unless you cupped it just right it would escape between your finger-tips and be gone. Slowly, she could feel the energy begin to flow up between her toes, along the top of her feet, around her ankles and continue up her legs. The sensation was warm and tingling, like gentle static electricity but very pleasant at the same time. As it reached her inner thighs and hips she gasped as it felt like a lover's touch brushing between her legs and across her stomach.

Her heart rate began to accelerate and her breathing picked up as she drew in even more of the Life Power. From her stomach, the energy wrapped around her ribs to her chest, brushing along her breasts, over her shoulders. It even continued up along her neck and over her scalp like gentle fingers massaging in her hair. She wondered how far she could take this and how much she could hold or if ultimately she would just explode in a sudden burst of light.

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Michael was spell-bound watching her. At first, he thought perhaps she wanted just to have the feel of the fresh grass under her feet while searching out the Life Force. But to his surprise, she was quite the quick study. As soon as she had made contact with the

bare earth and searched the Life Power out, it had been drawn to her like it had been waiting for her forever. It embraced her much like the way he wanted to. To surround her in his energy and enjoy every square inch of her while she responded to him in a way the pure rapture on her face indicated she was responding now.

He watched and almost felt he was guilty of spying on something intimate. She was a natural, harnessing the Life Power and quickly her body showed it. Her skin was sparkling and glowing from head to toe and he could see where her eyelashes were brushing her cheeks there was a slight glow coming from her eyes. He realized he had to intervene or she would quickly absorb too much. Being her first experience, his little Power Keeper could quickly get into trouble with what to do with it and possibly injure herself or someone near her. Had he known her intentions, he would have cautioned her on how far to go with this first experience.

He stepped up as close as possible to her, reached out, and placed his hands on specific spots used for contact during the Transference of Life Power. He had to place them correctly to make sure there was no back lash from the Life Power rampantly running through her. He grasped both of her arms with his hands positioned under her forearms and slid them as close as possible to her elbows. Luckily, with the movement, Stormy naturally grasped his forearms with her hands.

He leaned forward and whispered in her ear, “Stormy, I hate to interrupt your enjoyment, but this is the first time for you as a Power Keeper. If you draw in anymore Life Power, we will both be in trouble.”

On so many levels!

He carefully monitored her energy as she came back to herself from enjoying the raw pleasure of the Life Power. She had evidently been immersed way too far in the energy and realized she was beyond her depth. Her grip suddenly tightened on his arms and he was close enough he could hear the quickness of her breath. He suspected the enormous amount of Power spiraling throughout her body was un-nerving and she wouldn’t know what to do with it.

Tremors rocked through her body and made her heart rate and breathing increase even more. He sensed she was panicking, so he

quickly reassured her.

"It's alright, I have you."

At least he hoped he did. He had to calm her down and bring her confidence back which she so courageously showed a moment before. "Open your eyes and concentrate on me, Stormy." She opened her eyes looking directly at him. As always when he looked at her, he could feel himself drowning in those brilliant sea green eyes that were now glowing so softly.

"Concentrate on me. I'm going to link with you and the flow of the Life Power. You'll feel me and I'll guide you to release the energy back into your surroundings. Slowly, so you don't disturb the rhythm but quickly enough so it's directed into the right location."

"Can't I transfer it to you?" She inquired innocently.

Michael's entire body wanted that on so many levels but now was not the time. "Not yet. This experience is new to you and we need to take this one step at a time. Ready?"

She paused, but then with a deep breath gave the affirmative nod. He smiled reassuringly at her even though he was unsure of the outcome of controlling this much Life Power. He took a deep breath, paused, and then his inner Sphinx side dove in to the bright energy.

It was astounding. At one level he was overwhelmed and at the other he was completely in control. His Life Force was surrounded by an incredible energy with Stormy's Life Force entwined with his. He didn't want to release his hold on any of it. His inner Sphinx tried to grasp at what he hadn't been able to have in centuries, but he couldn't have it, at least not yet without hurting her. Placing his energy between her and the swirling storm of Life Power, he showed her the channel to release it from her body and slowly back into the earth, plants, and animals around them. Once again, she surprised him by quickly catching on and directing the flow of energy out and away from both of them.

His entire body and Life Force rejoiced and cried out as the flow of Life Power brushed around him, touching but not Transferring into him, as it flowed back to its origination. As he came back to his physical self, he realized he had Stormy crushed up against him.

Her sweet-smelling body pressed up against his in all of the most intimate spots. His right arm was firmly wrapped around her lower back pressing her against him. There was no way she didn't feel how rock hard he was from the entire experience. One of the possible side effects of being exposed to shared Life Power especially when it involved someone you were Joined with.

It was like having all the foreplay but none of the orgasm and relief. Glazed bedroom eyes and slightly shaking body gave evidence Stormy had felt the same stimulation. The fact she had shared such an intimacy with him sent him over the edge. He had to taste the full lush mouth just inches away from his.

He stared down at her gorgeous lips, his breath locking in his chest when she ran her tongue across them as if anticipating his thoughts. He needed to be closer to her but every inch of him was already firmly pressed against her. He almost took her to the ground with him when she ran her hands slowly up his chest.

Reaching up, he wrapped her braid around his fist so he could have complete control. Positioning her head exactly at the angle he wanted, he slowly lowered his head claiming her tempting mouth.

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For her, it was earth-shattering as every cell in her body wanted to reach his. She wrapped her arms up around his neck and held on for dear life. His taste was intoxicating like chocolate, strawberries, and fine wine. Her body wanted even more. Needed more.

Sensations roared through her body and she was lost to the intensity of it all. No one had made her feel this way before. She was his and only his. His grip on her waist and hair tightened even more crushing her body closer to his taking her breath away. The kiss became even deeper as his tongue played along her lips demanding entrance. At his beckoning, she opened her mouth and his tongue delved in claiming victory. Which one groaned first, it was hard to tell, but both were consumed by the ebbing Life Power and the taste and feel of each other.

Stormy just wanted to rub up against him like a cat as his answering groan and the movement of his hands as he brushed them along her back, sides, and hips stimulated her further. Michael's fingers were nimble as he made short work of loosening

her shirt from her pants. The exquisite feel of his rough hands on her smooth skin was just as powerful as the Life Power which had run through her body just a moment before. *More, more,* her mind cried, *Don't stop*.

As soon as she felt his hands on her bare skin freeze in place, she came out of her sensual haze. *What is he doing? Don't stop*. His head snapped up ending the most intoxicating kiss she had ever experienced. He released her and took several steps back. He appeared to be trying to get his breathing under control and he backed up when she tried to reach out to him. What had she done?

"I'm truly sorry, Stormy. I should have been more careful. I didn't mean to take advantage of the situation, but sometimes sharing the experience with Life Power, especially near or on Transference can be quite, um....stimulating. I should have been more prepared and warned you as well." He stumbled through the last as he continued to catch his breath.

Stormy tried to make sense of what he was saying since her mind was still swirling from the incredible brushing of not just their Life Forces but their bodies. Everything in her screamed for more but evidently not so for Michael. Once he had come to his senses he had jumped away from her like she was something contaminated and now stood there with his stance rigid, his hands clenched, trying to catch his breath.

She couldn't make sense of it. Had she done something wrong? Had she stepped over some boundary? Perhaps jumping him was a little much, but in the circumstance, who could blame her? She thought he had been enjoying it himself, too. Perhaps she was wrong. Not sure if she should be hurt or just plain mad at him, she closed her expression off, turned away, and went back over to her boots and socks. Sitting down on the ground, she put them on while she waited for Michael to stop acting like an idiot.

Of course, she didn't know if that was going to happen anytime soon since Michael continued to stand there looking down at her. He appeared to be just as upset as she was. She knew he probably wasn't trying to be cold or callous, but acting this way because he considered the circumstances were just too complicated even to consider having some type of relationship with each other.

As she finished tying her boots, he stepped up to her and extended his hand. “Look, I didn't mean to be such an ass, but I think this caught us both off guard. I don't want to start off with you pissed at me as we’re going to be living in the same space and working close together. If you like, I’ll let you kick my butt in the Training Room without lifting a finger when you start training. You can even withhold my Life Power for an extra month, although the guys will give me a hard time about being punished by the Power Keeper already.”

Stormy couldn’t help it, especially when she looked up at the expression on his face. He looked like a man who hated to be harassed. She smiled and grabbed his hand letting him pull her up into a standing position. She gave him an imperious pose, “I will grant you reprieve this time, Khenti Michael, but beware, next time I will educate your men on your weaknesses.”

With a more serious soul-felt expression, she continued, “But we have to talk about this and what happened between us. We both felt something and we can't just ignore it.”

He ran his hand through his hair and nodded his head, “We’ll talk about it later, I promise, but not now.” He turned, picked up her large duffle, grasped her hand again and led her back out of the Garden Dome.

“Come on, I want to show you the Warrior living quarters and let you meet whoever may be skulking about at this hour. I warn you some of the Warriors can be a surly bunch, but I guess if you can stand me, then the rest of them may be alright too. Besides, I have a feeling they will be falling all over themselves to make sure you’re happy and feel at home.”

Chapter Four

In silence, Michael led Stormy back toward the main entrance of the Garden Dome. She gazed back at the grassy field in disappointment as they stepped back onto the path which meandered among the plant life and led back to the entrance. She had so enjoyed the visit and would return as soon as she got the chance. She looked at Michael's muscular back wondering what was running through his mind. Did he really regret kissing her so much or was he just conflicted? She thought it was wonderful and wanted nothing more than having his lips against hers and more. If only she would get the chance. Too soon, they arrived at the dual entryway and left the Garden.

As soon as they reached the elevator, Michael accessed it with his thumb print. The doors slid open and they stepped into the cargo sized tan elevator. She already missed the colors and the life of the Garden. Michael punched in the next level up, five, which he had told her was the Warrior's Quarters. He reached over and pressed his thumb into another access scanner. Stormy glanced at him curiously.

"It's an additional security precaution. Only those of us who live in the Warrior Quarters can access them without clearance. You're already programmed into this as well and any visitor you expect can be given to Ethan, who can clear them." Michael pointed to a camera near the ceiling of the elevator. "For our protection, so we know who comes and goes."

Stormy looked at him with concern. "I wouldn't think you and your Warriors would be threatened. You protect these people. That doesn't make any sense that anyone would want to hurt you."

"You would be surprised, angel. Not everything is as it appears but we're working on it." Stormy wanted more information but Michael wasn't forthcoming so she had to settle for what she had at the moment. The elevator slowed as they arrived at their destination and the doors silently opened revealing another world

of colors and textures.

She took in all of the view thinking this was truly an environment befitting a race of Sphinx Warriors. The decor whispered of ancient and Egyptian but at the same time containing touches of unmistakable modern conveniences and technology. Stepping off the elevator, she was immediately wrapped up in visual stimulation with a bit of auditory as “Nickelback” played in the background. The music appeared to be coming from one of the side doors off the huge entry-way.

And what an entry-way it was. A huge expanse of polished marble covered the floor. It had the appearance of tiger’s eye with its glowing gold and swirling patterns of glittering silver. Carpets of different hues of dark gold, red, turquoise and other colors were scattered over the floor. On the walls were tapestries of lush scenery with depictions of royalty, Warriors, and battles of the past. Stormy wanted to examine all of it much closer, later.

The centerpiece of the entry-way was an exquisite stairway which led up to the second level. At the top of the staircase on the back wall was a golden statue of a Sphinx shining brightly under a spotlight. The railing all along the second level was a deep mahogany that was waxed to a warm shine. Gold, the color of sunlight, was scrolled along the ceiling at the edges with a huge inset of colored glass. It appeared to be stained glass and the images depicted a dark background of the universe with starlight sparkling here and there. Large planets of multiple hues of color played among the stars with golden rays branching out in a circumference around each one until they reached out and overlapped each other. Lighter golden shooting stars with trailing tails finished the image as they played among the planets. In between the edged scrolling and the colored glass inset was a rectangle of turquoise lights which enhanced the lighting. Stormy's gaze met Michael’s. He was watching her expression closely. She raised an eyebrow, “Authentic isn't it.”

“Hey, don't bust it down too much. You should have seen it before my sister moved in and intervened. She said it was way too manly with swords and axes and dark furnishings. One thing my sister has always stayed true to is her Sphinx history no matter how

much she delves into the modern technology. If you're up to it, I'll give you a quick tour. The living quarters are quite large, although most of it is individual housing belonging to the Warriors and my sister. Those are on the second level including ours." Stormy didn't miss the statement at all of the 'ours'. Well, well. Maybe there will be hope yet to soften up the great Khenti Michael.

Stormy smiled secretly at the thought. "Yes, I would love a tour. Thank you."

"Very well then." Michael gently directed her towards the main arched opening to the right of the staircase. As they passed through the doorway, he indicated, "This is our own personal kitchen and dining area. As I said before, occasionally we will dine in the main gathering area, but the majority of the time, we prefer our privacy and will eat here."

It was an immense kitchen and Stormy took in every inch of it. It reminded her of the kitchens she had viewed on television before. It appeared to have everything, including an actual cook decked out in a white chef's uniform with the appropriate chef's hat. He was studiously flipping an enormous pancake with no effort at all. He looked to be enjoying himself as he hummed along to a tune only he could hear. Stormy suspected he indulged quite often in the dishes he created as he was quite the rotund man. She would bet he could create some awesome meals.

"This is Roberto, our lead chef who keeps us well fed. He'll make you anything you like and have it brought to your room or set it up here or anywhere else you want it." Michael informed her while directing her to a spot where she could view the entire kitchen and dining area.

Stormy could imagine meals fit for a king prepared here. There was an endless sea of stainless steel with large side by side refrigerator-freezers, two gigantic stoves, microwaves, countertop mixers, blenders, bowls, and more. Cabinets of white oak were positioned on one wall with glass fronts so you could view the contents of glasses and dishes. Another wall had cherry oak colored cabinets set up in the same manner. Although very different, the set-up still complimented each other very well.

In the center of the kitchen was a long work table made of white

granite with light blue marbling throughout it and inset wooden slats on one side providing a place to sit and eat. One long side of the work table was solid with cabinets built in and the other open to allow it to be used as a breakfast bar. Wooden high backed stools were neatly lined up along the side.

The floor was tiled in light gold which was waxed to a high shine and gold light fixtures ran the length of the room. Brighter lights were positioned in recesses in the ceiling at key working locations. At the end of the long kitchen was a dining table made of the same cherry wood of the wall cabinets. If Stormy's count was correct, it could sit at least twenty people it was so large. Above the table was a beautiful crystal chandelier made of the same gold metal as the other lights but with hundreds of tiny crystals and bright white bulbs.

Sitting at the table was a young man with long golden hair that was pulled back and secured at the base of his neck. He had the physique of a body builder and Stormy suspected he was another of the Warriors. As Michael and Stormy approached the table, the young Warrior's unique lavender eyes grew wide. He dropped the food he had been shoveling into his mouth a moment before, and quickly shoved back the chair to gain his feet. In his rush, he nearly toppled it over but righted everything in the last second. He bowed his head looking up at Stormy and stammered, "P...Power Keeper. It is an honor."

"Stormy, I would like you to meet Caleb. He is the youngest of the Sphinx Warriors and tends to act like it sometimes." Michael raised an eyebrow at Caleb. "But to his credit, he is indispensable at acquisitions and getting us anything we need. Also, he is more at ease in the modern world as compared to the rest of us, except maybe Ethan, who couldn't live without his computer technology. "

"Khenti!" Came the anguished cry from the gently blushing Caleb. A blush which seemed contradictory to the size and build of the young Warrior. Turning to Stormy, he defended, "Power Keeper, I may be the youngest but I'm also the fastest and in human years I'm still ancient. I would be honored to provide whatever it is you find you need." At the end of his statement, he didn't seem to know what else to say, so he moved his concentration back to his

food.

Stormy decided to try and put him at ease. “Thank you, Caleb. It will be an honor to be your Power Keeper. I hope I can meet everyone's expectations. I’ll put a list together and let you know what I need. Please, sit, eat. I don't want to interrupt your meal. Thank you for the welcome.”

Michael looked down at Stormy, took her hand squeezing gently, and placed a kiss across her knuckles. “Stormy, I promise you’ll do just fine. You should stop worrying about it. You’ll see you have all of our support and I have faith in you.” He smiled at her. His gorgeous deep blue eyes sparkled at her in that special way of his and it always took her breath away. “Come on. I’ll show you the other side of the main floor.”

As Michael and Stormy turned to leave, Stormy looked back at Caleb and murmured, “Nice to meet you, Caleb.” Caleb smiled back at her, observing Michael was still holding the Power Keeper's hand. An expression of interest crossed his face for a moment but then he shrugged his shoulders. Now that Caleb wasn’t the focus of attention, it seemed his mind went back to the subject of food. He sat back down and proceeded to set a new record for inhaling a quad stack of pancakes.

Working her way back into the main entry-way with Michael, Stormy questioned, “Caleb seems rather quiet? Isn't that a bit unusual for a Warrior?”

Michael laughed at her comment. “Don't be fooled for a moment, angel. He can be louder than the rest of us put together. You just caught him off guard and literally with his mouth full. Give it time. Although ancient, he’s still a teenager compared to the rest of us and loves a good loud game of X-Box.” With the end of the statement, Michael stopped them in the next arched doorway, releasing Stormy's hand so she could enter first.

“If you’re interested, I’m sure he would love to challenge you to a game.” He pointed to the interior of the room she was viewing. “This is our entertainment room where we can make a challenge game happen. It has everything from gaming, to movies, to a bar or anything else you may want to do for relaxation and fun. We have to have some form of unplugging and find it many times here.”

Stormy peeked into the room and the first impression she had was a person could probably stay in this room for days and stay entertained with no problem. In the far left corner were four leather chairs complete with foot rests, drink holders on one side and game controller holders on the other side. Two were at a lower level than the others making it look like a mini movie room. On each side of the chairs were two large couches with comfy throw pillows for sprawling on. Two recliners were also strategically positioned in the mix for a good view of the full-sized big screen television that covered one wall. In one of the leather seats sat a large male with short spiked black hair who appeared to be completely engrossed in the action game he was playing. Stormy thought this must be another of the Warriors.

In the nearest left corner to her were several tables and chairs set up in individual groupings. On the tables sat chess games, checkers, cards, and other types of gaming items. A full wall was taken up by a complex looking stereo system and television screens showing music videos. The base setting was in full action as the floor vibrated under Stormy's feet. Flanked on each side of the system were shelves of CDs ranging all the way from classical to hard core rock and roll.

Closest to her right was another seating area with book cases of reading materials. The light was muted there, but with individual lights strategically located for reading and examining the hundreds of books on the dark wooden shelves. From the ceiling cascaded long streamers of gold and orange fabric gently draping over to the walls and then flowing down to the floor. Along the two walls were more seats made of dark wood with cushions and pillows of gold and orange. Near the door next to the reading area was a life size statue of a pharaoh in full ceremonial clothes of gold and black standing as if to guard those who were engaged in their reading.

In the far right corner there was a large bar made of rose wood with intricate carvings over its entire surface. Posts on each end held up an overhead section which had crystal glasses hanging from recessed slots. Mirrors spaced between the glasses caused them to sparkle brightly as the lights reflected off of everything. There were bar stools lined up along the front of the bar and behind was every

type of alcohol arranged intricately on shelves built into the wall.

There were lights behind the shelves which lit up the different colored alcohols making for quite an eye-catching spectacle. Small round standing tables took up the rest of the space with their spiraling white pedestals. The only item which was different from the rest was the modern looking popcorn machine resembling a cart you would find at a movie house. At the bar was another large male with shoulder length black hair who was enjoying the view of the game and a drink in his hand.

Stormy thought normally the design of a room like this would be chaotic to the mind. However, whoever set it up located each item just right so each area was unique and individual. It was quartered perfectly making four separate rooms but at the same time leaving the high ceilinged room open.

"Raven, quit fucking around and bring me a drink. Any longer and I'm going to continue the game without you. It's not like I'm not going to beat your ass anyway." yelled the Warrior sprawled in the leather chair.

"Like that would ever happen, asshole. Besides, I've found something much more intriguing, Ethan, which you're missing out on." Stormy turned away from the now identified Ethan and back to face Warrior Raven where she found herself pinned by a pair of piercing blue eyes much like Michaels but lighter. The color might be lighter but the look from this man was much darker. Not in an evil way but as if she was being stalked by a tiger that was tracking its prey before pouncing. Indeed, as he stepped away from the bar, the feline grace running through his body was clear and daunting. Stormy lifted her chin and was determined to stand her ground no matter what. If this Warrior thought he would intimidate her, he had a surprise coming.

"Well, well, what have we here? Looks like a sweet Power Keeper. Can I get you a drink?" He raised the crystal tumbler in his hand swirling the dark fluid and taking a drink. "Or perhaps you would like a taste of something else?" Raven raised an eyebrow in a questioning manner.

Stormy was more amused than anything by his antics but was still determined to show she could take whatever harassment he

had to give.

"No thanks. Some things just end up turning my stomach. You know, they might look good on the outside but prove to be very unfulfilling. " She heard snickering coming from the gaming corner.

"Ouch. Touché. Well, you look good enough to eat with all your golden skin. Sunshine captured in softness. Makes you wonder how much energy you have in your body." Raven appeared to be quite mesmerized as he sauntered closer to her. He stopped quite near, but Stormy refused to budge. Raven was quite explicit in his thorough examination of her and did he just sniff her? He acted quite distracted and his eyes were a bit glazed. Suddenly, he reached out to touch her.

As Raven's hand reached up, Stormy heard the deepest, darkest growl coming from behind her where Michael had been standing. This was closely followed by a sudden flow of energy that surrounded her and made her skin tingle and the tiny hairs on her arms stand up. Raven froze in place and whispered, "Shit."

As she looked away from Raven to see what was causing the disturbance, she saw the game playing Ethan spring over the furniture, move faster than anyone she had ever seen across the room, and slam into something behind her. Shocked, she finished turning around to find Ethan sprawled on top of Michael and trying to hold him down.

"If you would be so kind as to get your ass off of me." Michael was flat on his back and looking quite pissed.

"Dude. Uh, Khenti. I thought it was the most prudent thing to do at the time. I'm always good with a side seat view of someone getting a well-deserved ass-beating, but I don't think the Power Keeper would like to meet us during that particular scenario. And well, you had the Killing Look when someone tries to touch their Power M..." Ethan didn't quite get to finish his statement as he was suddenly airborne.

Michael had thrown Ethan off of himself with no effort at all. "Enough! I told you to get off of me."

Ethan swiftly gained his feet and took the opportunity to introduce himself while Michael recovered his composure.

"I apologize, Power Keeper. But we tend to be a physical bunch,

especially as some of us tend to run a little hot." He explained and jammed his thumb into his chest.

"I'm Ethan, gamer and computer extraordinaire." He bowed, then straightened, winking at her. "I make sure the hoodlums stay out of our domain here with my surveillance. You have inadvertently already met our resident womanizer and drinker, Raven."

"It's a pleasure meeting both of you. You can call me Stormy." She extended her hand and shook Ethan's hand without thinking. All three males stiffened as if touching her was taboo.

Are you kidding me? Do I have cooties or is there some unwritten rule that I have to be quarantined?

Ethan quickly released her hand and Stormy saw him eyeball Michael out of the corner of his eye. Ethan's tension appeared to ease as he was evidently satisfied that Michael had since gotten control of himself and wouldn't attack again. She noticed Ethan's pointed questioning look at Michael and the need for answers.

Ethan glanced back her way. "You really do have energy. I could feel it coursing through your hand. You're a natural." He looked at his fingertips while rubbing them together.

"Thanks, I think. Michael showed me how to draw the Life Power in. It was quite amazing." Both Raven and Ethan raised their eyebrows and looked at Michael for confirmation.

"Later, gentleman. We'll discuss it and other items later." Michael gave them a warning look Stormy didn't miss for a moment.

"I think that's enough excitement for Stormy today. I'll be taking her up to...our... quarters so she can get some rest." Michael paused and Stormy noted how he directed a challenging look at the other two men daring them to make a smartass comment.

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Michael re-shouldered Stormy's duffle bag and with a hand at her lower back began to guide her back towards the door. "I'll show you upstairs, get you settled, and let you get some rest." He turned back to his men. "You two, I'll be back to talk to you in a few. Don't go anywhere."

As Michael led her out of the entertainment room, he distinctly

heard Raven sigh out, “Shit.”

Once they cleared the site of the men and were back in the entry-way, she turned to Michael and asked, “Did I do something wrong? I don't know all of your rules and how to act around you all. You have to talk to me and let me know if there are any protocols, otherwise, I will just keep making mistakes.”

Michael took her hand and squeezed it. He just couldn’t help himself. He had to touch her. “You did nothing wrong, angel. If anything, our behavior and treatment of you is far from exemplary. You’re special and should be cherished, not pawed.”

He looked down at her small hand in his, feeling just as guilty, but damn it, he couldn't give up the contact with her. As if her very presence was keeping him together. He watched as she tried to cover a yawn with her free hand and realized she must be more exhausted than he thought. What an ass he was dragging her all over when she should have been resting. He allowed his gift to flow out and touch her searching briefly and found her energy levels had been deeply depleted.

“That’s enough for now. I can show you the rest of the quarters tomorrow.”

Stormy looked around her and up the grand stairs. “There's more?”

He smiled and nodded at her obvious curiosity. “Yes. This is just a wing of this level. When there were many more of us, every wing was filled, but now with the seven of us, my sister, and various staff, we only stay in this wing.”

They turned toward the staircase making their way to the foot of it. Stormy sighed, “It’s so sad to watch your people pass on especially when everyone counts in this battle you have promised to wage. Is there anything that can be done?”

Michael led her up the stairs. “We’re always looking for ways to destroy the Gate and keep the Wraith from destroying this world. Now with you, there is even more hope. You gave us hope, so don't sell yourself short.”

As they reached the halfway point of the sweeping staircase, Stormy stumbled from sheer exhaustion. Without pause, Michael swept her up in his arms. She circled her arms around his neck and

laid her head on his shoulder yawning, "I guess I'm more tired than I thought."

"Indeed. I've worn you out more than I should have." Michael continued up the stairs and to the second floor. Once he reached the top where the great gold sphinx stood guard, he turned to the right and continued down the long hallway past many other doors belonging to some of the other occupants. At the very end of the hall, they reached a beautiful hand-carved double door of more swirling scroll-work.

Michael easily shuffled her and the duffle and opened one of the doors maneuvering both of them and her belongings easily through the door. Inside she appeared to be too exhausted even to look at where they were going, but Michael was completely capable of keeping her safe in his arms as she fell asleep.

Michael worked his way across his personal apartment, a large high ceilinged room which was his personal domain. He slid the duffle onto the floor and carried Stormy to the large bed taking up a large portion of the far side of the room. He gently laid her amid the satin sheets and pillows of his enormous bed thinking how small she appeared on it. He removed her boots and socks to make her more comfortable, but stopped there as his imagination started to run wild. She rolled to her side curling in on herself like a small child giving him access to her long braid.

He knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't resist. He released the clasp on her braid and slowly undid her long blond hair. Once it was completely undone, he ran his fingers through the silky softness, arranging it around her. *Oh, all that luxurious hair*.

He grasped some of the strands and brushed them against his lips. He closed his eyes as he inhaled deeply taking in the vanilla scent of her. Suddenly, he realized he was getting carried away again just by her very presence near him. What have I done Joining her to me? She deserves better.

He regretfully released the soft glowing strands and pulled the bed covers up over her tucking them in around her shoulders. As silently as he could, he backed away even though his only desire was to stay with her and curl his body around hers.

Securing his apartment, he made his way back downstairs to the

entertainment room to face his men. What he had revealed in the brief interaction with them earlier in Stormy's presence was more than he wanted to at this point. But it was out there and had to be dealt with. When the time was right, he wanted to be the one to explain what was going on.

He re-entered the Entertainment room finding Ethan and Raven still waiting for him. Both of them were a fixture at the bar and both were now drinking from their crystal glasses. Each man with his own poison.

He was actually surprised they hadn't already taken off being just as hard-headed as he and the rest of the Warriors. Never one to pull punches, Raven looked directly at him.

"Michael, I take it we need to discuss what just happened a few minutes ago."

Michael walked past both of them, ignoring them for the moment, and went behind the bar, grabbing his own glass, filling it with his favorite, Jack, and taking a healthy swig before walking back and sitting on one of the bar stools near them.

"It's the Joining. As it hasn't happened since my mother's time, none of us are really familiar how it affects both parties involved. All of you know why it was done to save her during the Transition, but none of us know what the repercussions are going to be. None of you will discuss the full meaning of the Joining with her until I find a way to approach her on the subject."

Ethan looked shocked and Raven just flat out laughed at him. Ethan was the first to speak. "You mean you haven't told her? She deserves to know. Especially if you have another one of those macho fits. We can't keep the meaning of the Joining from her and she is definitely smart enough to figure it out."

"I know, I know." Michael took another drink. "She has been through enough. Let her acclimatize a bit to all of this. I'll tell her in time. And yes she is quite intelligent. She knows we were Joined but not the full implications. I already spoke with Alexandria and she promised to keep the details to herself."

Raven looked at him in disbelief. "And you believed her? Boy, are you gullible. Two females together and the way most gossip? The Power Keeper probably already knows and will end up holding it

over your head."

Michael narrowed his eyes at Raven. "Don't push it, my old friend. Just because you have issues with females and a low view of them doesn't mean they're all the same caliber you like to keep around."

Raven held up his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright. I'll let it lie for now, but you're going to have to face this sooner or later, especially if it affects our mission. You can't go off the deep end whenever any of us touches her. She's the Power Keeper and is the only one who can transfer Life Power to us. She's strong too. I could feel her as soon as she entered the quarters. She's going to draw naturally all of us to her. I only say this because you need be aware of this, and I say it with the deepest respect for you as our leader and friend."

"I know and I would expect you to give me that council no matter how painful it is. I would do the same for any of you as well. You know this." Michael looked down into his glass swirling the dark liquid contemplating all the tangled issues which were coming to a head.

Ethan went in for another refill behind the bar, "Dude, speaking of missions. Has Arik been able to get us any intel from the Elders as to what in the hell is going on up there? All this crap with the Collars is getting on my nerves. I know there was a reason for bowing down to the demands, but I want this damn thing off. I won't be a slave to anybody. I also heard there may have been a suspicious death in the general population and it was someone suspected of helping Arik poke around."

Michael looked at both of them seriously, "Yes, that's true. No one knows how the person died, but they were found lifeless in the middle of the Gathering Area. Alexandria examined the person and swears the Life Force was taken from them, but the lapse of time after the death made it hard to determine positively one hundred percent.

"Also, there's no way a Wraith would have escaped our notice if they would have even made it out of the Staging Cave. Arik was lucky he wasn't discovered while he was sleuthing around. I told him to ease off before he becomes another casualty. There's

definitely something wrong among the Elders and I'm not sure why they haven't moved on it."

Raven spoke up, "Because they're old fools who should have stepped down a long time ago."

"Raven, without them, we wouldn't have the Complex and our way of life still intact. Not all of them are useless. Although, I'll say Turin is the exception. I can't believe they put him in a place of leadership among them. There has to be a reason, but why it's not being disclosed and why they're allowing him to run over everyone is beyond me." Michael exclaimed in frustration.

"I hate the fact the man even associates himself with us. We're much better than that dick and much more liked by the ladies." Raven bragged. "Anyway, I forgot to tell you Arik is stopping by tomorrow to talk with Stormy and give her the eScrolls. He also said he needs to talk to you about her training. It sounds like there is a push for her to be brought up to speed fairly quickly because the Dimensional Gate is starting to go active again."

Michael gave him a look that could kill. "I know we need her with us, but what the fuck is going on bringing her so far into the fight already. Somebody needs to answer to me. It sounds like I'm going to have to choke on my own pride again and meet with the Elders."

"It's worse than that." All three Warriors at the bar turned and faced the doorway to see Joshua standing there. He sauntered across the distance of the long room. Raven grabbed one of the glasses, poured some aged scotch Joshua preferred and handed him the glass. Michael looked at Joshua expectantly, bracing for more bad news. How could it get any worse?

Joshua ran his free hand down his face, took a drink, and delivered the verbal blow. "Turin has announced Stormy will be brought to a Gathering for introduction and then publicly Collared."

"Fuck no!" "Hell no!" Both Raven and Ethan shouted simultaneously.

"Why would the Elders do that? The Power Keeper hasn't even exhibited her abilities to even be considered a threat to them." Raven growled.

Michael knew his Warriors expected him to explode over the threat to Stormy, but he just stared into the distance keeping the

fury deep inside and hidden. He maintained his silence for what seemed an eternity and then he took a deep breath.

"It's a message to us. Whoever is pulling the strings up there knows we're poking around trying to uncover them. If they can control our Power Keeper, then they can control us even more than they already do. Fuck!"

He slammed his glass onto the bar top and paced back and forth in front of his Warriors. Joshua blocked his way interrupting his inner thoughts. "Michael, how are we going to stop this? I talked to Alexandria and she doesn't know if the Collar is put on Stormy if it will have any negative effects, especially so near her Transition. This isn't good."

Michael stared his friend in the eyes with clenched fists and teeth and gritted out. "Of course, it's not fucking good. I'll go to the Elders, see if I can at least get her a reprieve to buy us more time."

"And if not?" Joshua pressed.

"Then we pray for the best and hope she's as strong as I think she is," he responded. "If I can't talk some sense into the Elders, then we don't have a choice but to let this happen. If we go against it, the repercussions will go deeper than just us. You know whoever is generating this is out for the lives of the entire population and our way of life here. They would love more than anything for us to screw up and turn the entire population against us. As much as this will kill me to let this happen, I may not have a choice. If Stormy holds this wrong treatment against someone, then it will be against me. The rest of you won't suffer for what I can't prevent. I'll make it right once we find the person or persons responsible and reveal them but not until then. I hope you're with me on this."

He looked expectantly at his Warriors, hoping against all hope they were still with him. He felt he was letting everyone down not being able to step up as their true leader and make everything right.

Joshua came up to him and grasped Michael's shoulder. "Khenti, we're with you. We will always be with you. We'll find the traitor and make it right again. Make all of our lives right again. I pledge this to you as a Sphinx Warrior and to you as our leader."

Ethan and Raven both stepped up making contact with Michael and pledged their loyalty as well. As Sphinx Warriors, they pledged

their lives and Life Power to the mission of protecting the Earth from the Wraith and to their Khenti whom they knew would give up his own Life Power and life for any of them before he would let anything happen to them. Simultaneously, they all stepped away and returned to the bar and their drinks. Michael felt they all contemplated those inner thoughts which just couldn't be voiced.

As one, they all paused in their drinking and turned towards the doorway. Each felt the change in the energy flow, from the lightness that was left from Stormy's brief visit to the broken dark energy beginning to pulse through the room. It wasn't very strong, but the Warriors knew it would continue and grow stronger heralding the opening of the Dimensional Gate.

Michael placed his now empty glass back on the bar. "Gentleman, I would suggest ending the evening and getting some rest. Tomorrow we'll be meeting early in the Planning Office and it's going to be a long day...again. It feels like our reprieve from battle is about to end. And our Power Keeper better be a fast learner as we're all going to need her."

Chapter Five

Heaven. This must be what heaven felt like, surrounded in soft warmth and a masculine smoky scent special only to Michael. The pillow she was laying on was as soft as a downy cloud and she wanted to stay exactly where she was forever. Stormy rolled over on the enormous bed where Michael had gently placed her the night before. She vaguely remembered him covering her and unbraiding her hair. *Interesting*.

She had awakened later in the night finding herself alone. She had been content to stay where she was, so she had simply slept in the clothes she had on. Towards early morning, she had reluctantly gotten up to get more comfortable and had shed her pants leaving only her t-shirt and underwear on. She then had wrapped herself back up in the sheets which were wonderfully scented of Michael too and had succumbed, again, to her well-deserved rest.

She had felt Michael return to sit on the edge of the bed and brush her cheek sometime later. But perhaps it was just one of her dreams because when she had awoke again there was no one there. Wishing Michael had actually stayed and watched over her, she stretched, taking in her new surroundings also known as “our” quarters. She smiled to herself liking the sound of it. She knew she was acting like a goofy teenager but she couldn't help it. She needed some type of reward for all the demands being made of her. Besides she found Michael desirable and decided she wanted more.

Examining the room she was in, she tried to picture Michael living day to day in it by himself. The bed she was lying in was enormous, bigger than even a king bed and to her surprise, round. The sheets and many pillows were satin and in colors of gold and royal blue. Above the bed were large swaths of fabric attached to the ceiling directly over the center of the bed and running outward to various points along the ceiling. More gold and royal blue fabric ran either directly to the floor or to the wall behind the bed and cascaded down to the floor. As the fabric ran from the ceiling to the

floor it was gathered evenly around the circumference of the bed at different locations leaving open areas. This was definitely the most ornamented bed she had ever slept in.

Besides the bed, there were three woven wicker chairs big enough for two people to snuggle in. Other items positioned around the room were large wooden redwood armoires for clothes, bedside tables, a desk with matching red wood king chair, and a table with four chairs of redwood against the far wall.

On the other side of the room was a sitting area with a beautifully carved coffee table and leather couches and chairs. To one side of the seating was a cascading fountain with ferns and other greenery interspersed with blooming flowers of pink, red, and blue. Although it was a masculine room, the feel of nature the Warriors seemed to love and the color Alexandria had evidently had a hand in choosing were included everywhere. It was a true home. Recessed in the wall the bed was closest to, Stormy spied a doorway. She certainly hoped it was a bathroom.

She made her way to the edge of the enormous bed and placed her feet upon a lush white lambskin rug. It tickled her toes just a bit and when she moved from it to the polished hardwood floor she found it was temperature controlled so her feet were nice and warm. The room must also have sensors for the lights since her first movement generated the low ambient light to turn brighter.

The room was indeed a bathroom and the entrance was carpeted with gray carpet which bumped up against a set of three dark tiled stairs elevating the level of the bathroom higher than the rest of the room. Dark gray tile led up to the edge of a white and blue-swirled porcelain tub which was set into the floor. The tub was huge, similar to a twelve person Jacuzzi, if not bigger.

She worked her way around the tub toward the rear of the bathroom where a partially enclosed free-standing shower stood. The front walls were only partial, so there was a large door entrance and the entire shower was tiled in pale peach. There was a brass drain in the floor and several inset brass shower heads throughout the shower. It was incredible and she was going to use it.

She turned back around and on the left was a double sink of the same white swirled porcelain. A gold filigree mirror with an

intricately designed edge of gold hung above the sink with crystal lights brightly shining down upon it. An enclosed oval room revealed exactly what she needed at this point. After taking care of her private needs, she ran back to the bedroom and grabbed her bathroom items and clothes for the day. Before she faced anyone else in this new crazy life she was going to spend some quality time refreshing herself.

Stormy found the bathroom towels and washcloths quite easily on the outside perimeter of the shower. It was quite ingenious as shelves were built directly into the outside wall. She picked a large fluffy towel of blue from the collection and hung it on one of the brass hooks on the outside of the open doorway. She stripped out of the last of her clothes and once again marveled at the changes to her body and how her skin literally glowed and sparkled with health. She took her shampoo, conditioner, and body soap and placed it on the recessed cubby holes in the peach tiled walls beside Michael's chosen soaps.

Now she just had to figure out how to turn the shower on. On the right side was a brass control panel. With a bit of experimentation she figured out how to adjust the temperature, number and direction of the shower heads, and the strength of the spray. It also had music, so she selected a channel that had the sweet music of “Daughtry” playing. As the warm water sprayed her body, she began to relax and truly enjoy the experience. *God, I could stay in here forever.*

She tipped her head back to get her new long sunlit blond hair wet and took some of the vanilla scented shampoo and washed her hair. Rinsing it out, she added conditioner hopefully keeping it from tangling. Next she went for the washcloth and soap. She faced towards the back wall and ran the soapy cloth over her body, over her shoulders, down her breasts, her stomach, between her legs, and down each long leg. As she started the repeat process of rinsing her body, she sensed the presence.

She smiled to herself instantly knowing it was Michael. Not understanding how she knew but she just knew he was there and watching her. Normally she would have been shy and diving for a towel in her previous existence, but now she only wanted to

tantalize him just as he did her. She figured if he was going to look, she was going to tempt. She fantasized over what he thought of her and her new appearance.

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A fantasy was just the beginnings of Michael's thoughts as he stood there in the doorway watching her. He hadn't meant to do it. Only to drop off the tray of food he had brought for her. But like a thirsting man drawn to water, he had heard the shower and had known he would find her there. He had limited himself to the doorway, to go no farther than the bottom of the stairs, and then had laid the full force of his look upon her body. And, by the Ancients, what a body it was. The water lovingly cascaded down her long hair and across each inch of her luscious golden skin. If only he could go to her and lick each silver drop of liquid from her and chase the droplets down to the golden down between her legs. He took a deep breath trying to gain some control and break the spell she had on him.

Unfortunately, Stormy had other ideas and even though he suspected she knew he was there, she wasn't acknowledging him. Instead, she shifted her pose so he could see the delicate curve of her hip and the side of her breast. She took the cloth full of water in her hand and slowly ran it down the length of her neck, between her breasts, and down farther while slowly rotating toward him. *So, she wants to play.*

Without conscious thought, his Sphinx rose to the surface and his Life Power flowed outward reaching across the bathroom and directly to Stormy. He had heard of this but never experienced it himself as it occurred strictly between Power Mates. He heard her quick intake of breath as the phantom-touch of his energy reached her and shimmered across her skin.

He loved the fact he had caught her off guard. If he could only touch her for real versus having to keep her out of reach. It was amazing to him that he had so little control around this remarkable woman. His inner beast was so easily awakened and his energy seemed to have a mind of its own as it sensually caressed her body. The heat and feel of her body traveled back through his energy into him nearly driving him to his knees.

Like a voyeur, he watched Stormy close her eyes and the expressions of ecstasy cross her animated face as his energy flowed across her cheek, down the side of her neck, across her collar bone, and to her breast. He could see tiny goose-bumps break out on her skin. He could sense she wanted more. So much more. What could he do but give it to her? Reaching through the flow of Power, he circled her nipple causing it to pebble into a hard achy need. The sparkling, flowing energy continued to travel down her stomach, across her hip, around her inner thigh, and paused but a moment before sliding slowly across the sensitive bud and the opening of her already wet core. She gasped, her eyes snapping open, dilated with desire.

With Stormy's gasp of pleasure, Michael suddenly came to his senses. “Damn it.” He cursed under his breath. He re-directed his Life Power to disperse from around her and to swirl to the hanging towel flipping it from its hook and wrapping it around her wet body, before returning to him. Now that particular ability, he didn’t know he had. It definitely was a pleasant surprise, but he was already kicking himself for taking advantage of her once again.

He was lucky he had stopped when he did otherwise he would have been in trouble. Anymore stimulation and he would have been stripping his own clothes off and taking her right there in the shower. As it was, he was holding himself back, trying to catch his breath, and control the raging hard-on he had.

“Food...” His broken thoughts wouldn't quite let him finish the sentence. He cleared his throat and started again. “I brought you some food as you haven’t eaten since yesterday afternoon. You have to be starving and I’m being selfish not making sure you have something to eat. I'll wait out here while you finish your morning preparation.”

Alright Michael, get a grip, stop babbling and step away from the door. Ancients, I’m acting like such an idiot. He abruptly pushed away from the doorway disappearing from Stormy's view.

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Wet, dripping, and turned on. She would have let Michael take her right there. Taking a deep breath she walked out of the shower and dried off. This time she had definitely stepped over the

boundary. She would be lucky if he didn't kick her out of his room now with that type of behavior. What a floozy she was being, but she just couldn't help it. Not only was she turned on by him, but she felt they were connected on a deeper level.

Shaking her head she finished drying and dressed in a clean Warrior's outfit. She walked over to the mirror and using her newly acquired brush, smoothed the wet tangles out of her hair and captured it at the back of her neck with a silver star-shaped clasp.

Taking a deep breath for courage she exited the bathroom to find Michael sitting at the table. He seemed deep in thought, with his forehead creased in concentration and his eyes looking into the distance. Upon seeing her, his face relaxed and a slight smile curved his lips. He stood and came over to where she was standing. She wasn't sure what to expect, but once again Michael showed the gentleness he always showed with her. He reached out and brushed a damp curl back behind her ear and with his other hand entwined his fingers with hers.

"Angel, you seem to know how to make me want things I shouldn't the way I do right now. If it was only easier here, not so much responsibility..." He trailed off sighing heavily and looked down at their interlaced fingers.

"I have to admit, I did want it too. I was a bit shameless in there, but I won't apologize." She said stubbornly. "There seems to be this energy between us and if it makes life more enjoyable then I want to embrace it."

Michael smiled and gently brushed his finger across her lips, "Yes, you are a true Warrior at heart. Probably even before you were transformed. I'm really not sure what to do about all of this, angel. You're already getting under my skin and into my Life Force. Spending time with you is more than enjoyable and I could tell you were more than willing to embrace it."

She worried when the smile left his gorgeous mouth and he sighed deeply, "Indeed. But enough. I brought you something to eat, so dive in before it gets cold. Unfortunately, I won't be able to stay. I don't know if you have felt it or not, but the Dimensional Gate is becoming active and I have to plan with my men for our next plan of attack. Once you're finished, go down to the entertainment room.

Alexandria is down there with Arik and he brought you the eScrolls. He needs to talk to you."

"I have felt it. A sort of negative energy which feels as if something is creeping up the back of my neck." She shivered. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Nothing for us as of yet. We'll need you later. For now, eat and meet with Arik. Don't worry about cleaning up when you're done. The staff will come through and straighten everything up. One of the benefits of risking your life for everyone. Be good and I'll see you later." Michael kissed the back of her hand and then left to start his planning.

Stormy moved to the table and sat down. The tray of food smelled like heaven. She opened the lid and discovered fluffy pancakes with syrup, eggs, bacon, and fried potatoes. A large glass of orange juice topped it off. Her stomach growled loudly demanding food and she realized just how hungry she was. It didn't take her long and the entire contents of the tray were soon filling her stomach. Once done, she knew she couldn't delay any longer.

Reluctantly, she got up to make her way downstairs, but she paused at the door looking back. She had enjoyed her brief reprieve and didn't want it to end. She wanted to spend more time alone with Michael, but it wasn't to be. At least not yet. She shut the door and made her way back down the elegant staircase. The surroundings still amazed her.

As soon as she entered the entertainment room, Alexandria got up from one of the chairs near the bookcases and came over to her and gave her a hug. "You're looking wonderful Stormy. How are you feeling?" Alexandria asked. She was ever the true doctor at heart.

"I'm feeling well. Thank you. I'm glad to see you. I miss our time together already when we worked together in Medical. Seems longer than just yesterday." Stormy genuinely liked Alexandria. Even though she was small and dainty. Alexandria made up for it with her huge heart and Stormy was impressed. She looked over Alexandria's head to see Arik, who had stood up as soon as she had entered the room.

"It's good to see you again, Stormy. I know I introduced myself only briefly when I was with Elder Turin but wanted to meet you in

the presence of better company." Arik gave her a brief smile. "Unfortunately, my job as a Guardian requires me to spend a large portion of my time with the Elders reporting and documenting the activities of the Warriors. I'm of the same mind of Khenti Michael that the less time spent in their presence the better. May we sit and I can go over the eScrolls with you. We have other news we must let you know about as well."

"I'm glad to meet you once again, Arik. Please sit down." Stormy indicated the chairs where they had been sitting before she had come in. She selected a chair which was situated near them and moved it closer, so they were positioned better for easier conversation. Arik offered her some cinnamon tea he had brought with him in a beautiful silver tea set. Alexandria indicated it was quite good, so she decided to give it a try.

Blowing on her tea to cool it, Stormy listened as Arik began describing his job. "As Guardian, it's not only my job to observe and record historically what happens with the Sphinx Warriors and their battles, but also to assist in their everyday lives, training, and being their intermediate for communications with the Elders. I also research through the eScrolls. They were created to preserve the original documents which are sealed due to their age. I brought a few with me for you to look over for education. I also ask, since you're a set of new eyes, if you can pick up on anything that may be useful in trying to find ways to permanently close the current gate and prevent any new ones from opening."

"I would be honored to assist. If there is anything I can do to help I will. I hope one day the answers are found and the Gate can be destroyed. Living day to day wondering if this is the day the Wraith will win or another Warrior will lose their life has to be horrible." Stormy accepted the eScrolls from Arik.

Arik pointed to the device containing the eScrolls, "The eScrolls work much like an eReader. Anyway, I appreciate the help. Any little bit helps."

Stormy realized Alexandria was fidgeting and wouldn't wait any longer with whatever she had to say. Wringing her hands, Alexandria jumped into the conversation. "Enough about the eScrolls, Arik. We need to discuss what you found out and what was

revealed to Michael and some of the other Warriors last night. If you won't tell her, I will."

Arik gave a heavy sigh. "Alright. The Elders have determined you'll be presented publicly at a gathering of their choosing. When is still to be determined, but it will be soon." Arik looked at Alexandria for a brief moment before he continued. "We think Turin has manipulated the other Elders into accepting this. On top of that they have decided you'll be Collared like the rest of the Warriors at the presentation."

Stormy was instantly on her feet. Pure white fury consumed her, something she had never felt before at such a depth. She wasn't even sure if it was fury for what they proposed to do to her or the fact her Warriors probably had to go through the same horrid presentation. She liked the idea they were her Warriors. She growled at Arik, "They'll never touch me."

Arik slowly stood up and backed around behind his chair raising his hands in surrender. His expression was one of surprise. Alexandria positioned herself between Arik and Stormy.

She commented over her shoulder, "Amazing isn't she, Arik? She'll make one great Power Keeper." Alexandria examined Stormy closely.

"Your eyes are glowing. Remember, Arik is just the messenger and a friend to us. He would never threaten you or anyone else."

Stormy blinked realizing she must have been ramping up again. This wasn't good if she couldn't control these new abilities. She might inadvertently injure someone. She spun away from both of them wandering to the center of the room breathing deeply. Closing her eyes she searched for something to unwind the mounting tension in her body. She remembered Michael's instructions and pictured him as he was in the Garden Dome surrounded by all the lush greenery talking her through the sequence of releasing the Life Power back into the field around her. Slowly the tension dissipated, leaving her shaky.

Alexandria was beside her instantly and took her by the arm. "Come sit down before you fall down and take a drink of your tea." She guided Stormy back over to her chair, sat her down, and handed her the cup. Stormy took a couple of sips while Alexandria

and Arik reclaimed their seats.

"Very impressive indeed. Are you all right? I'm sorry if I upset you, Stormy. I've never been very tactful in my delivery of information." Arik shrugged his shoulders and picked up his tea again. His hands were quite steady even though a moment before it probably looked like she was going to fry him.

"No. It's fine. I shouldn't have acted that way. It's just....these new abilities. Sometimes the energy just sneaks up on me. Especially when I feel threatened or someone I care about is threatened." She rubbed her eyes feeling suddenly tired.

"But I won't change my statement on the fact they won't touch me, and as soon as I can get permission, I'll be giving the Elders a piece of my mind as to the removal of those stupid Collars from the Warriors."

Alexandria looked stricken at this statement. But why? Why would she be upset someone would want to help her brother and the others? Did she want Stormy to be Collared too? She knew she was a bit unpredictable at the moment. But she just knew she could get control of her new abilities. "Alexandria, you have to talk to me."

"I know. And I don't mean to get upset but... I'm torn. I don't want you or anyone to be Collared just as everyone else doesn't want to be Collared, but the work the Warriors are doing to discover who is behind the chaos in our community will be threatened if anyone tries to stop this. Turin is just hoping the Warriors will go against the orders of the Elders, so they can be publicly chastised and make it look like they're just using the Egyptians for their own purposes." Alexandria finished with a cry.

Stormy could see Arik watching her expectantly while she was tying all of the discussions and events she had been exposed to together. "Michael can't stop this, can he?" Stormy asked Arik, and he regretfully shook his head.

"If he publicly tries to stop it, then he will look like he is going against the Elders, which could cause wide-spread dissension among the population. Turin could even invoke punishment at the gathering. I'm afraid you'll have to go through with this. You're strong, Stormy, you can do this. I promise you'll be fine. You'll know what to do when the time comes. I wish I could say more, but

I can't. Unfortunately, we don't know who may be listening or working for whoever is causing this trouble." As he finished this statement, he glanced over to the door and back.

"You all have a lot of faith in me. I hope it's not in vain, but I'll do the best I can." Stormy's shoulders slumped and she stared into what was left of the tea in her silver cup. How could Michael stand to deal with this sort of thing? Her respect for him grew even more. He had so much to juggle and to try and balance it all while keeping the Earth safe, keeping his Warriors alive, and being pulled like a puppet by some corrupt leadership figure. If it was the last thing she did, she would help them find out who the idiot was, and if her powers would let her, she would fry the person's ass. Not kill them, but just torture them for a while.

Arik laughed darkly. "I'm glad that look isn't for me. You look as if you will be ending someone's life. Slowly."

Stormy was startled. "Really? I'll admit I'm angry about all of this and would like to fry someone, but I don't know if I could take someone's life. This is just so crazy. And to think, less than a month ago, I was blissfully naive above ground working in the everyday normal world. The worst thing I ever had to worry about was waiting for transport to check on my apartment and catch up on the bills. I could never have imagined this in a hundred years."

Alexandria patted Stormy's hand. "I know and we're all sorry to have brought this upon you. Of all of us, Michael feels the most responsible for what has happened to you. I know you probably want to hold it against him, but he had no choice. If he could have found another way, he would have, but the Elders pushed our hands. If Michael hadn't brought you in when he did, the Elders could have potentially cost you your life. If it's the last thing we do, through all of this, we will make it up to you, Stormy. None of us could have gone through what you have and come out as positive about it."

Stormy wanted to tell them she understood on some level, but before she could speak the thought, a small silver bracelet on Arik's wrist began to beep.

Arik checked the bracelet and shook his head. "Well, it has been an incredible pleasure ladies, but it looks like my reprieve has

ended and the Masters call. My work is never done. I look forward to hearing any ideas you may have, Stormy, and if there is anything I can get for you, please let me know. If I hear anything else, I'll get it to you as soon as I can. Hang in there, Power Keeper, and keep your chin up no matter what."

Stormy and Alexandria watched Arik depart the room and then turned to each other. Alexandria smiled at her. "I second that as well. If there's anything I can get you or if there is anything you want to do on the girl side of things, just let me know. I know you can do it. Michael sees something in you and I do too. Don't let the Elders or anyone else tell you otherwise. I have to go now, too. Always another patient to take care of. I'll see you at mealtime and perhaps we can do something later today. You're always welcome to join me in the Medical Section. You were a great help to me, and I would love to have your assistance again."

Stormy stood with Alexandria and gave her a parting hug. "I think I'll join you in a few minutes. Thank you."

Alexandria departed leaving Stormy to her own devices. She wished she had more time just to sit and talk with Alexandria, but perhaps later. Stormy sat back down to contemplate the "left-curve" announcement Arik had delivered. She was to be presented and Collared and in public, no less. And Michael couldn't do a damn thing about it.

She leaned forward and put her head in her hands. Could she do it? What would she say to all of the Egyptians who would be sitting there watching her, staring at her, judging her? Would she measure up? Could she take the humiliation and possible pain of the Collaring? Could she even stand being near Turin again? There was something definitely wrong with the man. Just being near him caused chills to move all over her skin.

Alright. Enough already. She couldn't stand just sitting around and sulking. She had to go do something. She stood and took the eScrolls with her, to look at later, and headed to the medical section. It didn't take long as she was successful in punching in her thumb print at the elevator and going up the one floor. As soon as she entered the medical section, Alexandria greeted her with a big grin.

"Thank goodness. I was hoping you would come. Nothing serious but we're full with some type of flu-like bug. It looks as if it's from some type of food contamination, but I need some help running the tests and analyzing the data to be sure. Since a couple of the techs came down with whatever it is, I'm short on personnel. Do you remember how to run the analyzer still?

Stormy nodded, moving over to the analyzer to put on the lab coat and gloves. "Yes, doc. I'm on it. Just let me know what you need done."

She dove in, taking directions from Alexandria. In just a few minutes, she had the analyzer efficiently up and running blood samples which had been collected from the patients. Alexandria also gave her food samples which she ran through a different analyzer. As the results printed out, she took them to the medical computer and entered the data into the database. The computers happily hummed along calculating data and after a few minutes, completed the tabulations.

Stormy scanned through the information and gasped. "Alexandria. I think the food was tampered with. There's a foreign substance in there. Come look."

Alexandria quickly came over and checked the results over Stormy's shoulder. "Oh, by the Ancients. You're right. It looks like Henloc."

Stormy glanced at her questioningly and Alexandria continued to explain. "It's a poison usually used to control vermin. Normally, it wouldn't hurt people, but in the right amounts would make them ill. I have an antidote I can get out immediately and anyone affected should be okay within a few minutes. The bigger problem is I need to let Arik and the food suppliers know about this so we can find out if there is any more out there. We also need to check all of the food supplies that are being brought in to the Warrior's quarters. That's the last thing we need. The Warriors normally wouldn't have an issue, but as weak as they are without the Life Power it could potentially make them sick as well. Good job on finding this."

"Someone did this. How will they find out who is responsible?" Stormy couldn't believe someone would intentionally poison their own people.

Alexandria responded, “Once I report it to Arik, he’ll get it to the Elders. Although they’re having their issues right now, they would never allow something like this to go unpunished. They’ll have a couple of the Guardians investigate and find the perpetrator. They can be determined, so it shouldn't take them long. Anyway, I’ll take care of that. Why don't you go relax for a while, you’ve done the hard part for me. Perhaps I’ll see you later.”

Stormy removed the lab coat and gathered the eScroll. “Okay. I think I’ll do some light reading.” She smiled at her silly comment about the eScrolls.

“See you later.” She left the medical section and headed for the main elevator trying to decide where she wanted to go and at the same time not be seen. She wanted a little time to herself. She suddenly had the perfect idea. She punched in level six, the Garden Dome. The elevator was swift taking her there in a matter of seconds. She entered the Garden through the two sets of double doors and looked out onto all of the foliage, flowers, and paths of grass. She enjoyed the chirping and singing of the birds and the view of the frolicking rabbits and squirrels along the path. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath of the freshest air ever, and let the peace steal through her body and soul.

If she could only stay in this frame of mind forever. Opening her eyes she followed the main path that weaved among the many plants and flowers. She spied the hammocks among the trees and the strategically placed garden chairs with the small tables. After a second of consideration, she decided to sit in one of the garden chairs and settled on one of the white ones which had a soft pink flowered cushion on it.

She placed the eScroll on the table and began to scan the different titles randomly. She read a bit about the history of when the original Dimensional Gates appeared on Athenia and the appearance of the first Wraith as they passed through the gate. The description was creepy and disturbing. It sent cold chills down her back.

The writings described the Wraith as being of humanoid shape but their skin was a dull grayish blue as though all of the life had been sucked from them. Their nails were long and sharp as well as

their teeth. The hair was long, stringy, and gray, and their faces long and drawn-out appearing almost animal like. The eyes were described as slanted and bottomless black pits that reflected back hell and death.

They mostly attacked with their claws and teeth, a deadly combination just by themselves, but they also carried black curved sickle swords that could lay waste to the unsuspecting horribly. But the worst was their touch. If they touched your skin, they would literally draw the Life Power and then the Life Force right out of a person, leaving behind only a dead husk.

Stormy shivered. What would that feel like? She hoped she never found out. She continued reading another section. The Guardian who had recorded the events was quite detailed describing how the Warriors quickly learned how to fight the Wraith with ordinary swords and then eventually discovered the Sefu Elements, a primitive life form which once bonded to its user, would link with the Life Power of that individual and become its sword form, the Power Sword. Beautiful, artful, and deadly, it could cut through many a Wraith even when a Warrior was severely outnumbered.

Stormy had seen three of the Power Swords when the Warriors had come for her and recalled how magnificent they were with the silver, deadly outer edges and the sparkling diamond-like crystal running through the entire center of the blade.

She jumped to another section of the eScroll where different battles were recorded during the time before the Warriors had come to Earth. The descriptions of blood and loss were disturbing, to say the least. Warriors and the population overall were killed as the Wraith maimed them and sucked the Life Power out of them. It also described how, the Athenians and the Sphinx Warriors eventually determined they would have to leave Athenia to start a new existence. Once on Earth, there wasn't a lot of technology which had survived the long track, but they started a new life with what they did bring, until once again the Wraith found a way to create Gates on Earth. Then the battle for survival began again.

Time took its toll and Stormy's heart broke as she read about the desperate struggle of the Warriors, their deaths, and the death of Michael's father who tried to destroy the Dimensional Gates before

the last of the Warriors were lost in battle. She read about the loss of Michael's mother, the last Power Keeper, and the desperate search for a new one as the Warriors learned to carry on with what little Life Power they could draw themselves.

It was incredible to Stormy how much torment Michael and the Warriors had to have gone through over the many years of their long existence and yet they seemed to be good at heart and only wanted to protect everyone as they had vowed so long ago. As she was contemplating all of the new information, the garden suddenly became deathly quiet. All of the birds and insects were no longer making any noise. A creepy sensation she was becoming increasingly familiar with ran over her skin. She looked up already knowing exactly what was causing it.

Turin and two other men were making their way toward her. *Crap*. She carefully powered down the eScroll and stood. She contemplated running and hiding but knew they would ultimately track her down.

"Good afternoon, Power Keeper." Turin greeted her as he slowly perused her body. She shivered with revulsion, but Turin didn't appear to take notice of it. At least he didn't try and approach her too close.

Turin gave her his impression of a friendly smile but it just made him appear even creepier. "I thought I would personally escort you to the Gathering since Michael and the Warriors are busy with their planning to defend against the Wraith. We're preparing for you to be presented and introduced to the population. As well, you'll be given the opportunity to pledge your loyalty to your new people by accepting the honored presentation of the Collar."

Honor my ass. She wondered if she could hide somewhere among the plants in the Garden to escape this part of her new existence. If only Michael was here, but oh yeah, he couldn't stop this anyway. Before she could make a move, both of the men who had accompanied Turin approached her and each grabbed one of her arms. Luckily, they didn't appear to want to hurt her, but they weren't taking no for an answer either.

Crap, I guess there's no escape for me now. Oh, Michael, what is to become of me?

Chapter Six

Trapped between the two men with Turin leading the way out of the Garden Dome, Stormy wanted nothing more than to call to Michael. Somehow, when she was upset or threatened before, Michael seemed to know and would come for her. This time she thought it wasn't a good idea and repressed the normal reaching need she had felt in the past. If there wasn't a choice as to what was going to happen then she was just going to have to suck it up and deal with it on her own.

She was led back up the trail and through the double doors without any delay. Turin opened the elevator and the small group loaded in for the quick ride to wherever they were taking her. To her consternation, she saw Turin didn't select the third level where the Gatherings took place but the floor of the Elders. She looked at him nervously wondering what the hell was going on.

Turin smiled his greasy smile. "Don't worry, Power Keeper, you'll meet your people soon enough. First, however, we must prepare you in the ceremonial gowns so we may present you appropriately." As he finished his statement, the elevator doors opened and Stormy was greeted with the site of more luxury than anything she had seen anywhere else in the Complex.

She wasn't sure if she considered it outright waste of resources which could be used for the support of the Complex or if it was part of the entitlements the position allowed. She hoped it was the latter as she would hate to find out the Elders were greedy as well as over-controlling. The entry room was decorated in colors of gold, blue, red and silver in fabrics of satins, silks, velvets and other varieties draped over cushions, lounges and other furniture. A large fountain took up the center of the room made of pure white marble. Even in this room, there were free flying birds of many types and colors like in the Garden Dome. Young Egyptian women were sitting or lying about reading, eating delicacies, or simply lounging for the enjoyment of the view and not having to do anything.

The men directed her through and around the many obstacles, both object and human, to the other side of the room. They passed through a doorway, down a hall and several turns later, she was too confused to know from which direction she had even come. Finally, they passed through one more doorway into a bathing room with a large wading pool, several benches, towels, and two young women who were waiting patiently for her arrival.

The men released her and disappeared through the doorway they had just entered. Turin looked at her and declared, “These two handmaidens will prepare you for your presentation. We will be waiting outside until you’re finished.....unless you’re too uncomfortable to be here on your own.”

Turin gave her one of those raised eyebrow creepy looks and gawked at her as if he would just love to stay to see her stripped. He even moved forward with a transfixed look which passed over his face occasionally when he was in her presence as if he wanted to touch her.

Stormy repressed a shiver and crossed her arms over her chest raising her own eyebrows and standing her ground.

Turin chuckled and turned his back on her making his way towards the door. He gave her one more parting shot before he disappeared. “Let me know if you change your mind and need some assistance. I’m more than willing to assist with anything you may need.”

She watched his back disappear around the corner on the other side of the room. *I just bet you would. Yuck.* She shivered, shook off the creepy sensation and turned to the two handmaidens. As soon as she acknowledged them, they approached her. With a bow of their heads, but not one word from their mouths, they began to remove her Warrior's outfit down to her undergarments. She thought they would perhaps stop there giving her a little dignity, but no, they had her step out of those as well. Next, they walked her into the wading pool and washed every inch of her from top to bottom.

In any other circumstances, she thought this would be heaven, but in this situation, it was more like she was being prepared for sacrifice. One of the handmaidens stepped up behind her and made

short work of removing the clasp holding her golden locks in place. Once it was down, the handmaiden, helped her tip her head back and poured warm water over her hair from a large silver bowl. A sweet vanilla smelling shampoo was massaged into her scalp and then rinsed away. The same scented conditioner was added next, gently massaged in and rinsed out as well.

Once the handmaidens were satisfied with her cleansing, they escorted her out of the wading pool on the opposite end. A large fluffy white towel was brought to her by one of the handmaidens, but instead of giving it to her, the two women dried her off. They also tackled her long hair, drying it, and then brushing the length until it was free of tangles. A lotion was then messaged into her skin, once again scented of vanilla. Perfume was applied to her wrists and kohl lined around her eyes. This was just too weird. If she could, she would have run and hidden.

The two women then brought her a long white satin Egyptian styled dress, or perhaps it was a robe. She wasn't even sure what to call it, but either way, the two women slid it over her head and arms to slide down her body to end around her ankles. Tiny glittering gems ran throughout the material making it sparkle as the material moved. A gold chain which linked in the front was placed around her waist affectively gathering the material to keep it in place. Once the gold chain was connected, she could see there was a gold symbol over the clasp which was set with diamonds and appeared to be an image between a starburst and a snowflake. Gold sandals were then placed on her feet. There were a couple of things the women had failed to give her.

As the two women placed a ring of gold chains with tiny diamonds hanging from it in her hair, she asked the dreaded question about the missing items. "Underclothes?"

Turin gave the dark answer from a doorway directly in front of her. "They're not required for this Gathering. As the Power Keeper, you're presented in your purest form, only the Life Power will surround you. The gown is optional, so feel free to remove it if you would like once we start the Gathering."

Stormy shivered and wondered fearfully how long he had been standing there in the shadows. Had he watched? She shivered again

as a deeper chill ran through her body.

"Not if hell froze over." Stormy spit back at him in disgust.

Turin laughed at her, slinking closer. "Suit yourself."

He reached out with a gloved hand placing one finger against her neck. She was suddenly frozen in place unable to move, to breathe, to run. He slid the tip of his finger down her throat and slowly torturously followed the deep V of the robe. He then slid his hand inside roughly grabbing her breast.

Her skin crawled and her stomach rebelled. She was afraid she would lose what food she had eaten earlier. She fought with every bit of her being against whatever was keeping her from moving. Turin simply laughed ominously at her and moved in close to inhale her scent while squeezing her breast in a painful grip.

Suddenly, he released her, moving away. She was freed from the physical trap almost staggering but recovered. She crossed her arms over her chest, fury burning in her eyes with her Sphinx side roaring to the surface ready for retaliation. As she would have attacked him, the two men who had escorted her earlier, re-entered the room looking ominous and ready to defend their Elder causing her to pause in her movement.

Turin smirked knowingly at her. "With or without the robe makes no difference to me. I know what is underneath it, and either way, it's time." The two men approached her and once again each grabbed an arm and began to lead her to the main gathering area.

This time, however, they used some type of back hallway with a smaller elevator at the rear of it. As they neared the elevator, the doors opened and Guardian Arik came out of it. His startled expression indicated he was just as surprised to see her here as she was in seeing him.

"Shit. What the hell is going on, Turin? We discussed this and the other Elders agreed this wasn't necessary." Arik looked at her with concern. His eyes asking if she was okay. She nodded that she was.

"First, Guardian, you'll speak to me with respect." Turin gave Arik a glare which would have cowered anyone else, but just appeared to piss Arik off. "Second, there has been a change of plans, and the Elders agreed with me this would be beneficial for our people. Bring them together. Her pledge before them and

acceptance of the Collar will prove she is the true Power Keeper."

Arik looked stunned by the announcement, his concern for Stormy obvious. "I'm going to talk with Alexandria. As important as her pledge to the people is, the Collaring could be detrimental to her well-being at this point."

Turin waved him off. "Do what you must, but she will be fine." Turin moved past him and indicated to the two men, who had tightened their hold on Stormy, it was time to proceed. The men pushed Stormy along, aggressively shouldering Arik out of their way. Stormy looked over her shoulder at Arik as she was pushed into the elevator.

Arik silently mouthed at her, "Hang On. I'll get help."

Stormy was spun around and positioned behind Turin. She worried even if Arik got the Warriors to the Gathering, there was nothing they could do. Turin had them all in a corner and he knew it. She watched with trepidation as the elevator doors shut and they began to move down to the Gathering area. She realized the time had come and her heart rate increased, panic began to set in.

Deep breath, you can do this. You don't have a choice. Oh God, please just let me suck it up. I know I can do this. Please.

It didn't take long. The elevator stopped and the doors opened. Immediately she could hear the assembled crowd, but couldn't see them. Evidently, the elevator was behind the main platform she would be presented on. There was a storage space and then a large curtain separating them and the stage. Stormy began to shiver violently as goose bumps broke out over her skin. Time was up.

Turin turned to the two men. "I'll do the usual announcements and then move into the presentation. Once I announce her, you'll make sure she goes up the stairs onto the stage." Turin turned his steely gaze upon her. "You'll cross the stage and stand in the area I indicate. If you try to do anything stupid, you'll pay for it in front of them. And the Warriors will pay ten-fold. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I understand perfectly." She tried to put every bit of hate and spite into those words as she could so Turin knew her displeasure. To her disappointment, he didn't take the bait and simply turned his back on her and ascended the stairs disappearing through the curtain.

As she envisioned Turin being front and center of his people, the crowd settled down. She heard him dive into his announcements which were evidently part of the routine, going over projects, events, updates on battles, balances of food stuffs, outlooks for their future, and on and on. The crowd at times was silent, at other times cheering, and still at other times there was the occasional boo from someone. It sounded like the poor unfortunate person was silenced quickly enough. Stormy hoped they weren't hurt. How could these people put up with that kind of crap? And if Turin didn't get this over with she was just going to march up on stage to get this torment over, herself.

As she finished this thought, Turin paused in his announcements and then started up on a new line. His voice grew in volume as he warmed up to his new subject, "Now for the promised presentation of the day. As you all have heard, the Power Keeper was just recently discovered. We're going to introduce her to all of you today. She has promised to place her vows today and to take on the pledge of the Collar. So now I give you your new Power Keeper."

The two men pushed Stormy up the steps to the curtain and released her arms. She turned to one of them as for the first time he spoke to her. "They're waiting for you Power Keeper." He had a blank glassy eyed expression on his face, but unfortunately, she didn't have time to mull over the fact. Facing back to the curtain, she balled her fists, took a deep breath, and passed through the curtain.

Turin of course, was already there waiting impatiently for her and pointed to a small circular dais big enough for two people. Quickly, so Turin wouldn't touch her, she went to the front of the stage and stepped up on the dais. As soon as she presented herself, the crowd before her started to cheer and clap and carry on at levels, which to her, seemed ridiculous, but perhaps her presence might be incredible to them. Or perhaps it was just a charade so Turin and his bullies didn't torture anyone.

She looked out at the crowd and observed it was quite diverse. There were children of different ages, adults, and elderly in numbers too numerous to count. Both genders were present and the groupings consisted of couples, complete families, and those

who stood separate as though they didn't have anyone. Some of the crowd dressed in modern clothes that were casual and some were clothed as though going to a formal dinner.

Even the time period of the clothes varied and included what she would consider ancient Egyptian garb. She looked over them all wondering what they were thinking of her and how she should act. In the end, she just stood there trying to put forward a calm outer shell even though her insides were quaking.

Turin positioned himself beside her. Too close in her opinion. She would have inched over to get away from him but the dais was just not big enough without risking a fall. He faced the audience and raised his voice to be heard above the crowd.

"Great Egyptians of times gone past, of now, and of the far future, rejoice as we have found our beloved Power Keeper."

Once again, cheering and clapping followed his announcement. He lifted his hands and the crowd silenced. He turned to Stormy and with the slightest of smirks continued, "Oh great Power Keeper, will thou bring unto yourself the Life Power which strengthens our Warriors in their never ending battle against the darkness?" He lowered his voice for her ears only and commanded, "Say, I do."

Stormy thought better of it for a moment, but the chaos for everyone was not worth her refusal. Answering with the strongest voice she possessed at this point she repeated, "I do."

Instantaneous cheers, screams, and clapping renewed again. Turin silenced the crowd a second time.

"Power Keeper, will you take on the responsibility of becoming a Warrior through hard training and claiming of your Power Sword?" Again, Turin looked at her in expectation.

"I do." She said clearly to the crowd. In her mind, she was picturing a sword being run through Turin, her hand on it, and twisting for good measure.

"Power Keeper, will you declare your life and devotion to your people by taking on the mantle of the Collar to forever wear it in their honor as the Warriors have done." Turin looked at her as if to dare her to refuse.

In Stormy's mind, she refused, but in truth, how could she without destroying the Warriors and all these people's future. Turin

stared at her in a way letting her know he had her and there was no escape. All of these people expected so much from her and all she could feel was some part of her dying inside.

Ultimately, it seemed she was giving that final piece of herself and her freedom away. A piece she wanted to give only to Michael. Funny how a person realized these things when it was about to be taken away from them.

Swallowing hard, she took a deep breath and quietly uttered, “I do.”

She expected yelling and screaming again, but the reaction was much more subdued. Could it be these people didn’t agree with the Collaring of their Warriors or of her? Interesting.

Turin reached over and took something from one of the men who had escorted her earlier to the Gathering.

She wanted to try one last ditch effort to delay the inevitable. “Shouldn't the other Elders and Warriors be here for this momentous occasion?” She said sarcastically.

“Oh, don't worry, Power Keeper. The Elders watch from their distant locations as most of them have to run their political agendas to keep this Complex well sustained. The Warriors on the other hand will not be attending as they have more important duties of protecting this place and all the precious humans.” Turin indicated as he turned back to her with the hated Collar.

Her eyes locked on it and she tried not to hyperventilate. The Collar was made of intricately attached black crystals in the length of a choker. The crystals were even deeper than black, and just as hideous as the Collars the Warriors were trapped in. There was no luster, only darkness resembling a dark hole which had lost all of its color. It contained nothing but a vacuum and was in every single one of those horrendous black crystals.

She shivered and almost jumped a foot as someone behind her began to gather her hair off her neck to make way for the Collar that was to be placed upon her.

Oh God. Michael. She just wanted to call for him, but all she could do was watch as Turin lifted the Collar in his hands and approached her. She hoped it would be quick.

Before the Collar even touched her skin there was a huge crash

from across the gathering arena. Turin drew away and Stormy's hair was released. Everyone, including Turin, turned toward the commotion. To her greatest pleasure, she saw Michael storming through the doors with Arik closely on his heels. Behind both of them, were a group of men who all appeared to be Warriors. Almost all of the faces she recognized in the group; Joshua, Jacob, Ethan, Raven, and Caleb.

Michael and the rest of the group barreled their way through the crowd, although most of the civilians were smart enough to get out of their way. Michael only stopped his forward progress once he had reached the barricade keeping the audience from the stage.

He thundered out, "Turin! Enough! This hasn't been authorized through the Elders and you know it."

"Oh, but it is, Warrior Khenti. I have the seal approving it from the Elders and as they are absent, I am performing the ordained ceremony. And I have determined it will be now." Turin declared as he stared Michael down.

"You're making a mistake if you think the Elders will approve your twist on this so called ceremony and I think I will enforce their decision." Michael stretched out his right hand causing the intricate silver bracelet on his wrist, which was known as a Sefu Element, to shimmer.

Arik immediately grabbed his arm. "Khenti Michael, I wouldn't recommend this action. Remember what you're trying to achieve here."

Michael seemed to realize Arik was right. The bracelet stopped shimmering and he lowered his arm back down. He looked as if he felt the weight of the world sitting on his shoulders and the fact he was backed into a corner again. Stormy was fearful but also furious that Michael had to put up with Turin and his manipulations. She hated seeing him forced into this stand-off and not be able to do anything about it.

She so much wanted to reach out to Michael like he had reached out to her with his Life Power before. To ease his doubts, his uncertainty. In a split second, Stormy decided to give it a try. What more could she loose? While Turin was distracted she focused inward trying to mimic the patterns she had felt in Michael's Power

when he had touched her with it before. At first, nothing happened, but then just for a moment she could feel him, make out his inner thoughts: *By the Great Ancients, I can't just stand here and let this happen. Not to her. She is too important.*

Stormy could feel his heart beating frantically and a panic that screamed at him to get to her in time. She could sense the desire in him to be able to kill Turin and save her. The last wonderful thoughts she heard through the fragile connection she had managed to create was how proud he was of her bravery and going through with this, but that he just couldn't let her do it. Not for him, not for anyone.

To her dismay, the tiny threads of her connection came apart and she was once again alone in her own mind. Still, Stormy was absolutely floored Michael had come for her. She had watched as he had pushed his way past all those people and now stood before everyone not caring he could be in danger and placing himself and his Warriors in jeopardy. Even now as Arik cautioned him to stand down, by his look he still was considering something.

She watched as the expressions crossed his face from fury to hopelessness to the gentle look only he knew how to give her. Finally, a determined glare which spoke more to her than anything. She suddenly knew he was going to do something rash to try and stop Turin in front of his people and it wouldn't end well for him or his Warriors. And he would do it for her. She couldn't let him do it. He was too important to his people, to the world, to her.

Just as she finished the thought, Michael moved like lightening leaping over the barricade and was on the stage in a blink of time. He was still several feet from the dais. His arm extended just as quick, his Sefu Element shimmering again. Stormy had noticed it before with its large ruby and the image of a gold crown imbedded in the center. Stormy was transfixed as the thick silver bracelet began to shimmer again flowing around his hand and forming into a Power Sword in the blink of an eye.

In response, Turin's Guardians were just as quick showing up on stage with their own form of sword, ready to do battle for Turin. This show of force enraged Michael's Warriors and they reflexed their swords in turn. In the background, the poor Egyptian citizens

were running for cover, screaming in terror, and practically stampeding.

In the midst of all of this chaos, Stormy's Life Power began to stir within her slowing everything down, allowing her mind to analyze everything in an almost detached manner. Michael began to move forward; the Guardians moved forward; the Warriors moved forward. The entire group moving in to battle each other.

As she watched all of this, from the corner of her eye, she saw Turin remove a small device which appeared to be a small remote control and was the same dark dead black color of the Collars. He extended his arm pointing it toward the Warriors and was getting ready to push one of the buttons. Stormy connected the dots quickly realizing this would activate Michael's Collar and perhaps all the Warriors' as well.

Everyone froze in place, but she feared it was already too late to stop the chaos, to stop the torture that was sure to begin. To see her Michael submitted before everyone. Even if it killed her, she couldn't let that happen. Her mind began to sync back to the true time flow and motion went back to normal.

"No! I'll take the mantle of the Collar." She reached out grabbing Turin's arm on impulse to stop him from pushing the button. A definite mistake as every cell in her body screamed to release his arm as all of her energy seemed to be sucked out. If she didn't let go of his arm quickly, she would lose her lunch as well. Something was really off with this man.

"I'll take the mantle of the Collar. Everyone just needs to stop."

"You don't have to do this, Stormy. We don't know the consequences, damn it. Listen to me." Michael had so many emotions running across his face she couldn't keep track of them. Fury, confusion, guilt, respect until it all blurred with the tears blinding her.

"Yes, yes. I do. Now all of you stand down. It's my decision." She shook Turin's arm and then released it. "Turin, please."

Turin smiled at her as a cat might look at a trapped mouse. As he observed his mouse, he put the device back into the folds of his robe. "But of course, Power Keeper. It has always been your decision. No one can tell you otherwise."

Michael's eyes showed pure fury and a promised retribution as Turin smirked at him. To Stormy's relief, Michael backed down returning his Power Sword to its Element form as well as the other Warriors.

Michael slowly backed off the stage to where his Warriors waited as Turin's Guardians shadowed him until he was on the other side of the barricade. His eyes seemed to beseech Stormy that she didn't have to do this. She knew she did and she knew he was trapped in all of the nuances of his life to be able to do anything to stop the inevitable. The look on his face declared if anything happened to her, no one would escape his wrath.

Turin went back to entertaining the crowd which had begun to settle down. "This is wonderful. Your Power Keeper has pledged to all of you to take on the mantle of the Collar. Let it be and let us rejoice."

Turin reclaimed the Collar and Stormy's hair was re-lifted from around her shoulders. She would not close her eyes and block out the nightmare. She didn't think of anything but focused on Michael's gorgeous, beloved face. She wanted to drown in those deep dark blue eyes and have this all over with. She shivered as the weight of the icy stones pressed against her neck. Michael's eyes showed his absolute fury, his guilt, hopelessness, and then back to fury again.

Too soon she heard the final click of the black Collar being locked around her neck. It felt like a cold vice which at any moment could tighten and rob her of her precious breath. Something inside of her began to break and a dark fury to stir in the back of her mind. She looked out at the crowd as they all stood there waiting for what would happen next. Some had looks of amazement, shock, respect, but it fast became beyond her caring as everything in her future, her hopes, her dreams all became enslaved to the cold stones pressing against her sensitive skin.

"Now we will lock the Collar to your Power so you and the Collar will be in tune and it will be a part of you forever." Stormy numbly heard Turin but her mind grasped on to the one word forever, forever, forever, forever.....*How can this be forever*?

"It will go through a complete locking cycle, Power Keeper, so

unfortunately it will activate its control function. This may hurt just a bit." The last sounded like Turin was enjoying the thought of her suffering way too much.

Turin removed the black remote from his pocket again and aimed it toward her. He tried to hide his gleeful smile, but she saw it anyway. The man was insane.

"No! Turin this isn't necessary." Michael lunged back towards the stage again, but this time his Warriors and Arik were prepared, grabbing him by the shoulders and arms. He was strong, though, and pulled the whole group with him as he tried to reach Stormy.

"Stormy!"

Before Michael or anyone else could do anything about it, Turin pushed one of the buttons on the remote. The Collar activated and the crystals vibrated against her throat. Stormy heard an ominous hiss coming from it. The sudden activation of the Collar took her breath away as the sensation of millions of tiny needles digging into her throat came from the inside of it. She gasped trying to catch her breath, her eyes watering, pain screaming through her nerve endings as though something was slicing through her spine.

She grasped and clawed in desperation at the Collar trying to remove it as she fell to her knees. In the distance, she could hear Michael shouting her name, swearing at everyone and everything, evidently wanting to reach her, but in his best interest, his Warriors and Arik were protecting him from himself.

If she could only catch her breath, she could at least get back on her feet. But the damn Collar inflicted an additional layer of torture. It was wedging its black void of nothingness between her physical self and her Sphinx self. She hadn't noticed her two halves so clearly before since her Transformation. It felt like knives running through her body tearing her Sphinx away from her, leaving her alone, separated, bereft. The Sphinx wanted to fight back, to work its way through the dead void of the Collar and become one with her again. She was dying, her very spirit being ripped from her soul.

Stormy was becoming increasingly light headed. She fell forward onto all fours. The room around her had become deathly quiet. Everything was spinning and worst of all, as her Sphinx self was being ripped from her, she felt the connection she had with Michael

fading away as well. It was the most painful part of the entire experience, like watching a loved one dying before her. As she was consumed by this, she heard Michael gasp as if he was in pain as well. Could it be their connection was deeper than he let on? Perhaps he wasn't telling her the full story?

Stormy tried to see Michael through her blurring vision but she could barely see him. He was suffering, caught up in what was happening to her and experiencing the same torment. The Sphinx, now a part of her even down to her genetics since the Transformation, growled with a level of fury she had never felt before in her human life. Looking back down at the floor in her subdued position, the same growl in her mind reverberated from her throat. Her inner Sphinx pounced upon the dark void of the Collar's negative energy, learning its dark signal, making its way back through the barricade which sought to control it.

This incredible, determined side of her being destroyed the horrendous needle-like pain running through her nerve endings. Her two halves rejoined making her whole again. She was capable of beating the Collar. Was this the secret the Warriors were keeping? As she remained on the floor, she knew she must keep this secret of the Collar not truly being able to control a Sphinx Warrior or a Power Keeper.

There was a lot of explaining that needed to be done and Michael was the one who needed to do it. He had made her think they were truly enslaved. A lot of explaining. She arched her back, looking up through her long blond hair directly into Michael's eyes. Michael's guilty eyes. To even her surprise, she bared her teeth and hissed. She wasn't sure if the anger was strictly at him or for everyone and everything in general. All she knew was a feeling of white hot fury building up in her system and she had to get out of there before it escaped.

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Michael felt the fury of the Sphinx swirling within Stormy. Great Ancients, her Sphinx was incredible and it was his fault the feline was so close to the surface. At this point, there was nothing he could do about it. During the entire fiasco, he had simply endured as he had looked on in desperation since his Warriors had been holding

him back, and Turin had punched the damn button on the remote. He couldn't have physically gone to Stormy so he tried to access his connection with her and release his Life Power to try and protect her. When he had reached for his Life Power, the Collar around Stormy's neck fully activated affectively cutting her off from him.

He shook off his men who no longer held him back. The only thing Michael wanted at that moment of his life was to reach out, take her in his arms, and protect her from all of this. But he couldn't. He was staggered by the thought he had been caught up with what had happened to her.

She had been fading from him, their connection being torn apart. He had called out to her. *Ancients, Stormy, fight it. You can fight it. I know you can. Please, angel.* He should have told her the truth about the Collar. He was still gasping, trying to capture his breath as it had been stolen from him during the horrible separation of their Joining.

Now, he stood unmoving, not even sure what to do at this point. Just as he had felt his Stormy slipping away from him, suddenly she had snapped back in crystal clear clarity back in his soul, his spirit, his heart. Everything was right again, even if he was in deep trouble. He knew it too as Stormy's Sphinx side turned its energy towards him and its white hot fury began to swirl within her body.

He could take the strike of her fury but wasn't sure if he could contain it from the others. This could be bad and get out of hand fast. He just wasn't sure, but if her abilities got out of hand he hoped he could contain them. He had forgotten the special caveat about female Sphinx Warriors who were true Power Keepers. They could be unpredictable when their Power Mates were threatened, especially if something happened to their link. On top of that, the look she had just given him made him suspect she probably now knew the secret about the Collar and the fact the Warriors weren't so truly enslaved as they had let on. He had a lot of explaining to do if she would even listen to him. All he could do now was try and plead with her not to reveal the truth. It would set them back in their investigation if not completely destroy it.

He had hoped Stormy would calm down and focused his inner Sphinx on her to see how she was doing. The white hot fury

continued to boil and run hot through her system. He was afraid her abilities would spin up and out of control in her current condition. He had to get her out of here, but he couldn't at the moment until Turin was convinced he had control of her and turn off the damn Collar. Michael heard her gasp again and take in several deep breaths.

"I believe that is enough for the cycling of the Collar. You did very well, Power Keeper. You should be proud of yourself as your people are proud of you." Turin said in his pompous voice which never changed while at the same time turning off the Collar.

Turin reached down to assist her or more likely just to paw at her some more, but she avoided his hand, standing up on her own. "Perhaps you would like to say something to your people Power Keeper?"

Cocking her head to the side, she stood very still for a moment as if considering what she would or wouldn't say. Her eyes were glowing slightly showing her anger but she didn't focus it any particular direction. Instead, she stared out over the audience.

"No, I don't believe I have much of anything to say beyond what I have already given to all of you. As I have said before, I hope I live up to all of your expectations. I'm done here for the day."

Her eyes then became void. Staring at the back of the room, she stepped down off the dais. She worked her way across the stage to a set of stairs and moved down to the floor level. Head high, ignoring everyone, not making eye contact, not speaking to anyone. She walked past Michael, through his Warriors, and past Arik without even acknowledging any of them. They stayed out of her way, not stopping her, and not saying a word to her. At least they were smart enough to part out of her way, not try to stop her, and not say a word to her.

Like a wave, the crowd parted leaving a clear path to the doors and her escape. She acknowledged no one, making a bee-line to the doors.

It seemed to take her forever to cross the huge expanse of the gathering room, but she nevertheless made it to the distant side. Opening the doors, she quickly passed through, and slammed the doors behind her. It was an ominous sound of finality as the crowd

looked on after her departure.

"Now that is one pissed off female Sphinx." Joshua commented with a bit of sarcasm. "Good luck with that one, Michael. We're lucky she didn't take out the whole Complex. She has some control."

Arik looked from Joshua to Michael. "Yes, she's strong. Should I call Alexandria to check on her?"

"Damn it. Yes, I know she's pissed and once again most of this mess is my fault. And no, let Alexandria rest. Stormy will be fine. I just need to do some explaining and hope I can calm her down." Michael ran his hands over his face, shook his head, and started through the crowd of bewildered Egyptians following in his Power Keeper's footsteps.

Chapter Seven

Pissed was putting it mildly. The waves of fury and emotional upheaval coming off Stormy were plain to Michael as he followed in her wake. Down the halls, to the main elevator bank, and back to the Warrior's Quarters, he traveled as quickly as possible. He half expected to find nuclear fallout somewhere, but Joshua was right, his Stormy had a hell of lot of control.

Even with as much energy coming off her, there was an even larger amount she had to be holding in check. He didn't know how much longer she could hold it in, but he had to reach her quickly.

As he entered the Warrior's domain, there was no sign of her, but he still detected her energy trail leading up the stairs and towards their shared quarters. She must have been moving lightning fast, but thank the Ancients, she at least went to a safe zone.

Michael quickly bounded up the stairs two at a time and made short work of the hallway leading to his quarters. He paused for a moment at his doors as he heard a crash and a furious growl from the other side of the doors. He cautiously opened one of the doors and peered into the room before completely entering, quietly closing the door behind him.

Stormy, in all her glory, was standing in the center of the room. In her fury, it appeared she had taken the tray of food which was waiting for them and flung it to the ground. She now stood with her hands on either side of her head, eyes closed, as if trying to press the energy straight out of her skull.

Her eyes snapped open and she brought her hands back down to her sides forming them into fists. Her eyes were glowing slightly and the fury had not left them. No, not at all.

"What in God's name is wrong with you people? You're archaic ways. Your cruel ceremonies. It's no wonder the people haven't left this place and all this crap behind already."

Michael carefully circled around her so he was closer to the bed and out of any direct fire she might decide to rain down upon his

head. The Ancients only knew he deserved it. He should have stopped the insane presentation. He had tried for Ancient's sake. Didn't he deserve at least some credit for that?

"Angel, if we all could, we would. But where would we go? Who would protect the world from the Wraith? It's the sacrifice we pledged and made long ago and it will always burn in our blood. We'll fight until we can no longer and then keep fighting until we die. There's no choice."

Her voice raising louder, Stormy cried, "But there has to be a choice. There has to be some way to be rid of them. There just has to be!" She sobbed, catching her breath and roughly wiping her tears away as if she couldn't stand the fact she had been brought to this level.

"And the Elders. What the fuck is wrong with them? Why would they allow this? This!" She pointed at the Collar around her throat, grabbing at it as if to pull it free.

"Stormy, leave it, we don't know what it will do if it's tampered with." Michael advanced toward her to stop her but halted quickly as she directed her heated gaze at him and once again growled the deep seductive growl of a furious Sphinx female.

He wasn't sure what to expect or what she would do to him, but he still held himself responsible for her current state and would accept his punishment without a fight. He had failed her again.

"Most of the Elders support us. They don't condone these actions today. It's only a couple of the Elders who want to control us and the Complex. Believe me, if we knew exactly who was doing this, we wouldn't be enslaved to anyone. But right now, we don't know and we have to wait until the rest of the Elders return to hold council. These machinations were done with the majority absent."

She yelled at him again. "You don't know or you won't tell me? Or will you just lie again, making me believe you're all enslaved to this hideous thing. But really it's just one more intricate weave in your plots to make me believe what you want just so you can have your precious Power Keeper. I hate this and all of you!"

The strike to his heart went deep even though he swore to himself he would never fall for her with all the complications in his life. He watched as her fury spiraled further out of control. She

shook with it and began to pace back and forth trying to contain the energy within herself. Suddenly, she spied her reflection in one of the wall mirrors and choked in a strangled cry; her eyes going wild. She spun away and ripped the chains and jewels from her hair, kicked off the slippers, and even with him there began to shred the gown from her body.

Michael wasn't sure what to do or what was wrong with her, but as the material fell from her body and her glorious sun-kissed skin was exposed, the implications dawned upon him. His thoughts became murderous as he understood what Turin had done to her and the fact he evidently had taunted her with the old ways where pledges were taken in bare flesh. He would kill him and if Turin had touched her, he would flay the skin from the man's body before he killed him.

Risking his own skin, he grabbed the blanket from the bed, maneuvered near her and quickly cocooned her in the blanket, surrounding her with his own body. As soon as he had her contained, the energy stored within her body exploded outward in a bright white light of glittering sparkles. It didn't go far but surrounded both of them passing through Michael's body.

He expected shredding pain and would accept his punishment for not saving her from the humiliation, but instead he was astonished by the sensation.

There was no pain, but pure pleasure. He experienced every amazing emotion that was Stormy's from the fury to the hot desire she had for him. The energy brushed his body and moved through him invigorating him with much needed energy and at the same time turning him on at a physical level he had never felt before. His erection was instant and hard as a rock and he could do nothing else but capture her full lips. His own Sphinx growled and demanded entrance to her warm sweet mouth. As she parted her lips he delved into the moist depths, moaning his need into her mouth.

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Lost in pure sensation, surrounded by ethereal light, Stormy floated. Where once there was pure fury and the need to destroy, now there was pure desire and the need to meld every inch of her

body to Michael. Her earlier thoughts were only to escape the fiasco and the frustration of being paraded like a trophy and used like a pawn in a chess game. She had wanted to run but even more had wanted to stand her ground and take the abuse to save her Warriors. Especially this one Warrior, her Michael.

In the Gathering Room, she had reached a point where she couldn't take any more. She had come back here to try and control the burning fury and then she had seen her image in the mirror. The image Turin had made her. She had needed to rid herself of the influence and had thought loss of control and destruction was imminent. But then there was Michael.

Once again, he risked his personal safety for her and in the instant he had surrounded her, everything changed. She suddenly had control and knew on a deep level how to change the energy and give him pleasure, not pain. The Sphinx in her was pleased and purring. She needed more of the shared pleasure and pressed her body even closer to Michael's.

His tongue dueled with hers, deepening the kiss, pressing her even more firmly into his body, running his hands through her hair. She found her pleasure in the demanding seduction of his mouth needing more but unable to reach him because she was so totally cocooned.

The energy Stormy sustained began to dwindle as it was absorbed within both of them or made its way back into the surroundings. Her knees buckled and although the passion and need was still there, utter exhaustion tried to carry her away. To her disappointment, Michael ended the kiss, but she was too exhausted to protest or even to open her eyes.

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Michael gathered Stormy close as she began to droop in is arms from the loss of Life Power. Had she just inadvertently performed a partial Power Transfer? He had not felt that kind of energy in forever, and the pleasure he had felt had been extraordinary. No way in hell would she share this kind of experience with the other Warriors when she transferred Life Power to them in the future. His inner Sphinx would unleash a powder keg on anyone who tried to share passion with her during the Transfer. He sighed. Why

couldn't he just back off from her? They were Joined but it couldn't be taken farther than that. Ever.

Resting his chin on the top of her head, he sighed again and brushed his free hand through her silky hair as he held her up against him with the other.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. But there is so much, I didn't want to overwhelm you. We took the Collars on the deal we could attain the information to find you before Turin had his dogs find you and try the Transformation. It wouldn't have ended well if they had gotten to you first."

His heart clenched at the thought of losing her. "We suspected this was all part of a larger scheme to break up the bond the Sphinx have always had with the Egyptians. We don't understand why someone wants to do this and only those behind the plan know. We suspect Turin is a part of it as he always seems to be the ring leader, waiting for the other Elders to be absent before something happens, or he enforces some archaic rule just to get a rise out of us."

"I knew there was something wrong with the man. He freaks me out." Stormy mumbled into Michael's chest with a sleepy yawn.

"And there's going to be even more wrong with the man, Elder or not, when I get my hands on him for doing this to you." Michael growled. He absently kissed the top of her head, brushing his hand down her back to calm her as he continued his story.

"When we were Collared, we discovered as you did, the Sphinx in us is strong and knew how to manipulate the energy in the Collar, in effect neutralizing it. We haven't revealed this to Turin and his other cohorts so we can continue making him think we're controlled and wait for him to make the mistake and show he's the ring leader of the deaths, poisonings, and other things going on. Until then, we have to keep up the ruse."

Stormy shifted, snuggling even closer to him and yawned. "But you're all trapped here. What kind of life can that be?"

Gathering her firmly in his arms, he rubbed his cheek against her hair. "We're not trapped here, Stormy. This is our home, both for the Sphinx and the Egyptians. We can go above ground on a regular basis as long as we don't reveal who or what we are. But ultimately, we all return here because we feel the pull to be with those from our

old World. And the fact we have made the pledge to protect our new World from the Wraith. We did that freely, not from anyone forcing us to do it, but because we live here and we want to." He swallowed not wanting to say the words but knew he needed to.

"Even though we found you and Transformed you, you're not trapped here. If you wanted to go, we would have to let you leave. You're not a prisoner, although it may seem like it at times, but you're our cherished Power Keeper. We need you, but would part from you rather than keep you against your will. I have no problem taking you back to your human world now if that is what you want."

Stormy stiffened, pulling away slightly and looked up at him with her exhausted eyes. She looked as if she really had some choice things to say to him to put him in his place, and Michael could tell she just didn't have the energy. Instead she simply said, "I'm not going anywhere. You need me." Her eyes drooped closed and she leaned forward against his chest.

"By the Ancients, Stormy, I'm sorry. You've been through enough for the day." Michael gently picked her up in his arms and made his way over to the bed.

Against his better judgment, instead of simply putting her to bed and going to make a stiff drink to numb his swirling thoughts, he climbed in next to her. He just couldn't make himself leave her at this moment. He drew her close and cradled her in his arms. She wiggled closer, snuggling next to him, her cheek against his chest. He kissed her forehead and brushed the hair away from her face, tucking the stray strands back behind her ear. He looked down at her delicate face seeing she was fast asleep. He was amazed she could look so peaceful with what she had just gone through.

What is it about this woman that draws me in and just won't let go? He drew her back in close resting his chin on top of her head, running his hand down her back. The day spun through his mind of all the things he should have done or not done. How was he going to keep her safe when she continued to place herself between them and the danger she naturally perceived? Her Sphinx side was strong, especially for just being transformed, but was it strong enough to keep her safe in the chaos and danger of their life?

He had to protect her. No matter what the cost. He sighed,

feeling himself finally relax as her gentle breath whispered against his neck. Unfortunately, he had very little time for rest, but for once, he was going to do this for himself and the need he had to be close to her. Just for a sweet short time.

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Warmth. Comfort. Safety. Stormy hadn't felt this in a long time; awakening more refreshed than she had in forever. She slowly opened her eyes, and to her pleasure, found Michael was still with her. He was in a deep sleep which had to be unusual for a Warrior. Shouldn't they be on high alert all the time? That was okay with her, though, as she took advantage of observing him as he was facing towards her on his side with one arm draped over her hip. His dark eyelashes were quite long for a man and he had the fullest lips when he was relaxed and not grimacing at someone or something. He actually looked boyish in a manly way in slumber and the shadow of his facial hair was just slightly evident.

She couldn't resist and looked down his body since he wasn't covered up with the blanket. He was still dressed but at some point had kicked off his shoes and untucked his shirt evidently in an effort to get comfortable. The shirt had nicely ridden up on his stomach too. She could see the tastiest hard muscled stomach ever and was sorely tempted to run her hands over it to see if the skin felt as hard and smooth as it looked. She peaked to see if Michael was still sleeping or had awakened during her visual exploration. He appeared to be sleeping, so she tunneled her hands and arms out of the cocoon of blankets he had wrapped her up in the previous evening and blushed realizing she was completely naked underneath.

Slowly and gently, hoping not to awaken him, she placed her palm near the waistband of his pants. She slid her hand over his hip and then over his stomach so she could feel the rock hard muscles and soft, warm skin. As he still had not twitched, she got even braver and a bit mischievous knowing exactly what she wanted. Looking back at those firm manly lips, she inched forward until she was just a breath away. It's now or never she thought and leaned forward brushing her lips against his. She ran her tongue along the seam of his lips tasting him wishing she could have more but not

wanting to waken him.

As she started to draw away from him, he was astonishingly quick as his hand came around to the back of her head holding her in place and turning the tables of her little exploratory game. He re-established the kiss and began a thorough examination of her lips, mouth, and tongue delving his own tongue into her mouth, deepening the kiss. Ravishing her mouth until she was breathless, moaning, her head spinning with the purest pleasure.

Again, her hands roamed over his body. She slid them up over the hard muscles of his stomach, up and up, until she was well tunneled under his shirt and exploring the smooth planes of his chest, making his nipples harden. He growled, nipping at her mouth, rolling over on top of her, effectively pinning her in place. To establish his control further, he trapped her legs by placing one of his over hers. Between his body, the blanket which was still partially wrapped around her, and the bed underneath, Stormy was completely embraced and surrounded by Michael. He had one hand under her head bracing her so he could continue to ravish her mouth and with the other to do his own exploring.

He started at the side of her neck running his fingertips slowly over her skin feeling the beat of her pulse at her throat and over her collarbone to her shoulder. Massaging and kneading as he went. He brushed the top of her breast, around the side, and underneath smoothing over every inch of skin as he went. Stormy arched against him wanting more, needing more, nipping back at his lips, making sounds of pleasure.

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Michael shifted over, releasing one of her legs and pushing his legs between hers, rubbing her right at the apex of her thighs. He pushed his hips against hers, arching, rubbing, needing. His hand moved back to her breasts, gently feathering across each nipple. She gasped into his mouth. Again, he took advantage plunging his tongue inside, circling her pebbled nipple with his rough fingers. He rubbed against her hard with the evidence of his erection.

Tasting, touching, rubbing, this was all of Michael's dream world. Such a fantasy it was too. He could stay here forever. He left the sensual mouth to taste behind a dainty ear, slid down a soft rose

petal neck, across a sun-kissed shoulder, lower still until he had the firm, soft breast beneath his lips. Licking, sucking, circling around an areola and over a hardened nipple. His hand moved down beneath the blanket to find more tantalizing warm skin.

Satin, soft skin. He skimmed his fingertips over her smooth, firm stomach, down farther to find a nest of feminine curls. He wanted to touch every incredible inch of her and just couldn't get enough of his dream woman. He would bring her to the same intensity he was feeling, was needing. He swirled his tongue around her nipple again and was gratified when she arched into him as if asking for more. The brush of her body against his engorged cock was almost too much. He was so ready to be inside her. But not yet. The intensity was killing him but he had to stay in control.

He swirled his thumb around her wet folds, loving it when he heard more sounds of pleasure from his angel. The feel of her strong legs surrounding his hips had him imagining what it would be like to be deep inside her. He shuddered with desire and something more. An incredible need was riding him hard to make her his forever. This feeling had never happened to him before. He couldn't even explain it on any kind of level. All he could do was hold on and follow the impulses as his fingers slid across her clit and between moist lips of heaven. Back and forth. He needed more.

He reclaimed the fantasy mouth, sliding his tongue in, tasting her, and at the same time finally pushing into her tight channel with his thick finger feeling instant drenching moisture. He couldn't seem to stop himself as the moan coming into his mouth and his own in return were driving him over the edge. His hips bucked on their own as he rubbed his erection against the hip of his dream woman. Over and over, he glided his finger deep into the moist folds, each slide eliciting breathless whimpers from dream woman's luscious mouth.

This was exactly where he wanted this woman to be. Wrapped in his arms. What started out as a bit of exploring had ended up in pure ecstasy. Michael shifted slightly seeking to match the erotic movement of her body. He arched against her, wanting more, needing more. He rubbed against her as best he could. Spiraling out of control, he climbed higher and higher reaching for the ultimate

pinnacle and could tell she wanted it too when his angel moaned into his mouth.

“Michael, please!”

The sound of Stormy's precious voice snapped Michael out of his fantasy and into the realization he was not in a dream but actually ravishing her. All movement stopped as if frozen in time. He immediately moved his stimulating hand to the safe zone of the bed and removed his weight from her. His glazed eyes looked into her sea green ones taking in her flushed cheeks and thoroughly kissed lips.

“Stormy?” He rasped, shocked he had been ravishing her.

“Yes. Who else would it be?” She whispered back. He could tell she wanted to tell him not to stop, but how could he take advantage of her. His mind was not all that rational at the moment as he seemed to be somewhere between still turned on, shell-shocked he was actually awake, and mortified at his own actions. He started to back away from her shifting to his knees, but she grabbed onto his arms holding him in place.

“It’s alright. You didn't hurt me or do anything I didn't want.”

Michael looked at her again with his unreadable mask he put forward when he was about to close down on her. The expression as he prepared to run from her and the closeness she tried so hard to get from him.

“Stormy, I....” He shook his head not knowing what to say. He knew she wouldn’t let him get away from her without some type of acknowledgment from him. He could see it in the possessive look in her eyes and the intense focus coming from her Sphinx.

Taking a deep breath, he dove in, “I do want you and I know you want me too. I felt it all the way to my soul, but this is just not the time. It’s just...” He paused not sure how to put it.

“It’s just not what? When will be the time? What if there is no time?” Her aggravation was obvious. She sat there as if waiting for a reply for a moment. He couldn’t respond to her. He just didn’t know what to say when their lives were just so damn complicated.

He sat there in silence and after a few seconds, her entire body stiffened. She moved to slide away from him.

“Oh, never mind.” She grabbed the blanket firmly around her,

wriggling around him, and hitting the floor at a quick pace to the bathroom.

"Stormy." He called to her, but she simply continued to move away from him. She was playing his game of being aloof now. He supposed he deserved it. Already he knew she was feeling the difficulties they would face and becoming more like him. Why did she have to become like the rest of them? Why couldn't she just stay sweet and innocent? All he wanted to do was make her life better and protect her from the evils which existed in his life. It was his responsibility to do this for her both as a Power Keeper and as his... His what? He couldn't follow that particular line of thinking right now.

Feeling a bit sorry for himself, he watched her move stiffly to the shower and turn on the jets of water. Michael wanted to go to her and cradle her in his arms, but he stayed near the bathroom door loitering while he determined what to do next.

Michael sighed, feeling like an idiot. Should he apologize, try to explain further, or just leave it alone? She had turned her back on him now, keeping her distance, turning the tables on him. Wasn't that what he wanted from her? To keep their distance since their way of life would just destroy any type of relationship anyway? Even though they were Joined? He had gotten what he wanted, not to be close to her since he only seemed to hurt her. If it was what he wanted, to keep her distant, then why did it hurt so much?

"Stormy."

She turned back to him and walked all the way back across the bathroom standing at the top of the stairs looking down at him. "It's fine Michael. Don't worry about it. I'm sorry about the mess I made yesterday with our food. If you can forgive me for my little tantrum, I'm starving. Do we have anything else?"

The woman was amazing. She was giving him a reprieve, at least for this round using the food as an excuse. "And put this on the bed. I'm done with it for now." She flipped the blanket from around her body and tossed it right at his head. He caught it with his fluid swiftness and watched her spin on her heel, unashamedly heading back to the shower, her sexy butt wiggling all the way there. Now she was just teasing him. He turned and left the doorway before his

wayward body ended up overruling his mind and he ended up in the shower with her.

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Stormy watched from the shower as Michael disappeared from the doorway. Coward, she fondly thought. One way or another she was going to get through to him. She was determined to make him feel loved and free no matter what challenges lay ahead of them. Huh, love?

Is that what she felt for him? If it was this all-consuming need to give her very life and soul for him, then she did love him. How had that happened? She didn't care; she loved him and he would feel loved even if he couldn't love her back. Damn it. She smiled to herself with those last thoughts and completed her shower. Drying off, she wrapped the towel around her body and made her way back into the bedroom. Michael was missing in action, but the mess she had made last night was cleared away. She went to the dresser and got out her usual daytime outfit.

Once she completed getting dressed, she looked in the mirror. Who would have thought she could be someone who would be able to give a group of incredible Warriors the power and energy to be able to defeat creatures who could take life. She inspected her reflection seeing the black boots, black military fatigue pants, and black shirt contrasting against her long flowing blond hair. And she took note of all the things making her stand out as a Power Keeper.

The markings on her clothing with the intricate swirls in glittering silver and the sparkling of her sun kissed skin. The only thing destroying the image was the ugly dead Collar around her throat. If she dared grab it and rip it from her neck she would, but instead she must keep it on, at least for now. So instead, she stuck her tongue out at the entire image she made and drew her hair back clipping it in place.

“Well Angel, I like how you look.” Michael's deep voice came from the doorway.

Stormy turned to face him, giving him her best smile. “It's not that. It's just the Collar ruins the whole look.” At least she was trying to be light-hearted about it. She could smell a heavenly scent coming from the large tray he had balanced on one of his hands. He

brought it across the room and set it on the table. She came over to the table to see what he had brought and sat across from him ready to pounce no matter what morsels were offered.

"Hungry, I see." He smiled back, uncovering the tray for her. "I noticed you have a fondness for pancakes, so I made sure Cook included some." He placed the large plate before her, with some scrambled eggs, and a biscuit with gravy.

"Thank you for getting me this even if I don't deserve it for wasting the last food. And, yes I do love pancakes and warm maple syrup." She dove in with enthusiasm since it seemed as if she hadn't eaten in forever. To her pleasure, Michael had brought his own and joined her versus his usual taking off to meet with his men. They ate in companionable silence working through their food fairly quickly. Michael finished first and sat back watching her eat the rest of her eggs and drinking the rest of her orange juice. She licked her lips of the last of the sweet juice. He watched her tongue work along her lips feeling the punch in his gut.

"Don't you have a planning meeting today or whatever you call it?" Stormy asked curiously.

"Yes, but I wanted to have breakfast with you first. I felt bad as you're always being left alone with the rest of us so busy. I also wanted to let you know it's time for you to start your training. I want you to be able to defend yourself and be safe here, not worrying about every time something happens and your safety being threatened. If nothing else, it would be nice to know you can kick Turin's ass if you want to." Michael had a wicked gleam in his eye as he said the last.

"I would like nothing better than that. Do I start today?"

"Yes, Hunter will be training you. Hand to hand, sword play, any other techniques he thinks will be of benefit for you. He'll also take you to Joshua to find your Sefu Element which will ultimately be your Power Sword. He will push you in the training, but this is to test you. Like the rest of us, his goal is to keep you safe. You're a Sphinx Warrior, but first and foremost you are a Power Keeper to us. We need you. We need you to be safe." Michael took her hand twining his fingers with hers.

She glanced at their joined hands and loved the fact he liked to

have contact with her all the time. "I would like that. I want to feel I'm of some use here versus just taking up space all the time. I enjoy working with your sister in the Medical Section but I want to do more."

"You're already doing something for us by just being here." He kissed her hand. "If you're done, we can head over now and I'll introduce you to Hunter."

"Okay." Stormy stood up, ready and eager to start her training. No matter what Michael said, she needed something to occupy herself and to feel she was being a productive member of their team. Michael led her from the Warrior's Quarters firmly keeping her hand in his the whole time. She thought for someone who wanted to keep a bit of distance due to all the complications, he sure did like to hover over her. Not that she minded in the least.

Back to the main elevators they traveled, but this time Michael took her to a new level she hadn't been to yet. Level seven he explained was where the Training and Weapons section was. He gave her a quick tour showing her the gym areas equipped with cardio gear, treadmills, elliptical steppers, sit-up mats, free weights of every size, fixed weights, and a wrestling area.

She was excited when she saw an Olympic size swimming pool and an area with multiple Jacuzzis. There was also a sauna room which would come in handy to loosen up sore muscles. Another area was for hand-to-hand combat practice. It was equipped with lots of padding for breaking one's fall and different platforms to vault off of or up to when escape during a competition was needed. *Oh great, what do they plan on teaching me?*

The next section was for sword training and battle scenarios. The area it encompassed was at least football-field size and looked like an arena with stadium seats surrounding it. Michael indicated occasionally there were battles fought with audiences although this didn't happen very often anymore but for entertainment purposes only. The last section was divided depending on the type of weapon.

Many different objects hung from the walls or were in lighted cabinets. Swords appeared to be the favorite because of the sheer number displayed, but knives, throwing stars, staffs, sickles, and objects she couldn't even name, or recognize, were everywhere.

"I noticed there are no guns." she asked curiously.

"No. When fighting in the Dimensional Gate anything mechanized doesn't function. If it has any type of explosive content, it can cause the gate to destabilize. It doesn't destroy the gate, in those circumstances, but the gate can temporarily collapse or the energy can negatively change causing entrapment or killing anyone in the area."

Stormy picked up on the fact Michael's expression became distant when he said the last. "This has happened in the past," She stated. Michael nodded somberly at her but didn't offer any additional details.

They continued along the rows of weapons until they were near the back of the room. Here they found what looked like a blacksmith's kiln and tools. The tools consisted of many objects including an anvil, hammer, and a kiln to generate heat which was currently dark and cool but evidently had seen use in the past. To the right side of the kiln several feet away were copper containers sitting in neat rows locked behind clear cabinet doors. These cabinets were lit as well on the inside similar to the other weapons' cabinets so she could see inside them.

"What are those?"

"Those are containers which contain the Sefu Elements. Joshua will work with you to see which responds to your energy and will bond with you to become your Power Sword. It is a very special event. One, I think you will enjoy." He held up his hand so she could examine his. Stormy reached out and took his hand in hers. She examined the smooth shiny silver bracelet on Michael's hand and wrist. It was wrapped around the base of his middle finger once and then spiraled from there down the back of his hand to his wrist. It then separated into two pieces going in opposite directions around his wrist and ending connected on the inside of his wrist forming the full bracelet shape.

On the back of his wrist where a watch face would be was where the thin silver rope shape flattened out slightly. Imprinted on the silver flat surface was Michael's Power Symbol which Stormy had noticed before. It was a large red ruby with a gold crown in the middle.

"Does it always stay on your wrist?" She asked.

"Yes. We believe it is part chemical element and part biological. It's sentient to a point of knowing the requirements of the wearer when it comes to being needed in defense. It will form any type of weapon that is needed, but the Power Sword is the ultimate expression and is normally what is formed. Once it's bonded to a Warrior, it will not separate itself from the individual unless the person wants it to be so. Then the Sefu Element will cease to function or die depending on how you think of it. Element or sentient biology. It will also cease to function if the individual it has bonded to dies." He looked at her wondering how she would take this information but in usual Stormy fashion, she accepted the strange concept fairly easily. "The element is unique to our planet and is what is left from our travels here. It can duplicate itself, so we don't run out. That is another reason each one is kept separate in these containers. It wouldn't do to have Sefu Elements over-running Earth."

Stormy looked up at him in shock and then realized he was teasing her. She playfully punched him in the arm. He smiled at her and took her hand again. "Really, the Sefu can duplicate, but it's a rare and complicated procedure so we guard them well." He finished.

"Come on. I'll introduce you to Hunter and will let you start your training with him. Unfortunately I have to get back to working on the plans for the next approach to the cursed gate."

They made their way back to the training area where the padded mats were and the platforms. Standing near a table on one end was another of the Warriors. One she had not met before. He turned to her curiously, examining her just as she was examining him. Like Michael, he had dark tanned skin, shoulder length black hair but with a silver streak through it on one side, and eyes of deep emerald green. A very unique color in her opinion. He stepped forward extending his hand.

Stormy reached out and shook his hand as he indicated with a deep voice, "Hello, Power Keeper, I am Hunter. I'll be working with you on your training." He quickly released Stormy's hand when Michael pointedly moved to Stormy's side. Stormy could see Hunter

recognized Michael's highly protective and possessive manner.

Raising his eyebrows at his Khenti's actions, Hunter continued, "We'll be working on hand-to-hand techniques as well as working with different weapons. That's if Khenti Michael still would like me to do the training." He directed the last at Michael.

Michael seemed to realize what he was doing and backed off. "Of course. She needs to know these things to keep her safe." He ran his hand through his dark hair.

"Please, call me Stormy." She took note of the interaction between Michael and his Warrior Hunter. "I'm not much on formalities. And I have to let you know I'm the most uncoordinated person you'll ever meet, so I warn you now not to expect too much."

Placing his hand on Stormy's shoulder, Michael encouraged her, "You'll do just fine. You'll find with the Transformation your coordination and physical abilities will have improved vastly. I have faith in you." He placed a kiss on her forehead and then pointedly turned to Hunter. "Make sure you train her well. Feel free to test her levels, but don't go to the extremes you like to do with the others."

Hunter's feigned innocence at Michael's order was obvious. "Khenti... me? I would never do such a thing. I will be honorable in all of my tests and scenarios with her. No set-ups. Warriors' honor."

Michael rolled his eyes at Hunter, squeezed Stormy's hand and left them to their training. "I'm going to see how Ethan's surveillance gathering has been going and how we can integrate it into our plans. I'll see you later, Stormy."

She waved at him as he sauntered off, disappearing from her view. She turned back to Hunter who crossed his arms and seemed to be sizing her up.

"Well, Power Keeper....uh... Stormy, we have a lot to teach you and a short time to do it in. Ready?"

She shrugged, then squared her shoulders, keeping her head up. "Ready as I'll ever get."

Chapter Eight

Making his way back to the planning office, Michael could still feel his inner Sphinx prowling restlessly in the depths of his body due to the fact someone was going to be touching Stormy. He knew Hunter was good at what he did and would never step over boundaries he shouldn't, but that still didn't seem to make a difference to the possessive side of him when it came to his Power Keeper. He pictured Hunter showing Stormy the different holds and ways to break from them purposely entrapping her in his grip, trying to wear her down to make her stronger.

He growled deep in his throat feeling the possessive beast begin to stir again. She was his! *Stop it, damn it.* He shook his head trying to throw off the tension and refocus on what he needed to do now as he entered through the door to find his men waiting for him.

"Khenti." Ethan greeted him as he poked his head up from one of his many computer screens. He had been scanning for hours if his blood shot eyes were any indication. His spiked hair was in even more disarray than usual. Michael didn't think the man ever fully unplugged from his electronic devices.

Sprawled among the many oversized leather chairs in the room were Jacob, Raven, Joshua, and Guardian Arik. "Where is Caleb? He should be here as well." Michael directed to no one in particular.

Joshua, his second in command spoke up, "He's out on a supply run. He voiced concern over the last incident with the contamination of the food. He felt responsible since he's supposed to inspect everything, but I told him he couldn't prevent someone from doing it on purpose. He assigned some additional personnel to keeping an eye on the various stores. I also had Ethan add some additional surveillance equipment in obvious locations to curtail any future activities. Hunter?"

"He's starting Stormy's training." He growled aggressively and then made a production of clearing his throat. Damn Sphinx, he thought, making an ass out of him again.

His Warriors suddenly became quite interested in their computer, drink, or whatever they happened to have near them. Except, of course Raven, who always dug right to the point. “Is there a problem, Michael?”

“No, there is not. Stormy will do just fine with the training. She needs it and it will make the rest of us feel more comfortable as well.” He neatly steered away from the actual point Raven was trying to prod him to. Michael moved over to the large central table and faced his men crossing his arms over his chest. “Arik, any word from your contacts?”

Arik looked at him with a concerned expression. “Nothing specific, but there was word of some missing components from the Weapons section. Specifically electronic boards, wiring, and small sphere cases. There was also word of Elder Turin sending out one of his Guardians top side to pick up some un-named items. When my contacts tried to follow, they were interestingly detained or side tracked. There has been increased activity on visits top side that seems a bit shady. I'll try and do some additional checking.”

“Understood. Make sure your people are being careful. I don't want any more casualties from this.” Michael turned to Ethan. “Any new readings on the Gate?”

Ethan looked up from his computers again. “Yeah man. Spikes off the charts. It could go anytime now. I thought it was ready to go last night but it lost its steam. Probably within this week when all shit hits the fan. Man, I really hate this shit. I was just getting used to goofing off.”

“Joshua, I need Stormy up and trained on her Power Sword if you can find a Sefu Element that will bond with her. Ancients help us if she needs to go to the Staging Cavern, but we may need her nearby since we haven’t had Life Power transferred to us in ages and we don't know how bad the Wraith have been building up waiting for their next chance to cross to this side. If they didn’t find another Gate somewhere they will be starving for Life Power.” Just the thought of any one of the Wraith getting anywhere near Stormy sent chills to his very soul and brought out his Sphinx to instant attack mode ready to protect her.

Joshua nodded affirmative. “Done. I’m sure with her energy

pattern it won't be a problem to match her."

Michael looked to everyone in the room. "Has anyone found anything new in the eScrolls?"

Arik spoke up and with more enthusiasm than he had in a long time on the subject. "Actually, Stormy may have found something. I don't have the specifics yet, but she had mentioned to Alexandria some items on the subject. Something about a pattern in the reading that repeated in different timelines in the eScrolls when trying to destroy a Dimensional Gate. She wants to look at some of the more ancient scrolls from our planet, so I'm getting them translated. She also mentioned symbols, but didn't go into the details. She's making an excellent addition to the team, and having a fresh set of eyes will be of benefit."

"Yes. Yes, she will." Michael was already impressed with his little Power Keeper. She was already an excellent addition. He knew the extra training she was getting would make her an even stronger member of the team, and hopefully, ease his mind at least partially as to her safety. At least he hoped it would before he drove himself crazy.

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The training Stormy was getting was quite thorough. At the moment, she was entrapped by strong arms holding her wrists from behind, squeezing her, making it difficult to breath. Hot breath was at her neck and a deep growl in her ear. Stormy braced her legs, rotated her hands and arms around to the inside of the arms holding her, and jerked down hard. As the grip was lost on her, she grabbed the enemy's thumb, spun around to the right under the arm, while continuing the thumb hold, and came up behind, twisting the entire muscled arm and holding it in place.

She couldn't believe she was able to do this, but the Sphinx DNA in her evidently enabled her to perform incredible acts of strength. Once she had her enemy in this grip, she reached up and grabbed his hair at the same time sweeping his legs out from under him. He landed in a nice heap at her feet. She placed her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow at him.

"Excellent. Exactly the way I showed you. I couldn't have done better myself." Hunter said breathlessly. "Damn woman, you're

putting my old ass to shame."

Stormy extended her hand to help him up once again amazing herself that she could pull up a man his size without any effort at all. In fact, the whole experience of the training had been utterly amazing to her.

At first, she had been frustrated with the whole experience because in her mind, she was weak, uncoordinated, and just not the physical type. Plus, she had to work her stamina back up from going through the Transformation and this had helped.

She would go back to the Warrior Quarters and be so exhausted, she would eat like a zombie, clean up, and automatically crash in the bed. Seeing Michael during that time was like two trains passing by each other, but he still found a quick moment to hold her hand or brush his fingers across her cheek. Each day she became stronger and less tired.

Three days and several lessons later she was showing she was quite capable and a fast learner. Hunter had showed her everything from escape to vaulting between platforms to strengthening her speed, coordination, and technique. In one maneuver, she had even back flipped over his tall frame when he had tried to attack from behind. When she had landed behind him she had shoved him so hard, he had gone flying. She had looked at him on the ground in horror, but Hunter had just laughed and said her Sphinx was showing.

Evidently, her eyes had been glowing again.

Other techniques she learned had been choke holds, grappling, and just plain old brawling. Once, he had unintentionally connected, hitting her, but she had counter-attacked right into it. Still she had a bit of the old uncoordinated Stormy in her no matter how much of a Power Keeper she became. Hunter had felt terrible swearing he would make it up to her, but she had refused and told him to stop. If she was going to fit in with him, then a few lumps she would more than welcome.

Besides her new Sphinx system had absorbed the pain and healed the bruising so quickly she had barely even noticed it. Since then, she thought she detected he was pulling his punches and not being quite as rough which just pissed her off more than anything.

Hunter looked her over, rubbed his chin, and then nodded to himself as though he had come to some type of decision. “What are the key points of injury?”

“The eyes, nose, throat, ribs, groin, knees, and instep,” she recited from memory.

“Correct. What is the most important thing to remember when engaging in hand to hand with the Wraith?”

Stormy jumped on this one as well. “To not have to. Their touch will take your Life Power and ultimately your life. But if the situation arises, do everything in your power to get away from them quickly for you will only have a few seconds before it is too late.”

Hunter looked at her with pride. “Exactly. No matter what it takes don’t let them catch you. Now, with that being said, one can’t fight beyond their reach without a weapon. It’s time to go see Joseph and see if we can find a Sefu Element for you.”

Stormy was excited and incredibly curious about the Sefu Power Sword and wanted to see how it all worked.

As Stormy and Hunter entered the weapons section again, they saw Joshua over against the back wall near the lit cabinets with the copper containers containing the Elements. They approached his work area which was a large table with gold velvet covering it.

“Good afternoon, Stormy. Are you ready to find your Sefu Element?” Joshua reached over to unlock one of the cabinets and took out one of the copper containers.

“I am.” Stormy said excitedly as Joshua up-ended the container over the table and out slid a silver index finger width rope shaped object. Stormy was fascinated as the surface of it had the appearance of reflective liquid silver. There was no indication there was a head or tail but an even width throughout the entire length. To her surprise, the Element began to slither like a snake across the surface of the velvet on the table. Joshua reached back to the cabinet and emptied two other containers each with an Element within them.

“These three should be the closest to your energy pattern, but may I have your hand to read your energy just to be sure before we proceed?” Joshua asked her.

Feeling no fear at all, but just curiosity and excitement, Stormy

extended her hand. “No problem. Have at it.”

Joshua took her hand in his and then placed his other hand over hers. Closing his eyes, he appeared to concentrate deeply. Stormy didn’t feel anything to the process, but upon opening his eyes, Joshua expressed awe and enchantment with her. She still couldn't comprehend how her plain-Jane-no-one-is-interested-in-her life transformed into this one as full grown men were mesmerized by her.

“Incredible. Thank you, Stormy. These will be the best fit for you. Now we’ll see if they will be drawn to you and bond with you.”

“How does it work?” Stormy asked as she leaned over the table with Hunter, both of them watching the Sefu Elements glide and turn on the table, overlapping each other from time to time and moving back and forth as though they were searching for something.

Joseph looked down at the Elements as well. “We’re not completely sure how they work, but we know they’re drawn to energies or patterns of energy which match their own. Once they find it, they will be drawn to the person and bond through an electrical alignment, so to speak. Once bonded, they can only draw energy for survival from that person and if discarded or the person dies, then the Sefu Element will die.”

“That seems so sad.” She frowned, thinking it was a strange existence but happy she didn’t have to keep it if she didn't want it. Although not wanting the small Element would be sad because it would die unwanted.

Joshua could see why his Khenti was so enthralled with her as he watched her expressions. “The Sefu Element draws very little energy from the one they bond to so it will never affect you, especially since you’re a Power Keeper. In exchange for the care, the Sefu Element receives from you, it has the capability to become any weapon you want, although normally it’s in the form of the Power Sword which is the most effective weapon against the Wraith. If you’re ready, place your hand on the table and we’ll see what we have.”

Stormy nodded, only hesitating for a moment. She really didn't know what to expect but she trusted in these men as Michael would

trust in them with his life. She placed her hand on the table and waited with Joshua and Hunter to see what would happen.

The Elements at first continued their random meanderings on the table. Then one-by-one, they appeared to sense her and began a slow circling of her hand. First one, then another slid across her fingers. Stormy giggled as they were cool to the touch and tickled as they moved across the back of her hand.

Two of the three lost interest and went off to the other end of the table but one remained on her hand, now trying to twine itself between her fingers. She picked up her hand and slowly turned it over as the Element worked its way around her hand. Once in her palm, it curled into a coiling circle and then stopped moving.

"Is it alright?" She looked up at Joshua.

He nodded the affirmative. "Give it a moment. It's finding your energy pattern. Are you sure of this one, Stormy? Once it's bonded to you, it's yours to care for." He finished the last with a serious look.

She stiffened her spine and answered him forcefully. "I'm sure and I wouldn't take this lightly. This is a great responsibility."

Joseph nodded again, taking her at her word. "Yes, it is a great responsibility. You will have to forgive me. I have always been protective of the Sefu Elements and just wanted to be sure you understood it will always depend on you."

Stormy directed her attention back to the Element which had grown warm against her palm and seemed to be matching her body temperature to its own. "I promise, as long as I'm alive it will be with me."

Once she could no longer detect a difference in the temperature, the Sefu Element began to glow slightly. Gentle static passed between them making tiny lightning bolts between her skin and the shiny surface of the Element.

"Wow!" was all she could say.

It took several seconds for the "bond" to complete between her and the Element as it adjusted itself to her energy pattern. When the process was complete, it started its migration across her palm. It wrapped its long length near its midpoint around her middle finger, twisted its two ends down the back of her hand splitting its

direction right at her wrist. It then wrapped the remainder of its two lengths around her wrist and the two ends sealed so it was one continuous circle.

Stormy held out her hand in front of her to see the end result. The Sefu Element had bonded and attached itself to her resulting in a beautiful work of art which resided on her hand and wrist. Although it should seem strange and alien, it felt as if it should have always been there.

The Element continued to glow and after a few seconds grew even brighter drawing energy into itself. Stormy's Element formed a round disk shape where a face on a watch would be and with one last intense bright burst of light it formed a red ruby much like Michael's, but in hers, was imbedded a silver sparkling shape resembling a starburst or snowflake image. Once the final image formed, the glowing slowly faded away leaving the liquid silver smooth and shiny again.

She rubbed her fingertips over the symbol looking to Joshua for an explanation.

"That's the interpretation of your Power Signature from the Sefu Element. Only it can see it. I haven't seen that type of symbol since ancient times. It's the symbol of the Draw. The Draw of the Power." Joshua grasped her hand looking at the Power Signature in awe.

"I've seen this." Hunter and Joshua both looked at her for further information. "In some of the passages of the older scrolls. It's almost like a small watermark and I saw this symbol on several pages. I'm not sure what the words said but Arik was going to get me a transcribed eScroll version so I could do some research in those pages. There are other symbols in some of the other scrolls as well. Perhaps I should have him transcribe some of those too." She mused.

Joshua released her hand and nodded in agreement. "I've seen the symbols myself but I don't think anyone has really thought anything of it. Arik is fairly quick at the transcription so you should have it in no time. In the meantime, let's do some demonstrations with your Element." He turned to Hunter. "If you would be so kind to demonstrate as I explain and make sure you perform the reflex slowly."

Hunter obliged by moving to a good distance so he could be seen in action. He extended his right hand so Stormy could observe his Sefu Element. Like hers, it had the same liquid silver appearance but his Power Signature was a green emerald with a gold bow in the drawn position and an arrow through the center. He appeared to concentrate and slowly flexed his hand back towards his forearm and then positioned his hand as though he was holding a weapon. Stormy watched as his Element began to glow and slowly transform into a sword.

The Power Signature moved from the back of his wrist and formed into the end of the hilt. The rest of the liquid silver flowed into his hand forming the grip of the Power Sword. Once it was formed, the blade quickly extended and transformed so that the shiny silver was on the entire outer edge of the sword blade and a solid diamond-like crystal developed in the middle of the blade. Intricate scrolling was on all of the surfaces of the silver.

"That's amazing. Does it always take that much time or can it be quicker in case you're not expecting something and have to have it ready instantly?" Stormy stepped closer to examine the now fully formed Power Sword.

Joshua moved up beside her and pointed to the sword. "The Power Sword can be instantly formed, yes. At first it will take a little practice and concentration, but in no time you'll be able to do it very quickly."

Hunter slowly reversed the process from Power Sword to wrist Element. He then reformed the Power Sword quicker than the blink of an eye.

Joshua explained the parts of the Power Sword as he pointed out the different sections.

"The portion Hunter is holding is the hilt. It's made up of three sections. The Pommel which is the very end of the hilt where the Power Signature resides; the grip where the hand actually grips the sword; and the guard which helps to protect the hand during battle and can be used to brace against another sword or other weapon and can effectively be used to clock someone in the jaw or the side of the head."

He smiled wickedly at this comment. "The blade also contains

three sections. The tang which is embedded in the hilt, the fuller which is the majority or main section of the blade, and the tip which is naturally at the very end and used for stabbing."

Hunter reflexed his Power Sword back to its Element form. "She's a fast learner. I would suggest letting her reflex it before ending the day of training to see what she's got."

"Alright. Stormy, are you up for it?" She nodded in the affirmative. Joshua positioned himself behind her and held her arm up in the extended position.

"Repeat the hand positions that Hunter did and concentrate on the image of a sword. As you do that, focus the image towards the Element and direct your energy to it. It may or may not work the first time as this is new to both you and the Element. Since it has just bonded with you it may take time for it to learn how to harness the energy and change its structure. So don't be disappointed. You'll get it."

Stormy was sure she could do it. Michael had already shown her how to gather and direct the Life Power, so it was just a matter of how much and she supposed in what form as it might need to be modified for the small Element. She took a deep breath, mentally preparing herself and centering her concentration on the steps.

First, she concentrated on the image of a Power Sword. In her mind, she saw it much like Hunters' but more to her size and with her Power Signature on it. Next, she concentrated on the Life Power and how it flowed within her, gently directing it to the Element. Finally, she reflexed her hand back putting pressure on the Element and then holding her hand as if she already had a sword in it.

She concentrated hard, worrying that nothing was happening, but finally the Element began to glow. She felt a sensation like static electricity around the Element and then a sliding movement along her wrist and hand.

The Element released its grip on her wrist pulling energy with it and at first just formed the hilt with the three appropriate sections. Then slightly quicker it extended, silver on the outside edges and tip and the diamond-like center of the blade. Intricate scrolling covered the silver portions much like Hunters'.

Amazing!

Suddenly she stood there with a fully formed Power Sword. It wasn't as heavy as she thought it would be, but quite light. It also wasn't cold like metals could be and still retained the heat of her body. She brought her other hand to the hilt, grasping it with both hands and doing an experimental figure eight in front of her. She glanced up at Joshua and Hunter knowing she had a silly school girl look on her face.

Joshua looked at her with pride. "Quite impressive for your first try. A lot of young Warriors, back in the day, couldn't even do it the first time, if even several times after that, and not even as intricate as yours. Now reflex it back to it Element form."

With Joshua's next set of instructions Stormy removed her other hand from the hilt. She rolled her hand so the flat side of the blade was parallel with the ground and pressed down. At the same time, she pulled energy from the Power Sword drawing it back up her arm. The Element quickly complied by starting to glow again. The blade of the Sword un-formed and retracted back toward the hilt where it disappeared. The hilt then changed back into the rope-like structure of the Sefu Element while still retaining the Power Signature. It re-positioned itself around her middle finger, across the back of her hand, and around her wrist. The glowing stopped and the Sefu Element was complete again.

"That was even quicker. Very good." Joshua nodded again in approval. "That's enough for today. Both you and your Element need to rest. Be back early tomorrow and we'll start your sword training."

"Thank you, Joshua. Hunter. See you tomorrow." As much as she enjoyed the training, Stormy was glad to be done early for the day. She headed for the main elevators so she could see if Michael was perhaps in their quarters or not. Hard to say as he was so busy these days with war planning, getting the Complex reset for the next season of Wraith fighting, and not to mention, finding the person that was screwing with the population.

She reached the Warrior's Quarters fairly quickly. She waved "hi" to Ethan who was heading for the video games as usual, snagged an apple from a handful Caleb was carrying to the same said gaming session, and laughed at Raven as he checked her out on the stairs.

She rolled her eyes at him and took a big bite of apple. The rest of the quarters was quiet. Quieter than usual with an underlying tension.

Working her way quickly down the hallway of the second landing, she reached Michael and her rooms. She paused for a moment as the energy she had felt downstairs was even stronger and appeared to be emanating from their room. She entered the room, shutting the door behind her and found nothing amiss. At least nothing other than the fact that Michael was actually present in their room. Usually he wasn't available this time of day. Come to think of it, none of the Warriors were usually in the rooms this time of day.

Michael was sitting on the edge of the circular satin draped bed, his shoulders were slumped forward and waves of tension rolled off his body. His elbows were on his knees, hands lax at the end of his wrists, and his head drooped down with his eyes closed. Stormy slowly approached, sensing something was not quite right on many levels.

"Michael?" She asked, but he didn't move, didn't even twitch.

She placed her apple on the table and glided up closer to him. Unsure as what to do, she stopped right before him reaching out for his shoulder. Had he fallen asleep sitting up?

Unexpectedly and quicker than lightening, his right arm snaked out reaching behind her and yanking her forward, her legs trapped between his, her body pressed up against his. Michael's other hand grasped her hip and he pressed his face into her abdomen as his position put him at the perfect level. She heard him inhale deeply.

"You smell like them." he growled. "You should smell only like me."

"Excuse me?" she got out, before he reached with his left hand and yanked her shirt loose from her pants twisting it in his hand and lifting it so her entire abdomen was exposed. He placed his face against her stomach again and inhaled a second time. She swore she heard purring and then he proceeded to rub the side of his head and face against her. He placed a kiss right above her navel. Stormy's heart rate raced right through the roof.

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“Mmmm. Much better.” Now that the shirt was out of the way where the other Warriors had touched her during her training and only her bare skin was against him, he could smell only her. Yes, much better being able to smell the sweet vanilla scent that was only her.

The day had been hard enough with all of the usual tedium, then his sister, then the damn Gate. Then to top it off, his Sphinx had sensed her coming up the stairs and had smelled other males on her. It had gone crazy, growling and scratching in the back of his mind.

The damn Joining was taking over his mind as if he didn't have enough to worry about. But now, just the feel of her in his arms was worth the internal battle he had gone through to maintain his position on the bed and not grab her the instant she came through the door. It wasn't his fault she came up to him. Her decision.

Now that he had her in his arms, he was going to take advantage of it especially since his day had basically sucked and he needed something for himself. A little enjoyment never hurt anyone. He continued to kiss across her abdomen. So soft, smooth, yet firm from her work-outs, and sweet smelling. He slid his tongue across her skin and dipped it into her belly button.

Stormy gasped, grasping his hair and throwing her head back. His arm tightened around her holding her even closer. He worked his kisses up her stomach wanting to tease her, so she would moan for him. Moving to the underside of her breast, he nipped the soft firm flesh.

It was just not enough. With a quick lift and roll, she was on her back and on the bed with Michael pinning her down. He continued to explore upward from the bottom of her breast to the pink nipple. He grasped it gently with his teeth, nipping, sucking, licking, swirling around it with his tongue. He slid higher, nipping at her shoulder, her neck, behind her ear.

Michael couldn't wait any longer; he had to have a taste of that soft, sweet mouth. And when he did, it was life shattering. The joining of their lips was like fire and lightening all at once. She was willing, parting her lips, as he was, sinking his tongue into the moist depths.

Even more earth shattering, her energies swirled up around them both. Around him, through him, into the passionate depths of him. He groaned, using the hand at the base of her back to draw her hips into his. Grinding hard, needing more, wanting to find the ultimate release.

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Stormy couldn't get enough. She wasn't sure when Michael would come to his senses as he always did, but at the moment she was going to take advantage of this bonus. Her hands pulled his shirt loose finding his smooth hard abs, running her fingers over the defined muscles. She managed to get a leg loose and wrapped it around Michael's to help get him even more firmly seated against her hot core and to grind with him even harder. Her energies swirled around them and into Michael. In response, he groaned and then his Life Power responded in return sensually charging through her system. Her breathing became faster. She wanted more.

She slid her hand down Michael's stomach, feeling his muscles tense as she brushed across them. Her nimble fingers found his buckle and she had it undone in a split second which loosened the band of his pants. She ran her fingers under the band, sliding from the side of his hip towards the front. Michael stopped his hard grinding, rolling slightly to the side obliging her exploration.

She wondered if he was even aware of what he was doing, but didn't really care as long as she could take advantage of it. She worked her way down the front and, ah yes, found the goal. He was hard, firm, and oh God, long. Her hand closed around the smooth firm head of his cock. Michael almost came off the bed with the stimulation but repositioned himself closer to her as he wanted more.

She could feel the liquid pearls coming from the tip of his erection. She ran her thumb in a circle around the head, smoothing it down the shaft that she had deftly worked from his pants. As one hand had kept him distracted, the other had undone the buttons of his fatigues. As Michael was pushing his tongue in and out of her mouth, she was stroking her hand up and down his slick length.

Deeper, faster. If he was only inside her. She wrapped her legs tighter around him bringing her core closer to his cock, rubbing it

against her. Even though she was still fully clothed on the lower half, the friction was still intense. *God it felt so good.*

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Michael was in heaven... or hell. He wasn't sure which. But he had never felt this good. He knew he needed to stop, but damn, she was a talent with her hand. Squeezing, stroking, driving him insane. He pumped harder into her, gripping her hip with one hand, touching her everywhere with the other. More, was all he wanted.

He was coming to the edge and if he didn't stop now he would make a mess over both of them. It wouldn't take much more to make him come completely undone, especially with Stormy's energies spilling into him and his swirling into her.

He broke the kiss as she tried to get even closer to him for more. He shuddered, grasping her hand to stop her. One more stroke and it would all be over with. Ancients, how he wanted to come with every fiber of his being, but not now. Not like this. It would be at a time that he could give her everything not just take advantage of her. Would there ever be a time like that? She opened her eyes looking at him with a disappointed expression.

He knew she wanted to continue and he so very much wanted to see her come undone. He sighed and gently removed her hand. Not wanting Stormy to think he was rejecting her, he renewed the kiss, taking it deep and then slowly bringing them back to earth again. Their energies withdrew from each other and once he was sure she was back on solid ground again, he ended the kiss.

He looked into her eyes and placed a kiss on her forehead. "Angel, we have to stop. As much as I would love to, it's just not the time. And I have some news to share."

Stormy nodded and they both moved back to the edge of the bed, each of them straightening their clothes. When they had mostly physically and mentally put themselves back together, Michael turned to her taking her hand in his.

"The Gate is expected to open tonight."

She gasped and turned a concerned expression his way. "That's why the Warriors are here and Hunter and Joshua told me to leave early."

"Yes. Ethan saw the Gate peak on his computers, but all of us felt

it shift. We're going to have to go to the Staging Cave to wait and see what the status is and worst case, if any Wraith emerge. The first time the Gate goes active is the worst until we know at what level we're going to have to fight."

He stood, pacing and running his hands through his hair. With his back to her he said quietly, "We need you to transfer the Life Power to us, Stormy. We have never been this low before. Even with what we can draw into ourselves it just won't be enough to start this mess again." He sighed heavily.

How could he put her through this? To take on this kind of responsibility when she was not born into it. Could he handle it? Could his Sphinx handle it knowing these men, even though they were his closest friends, his Warriors in battle, would be touching his Power Mate even though he couldn't claim her for himself?

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Stormy sensed he was upset. Not just about the Gate opening and evidently the upcoming battle, but about the fact she would have to start her duties as a Power Keeper. That he would have to share her with others even though he always tried to convince her he couldn't keep her as his. Her heart warmed to the fact that even though he talked of not being able to claim her as his own, he was actually bothered by it. She got up and walked quietly over to where he stood his body rigid, his shoulders tense. She placed a hand on his strong broad shoulder.

"I'm more than willing to help you and your Warriors. I know this is a serious duty and I'll do the best I can for all of you. I just hope it's enough. I don't want anything to happen to any of you. Tell me what you need."

He spun to her, taking her in his arms. Holding her close. Resting his chin on her hair. "I need you. I need you to be strong. I need you to survive. I need you to trust me. If I get a little crazy with all of this, try and understand. I wish I could explain, but damn it, you'll just have to trust me."

"I do trust you." And she meant it. They barely knew each other and their first meeting had definitely not been under the best of circumstances. Together, they had been thrown into this craziness. But God help her, she did trust him with her very life. He had saved

her before; he would always save her.

"Damn, if I know why you do, but I'll take it, angel." He kissed her forehead, spun her around, and slapped her on the butt with a bit of a push.

"Get something to eat, clean up from your training, and then go see my sister who's driving me crazy. You can visit with her while you wait for me to come get you later for the.... Power Transfer." He slightly stuttered on the last.

She could tell he wasn't comfortable with it, but what could they do. She walked over to the table with the tray of food she had initially missed and watched him stride over to the door. He turned back to her as he opened the door and looked into her eyes one more time trying to give her a smile even with all of his worries still written on his face. She gave him a tentative smile back in return. Tonight was going to be a rough one on all accounts.

Chapter Nine

She was worried about him. She had eaten her food not really tasting it, showered without really noticing if she had even washed her hair properly and now was working her way to the Medical Section to hang out with Alexandria with Michael still on her mind. Something was really bothering him. Not just the fact she had to juice them up or that they were going into battle, but something even beyond that. He looked at her at times as if he was regretting something. Could it be the fact he regretted having anything personal to do with her? The man was just so confusing. And she was so close to making progress with him.

As she reached the doors of the Medical Section and opened them she found Joshua and Alexandria in a heated discussion.

Joshua, who was pulling his fingers through his long strawberry blond hair, barked at Alexandria, “Fuck woman. Your brother just told you to stop this nonsense and I catch you doing this again. Are you trying to kill yourself? Look at you, your pale as a ghost, ready to fall down.” Even with the barrage of Joshua's temper, Alexandria was standing her ground, her chin up and dark blue eyes sparkling with stubbornness.

Joshua spied Stormy, flung his hands into the air and said in exasperation as he stomped off, “You try and talk some sense into her. I can't deal with this right now.” Out the doors he went, slamming them behind him.

Stormy turned back to Alexandria. “Wow, I guess I missed something there.” Alexandria glanced up at her and then suddenly turned pale as a ghost as Joshua had described. She started to slide towards the floor. Stormy sprinted the short distance, surprising herself at how quickly she could cross the distance and grabbed Alexandria, steadying her.

As she grabbed her arm, she could sense it. Weakness, a need for Life Power. An impulse that even Stormy didn’t understand raced down her spine. The Life Power charged from her surroundings

spiraling through her body and into Alexandria.

Color was instantly restored to Alexandria's features. Her back stiffened, she rebalanced herself, and quickly pushed away from Stormy. “I’m sorry I shouldn't have done that, didn't think I could even do it anymore. I shouldn't have drawn Life Power through you in that way. Are you alright?”

“I don't know if you did draw it from me.” Stormy responded quickly, “I sensed you needed it and I think I pushed it to you. I’m fine. Are you alright? And what did Joshua mean you were doing something that you weren't supposed to be doing.”

“Yes, I'm fine.” Alexandria said, rolling her eyes. She had a stubborn look to her eyes again. “I had a very sick baby brought in today. We were trying everything for her, but we just couldn't get her stabilized. She was failing fast and I couldn't stand by and not do anything. I figured, she’s so small, and I just used a bit of Power Healing. I figured it shouldn't tap me too bad, but I guess I just don't have much of the ability left at all.” Alexandria's shoulders slumped in dejection.

Stormy grabbed her slight friend and gave her a hug. She stepped back, looking at her. “But look at what we just did. It has to mean something. I’m not sure what it means that I can transfer Life Power to you, but it could be to our benefit. If I can feed it to you as you use it to heal, then technically you’re not draining your own Power but using a source.”

“Yes. I read something about this in the older eScrolls. I hope you don't mind, but Arik dropped off the eScroll transcriptions of the older scrolls you had asked him to translate. He didn't have a chance to come see you himself, so I told him I would give them too you. I couldn't resist and took a peak. I hope you don't mind?” Alexandria asked hesitantly.

“Don't be silly. It will be nice to have someone to talk with about what I have been finding. Besides I’m just stuck right now waiting on Michael to come get me for the Transfer. I'm nervous about it. What to expect. I hope I can come through for them. They need me and I can't fail.” Stormy sighed, shaking her head. Only able to think of the danger Michael and the Warriors would be going into shortly.

Alexandria took her hand and squeezed it. “You’ll do fine. I know you will. You'll see. Right now, you just need a distraction. Would you like to go through the eScrolls?”

“Yes, I would love too.” While Stormy was setting up the eScrolls, Alexandria went to a kitchenette they had set up for breaks. She came back with some hot cinnamon flavored tea for both of them. They blew at the steaming liquid while reading through the electronic pages.

Pointing at the border of one of those pages, Stormy commented, “Look, there it is again.”

Alexandria looked to where she was pointing, squinting her eyes at the faint water mark. “What is it?”

“The same water markings I have seen in the other eScrolls and hard copies. This one looks like mine.” She moved her finger to a marking farther up the page that looked like her Power Signature, part shining starburst, part snowflake. “And there are other ones as well. I think they’re all Power Signatures, but none I have seen on any of the Warriors. Unless they were Warriors who had died in the past.”

“Yes, I see.” Alexandria advanced the pages pointing out other markings. “I wonder what the significance is. You know, if the Power Signature like yours also came from a female, perhaps they aren’t Power Signatures of Warriors but of Priestesses. Or even other classes of Sphinx or Egyptian who existed in the ancient days.”

Stormy nodded her head in the affirmative and sipped from her now cooled tea. “I agree with the female thought. Didn't you say the Priestesses were quite powerful in their own right?”

“Absolutely.” Alexandria replied enthusiastically. “The Priestesses were trained just like the Warriors in fighting skills. They didn’t fight the actual battles, but could direct away negative energies that came from the Wraith, jump gates when we had multiple areas to protect. They could even stabilize a failing Gate so the Warriors didn’t become trapped. Each Priestess had her own gifts and Powers. They could also transfer Life Power when needed, when a Power Mate wasn’t available to a Warrior, or a Power Keeper wasn’t readily available. They were an honored caste in our

community."

"Do you have them now?" Stormy asked.

"No, unfortunately not. Like the Warriors, they were lost in battles during Gate jumping. We lost the last of them fairly recently, at least in our life years. They gave up their lives for the remaining Warriors when one of the larger Dimensional Gates collapsed." Alexandria sadly looked in her now empty cup of tea. "One of them was a close friend to our family. And to one of our Warriors."

"I'm sorry. It must be hard to watch so many loved ones die for a battle that seems to have no end." Stormy examined the eScrolls again more determined than ever to decode whatever hidden secrets were within them to help save her new family. If Dimensional Gates in the past had been destroyed, then there was a way to do it again somewhere in there.

"I want to look at a new approach to these eScrolls. We have been so focused on the Warriors and their actions, but perhaps we should look at what the Priestesses did as well. There has to be something there."

"You could be right, Stormy." Alexandria began but was interrupted by the door to the Clinic opening and Guardian Arik entering. Both women turned toward him and Stormy's heart rate shot up as her nerves kicked in.

Arik's expression, in itself, said it all. The time had come and it was a dire situation that the Warriors would be going into. He was fully decked out in battle gear. Arik was wearing the same black battle boots, military fatigue pants, and shirt the Warriors wore. On top of his clothes he had on a full vest that appeared to be made up of tiny linked chain-mail. His forearms were incased in black guards and his hands in black gloves with the knuckles and backs of his hands incased in the same chain-mail. Across his back were two crossed swords in scabbards and wicked looking throwing stars and knives strategically placed around his waist in a weapons belt.

Stormy stood up from her perched position on one of the medical stools bracing for whatever was coming. Quietly she said, "It's time." A statement, not a question. She was surprised Michael hadn't come for her.

Regretfully, Arik nodded in the affirmative. "Yes, the Warriors

are preparing and will meet us in the Garden Dome. Michael decided that will be the place of Transference. He chose well. I'll escort you down there." Arik spoke to Alexandria. "Bring the staff and anything you need to the Trauma Cell."

She gave a thumbs-up, putting on her doctor's expression. The only way Alexandria knew how to handle the situation. Become the doc.

"We're already prepared and will activate now. If she's up to it, I could really use Stormy to assist me when she's done with the Transference."

"Done." A stiff nod from Arik. He turned to Stormy and she started towards him. He held the door open for her and accompanied her out into the hallway and down the corridors to the main Elevator bank.

"I thought you were only observers and recorders as Guardians of the Warriors?" She nervously asked. Stormy's heart rate continued to increase, her breathing, her whole nervous system ramping up for what was about to occur. Transfer of Life Power, battles against Wraith. Who would be injured, who would die? Would the Wraith escape to destroy their world? Oh God, it was just too much.

Arik stopped her at the elevator banks, punching the access to go to the Garden Dome. "Breath, Stormy. This is our way of life, nothing new. We'll get you through this. Trust me. Michael won't let anything happen to you.

She crookedly smiled up at him. "I know. It's just so weird. I feel like I should be doing something more. And I'm nervous about the Transference." The elevator arrived and they both stepped into its cool interior. Arik punched level six, the doors closed, and they began the swift descent.

"Just being our Power Keeper and transferring Life Power to the Warriors is the greatest thing you could ever do for us, Stormy." Arik smiled at her.

Pointing at his own chest, Arik continued, "And yes, this is what we now give to the Warriors to help support them. We used to just observe and document, but with so few of them and plenty of Guardians, a new class was formed. Guardians Elite. We took a vow

to fight along-side of the Warriors. In order to earn the honor, we must pass the training the Warriors must pass. It's not easy as we don't have the Powers the Sphinx Warriors have, but we do have the weapons and fighting skills that make us just as deadly." He patted his weapons belt with a glint of death in his eyes.

The elevator stopped and Stormy took a deep breath. *It's now or never woman. Get a grip. They need you.* She hesitated but a moment, stiffened her spine, gave herself a mental kick in the butt and followed Arik out of the elevator and through the double set of doors to the Garden Dome. As they were making their way down the path which led through the beauty of the Dome and down to the open field, she could see what awaited her. It was quite awe inspiring and nerve wracking at the same time.

Men were standing everywhere in the field, fully decked-out in their battle finery. All of them, both Sphinx Warriors and the Guardians Elite were in the black battle garments with the same black chain vests, forearm guards, and weapons belts. The Guardians Elite all had dual swords across their back. Not so for the Warriors, but Stormy knew that their deadly weapon awaited in their Sefu Elements to reflex into a Power Sword within the blink of an eye.

The Guardians Elite were scattered around the Warriors, seemingly standing by for their mission. The Warriors were in a loose circle facing each other. Michael was slightly shifted out away from the rest, steely eyes resting on his men, his body tense, his fists rhythmically opening and closing repeatedly. In fact, all of the men looked tense, wired, and ready to explode into action at any moment.

The Warriors quickly sensed her presence, all of their eyes aligning on her. Michael's were the only eyes she truly sought out. He didn't disappoint as his eyes hungrily fastened on to her, literally claiming every inch of her. She could almost hear "Mine!" as if their minds were linked. His eyes were intense, demanding she only see him. What had she gotten herself into?

Arik led her to the center of the circle facing her away from Michael and then stepped back. Although she couldn't see him, she could sense Michael very clearly. She could feel the energy and

tension roll off him as he approached close behind her. His hands captured her long braid and then he undid the clip holding her hair. He slowly unbraided her hair in front of all of the Warriors, the Guardians, all of them watching.

She didn't know if she should be self-conscious, nervous, excited, or a combination of all three. Michael ran his hands through her now unbraided hair. He brushed it out of his way as the gentle breeze blew the loose strands around her shoulders and put his lips very near her ear. She could hear a low growl coming from him and she glanced back at his handsome face seeing that his eyes were glowing slightly. He continued to run his fingers through her hair repeatedly as though to settle her or perhaps himself.

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Arik slowly approached. "Khenti Michael if you're ready. Time is of the essence." He pointedly finished, bringing to Michael's attention that if they were going to do the Power Transference, the time was now.

Michael closed his eyes for a moment. He had to get a grip on his Sphinx if they were going to complete the Transference and they had to. There wasn't a choice in the matter for Stormy or any of them. He shouldn't be this upset as he had told himself time and again that he couldn't claim her anyway. Damn it all to hell. With every bit of his self-control, he pushed his Sphinx back down to a low boil. *Save it for the Wraith, boy*. The growling of his Sphinx ceased. At least for now.

Michael closed the remaining gap with Stormy as he brought the front of his body up against her back supporting her. He ran his right hand up under her hair cupping the back of her neck and placing his left hand on her hip. Part of the hold was for monitoring her energy levels, the other was simply a show to his men to not get carried away during the Transference. As he knew it could be quite stimulating, especially with Stormy. His mouth was near her ear again and he opened his steely eyes looking at his men.

He spoke softly in her ear, his breath brushing across it and causing her to shiver against him. "Do just what you did the other day. The same forearm to forearm grip, the same drawing of the Life Power from the environment, the wind, the water, the earth,

the animals, the plants, everything. Once you feel you have enough, open up a channel and direct it into each of the Warriors. They'll know when to disengage. I'll be monitoring your Life Force to make sure we're not over-tasking you. And for Ancient's sake angel, try and control the level you direct. I would hate to have to pummel one of my men for not being able to control himself."

Michael saw Stormy blush prettily at the reference to their time together in the field when she had inadvertently made both of them hot. "Uh, yeah, I'll do my best." She stammered.

"Will you go first?"

"No. My Warriors first. It's just my way." He looked over to Raven. "Raven. You're up and I would suggest behaving. I would hate for you to miss the first battle of the season because I kicked your ass."

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"Of course, Khenti." Raven sardonically replied. As much of an asshole he could appear to be, she could tell he did have respect for Michael and his fellow Warriors. He just couldn't resist poking at everyone to keep them on their toes evidently.

He sauntered over to stand right before Stormy, put on one of his "winning the women" smiles and purred. "Ready to get it on, Power Keeper." And there went the eyebrows.

Which of course got a rise out of Michael. Stormy heard him growl low and deep.

"Raven, I'm warning you."

Raven gave an exaggerated sigh. "Oh, all right. No more foreplay."

Stormy watched Raven closely and knew he was ready when his expression became serious. He slowly extended his arms towards her. She could feel the slight tension in Michael as he was pressed so close against her and hoped he would hold through all of this. She extended her arms as well. Raven grasped underneath her arms close to her elbows and she grabbed onto the top of his forearms. Her arms were much shorter, so she didn't have quite the reach down the length of his arms.

Raven watched her with his blue eyes and bowed his head briefly. "Power Keeper, I, Raven, marked by Infinity and called in the old

tongue, Khaldin, do ask for the gift of Life Power. May the Transference make me whole and give me the strength for the battle to come."

It must be part of a ceremonial practice, Stormy wondered, but didn't ask at this point. She would need to concentrate on her task and would save her questions for later.

Michael's breath brushed against her ear again raising goose bumps along her skin as he spoke, "Now Stormy, draw the Life Power in. I'll let you know when to transfer." Michael adjusted his grip just a bit on the back of her neck and placed a kiss behind her ear.

She concentrated on the life around her, the breeze, the sound of the water in the distance coming from the water fall, the chirping of the birds fluttering amid the plants, the very Life Power dwelling everywhere. She felt all of this and drew it to her. Like slowly flowing water, it made its way to her, lapping at her feet, gathering, pooling around her ankles.

The energy continued to flow up her legs, over her hips, across her abdomen, up her chest making her heart beat just a little faster. It moved all the way through her body to the top of her head and even down through her arms into her hands. Her skin started sparkling with a slight glow making her golden skin even richer.

"You're doing well, angel." Michael was so close to her it took little effort to hear his deep quiet voice. "Now slowly, and I do mean slowly, release the energy and Transfer it to Raven. You'll know when he has enough as his eyes will start to glow initially. Can you do that?"

She nodded the affirmative and concentrated on the contact between her hands and Raven's arms and his hands and her arms. He seemed a bit tense. Perhaps this hadn't gone well in the past? She was determined to make this work with no harm to anyone if that was what he was worried about. Looking for the conduit between them and finding it, she gently opened the smallest, gentlest of flows of Life Power directing it through her hands and into Raven.

Raven gasped, his knees almost buckling, his eyes closing. Stormy panicked and went to close the flow of energy afraid she was

hurting him.

"No! Don't stop. It's just that I have not felt the Life Power this strong and pure in such ages. I had forgotten. Please." He implored.

If she didn't know better, she swore she could see tears in his eyes. But not the Warrior Raven, never to show his true emotions he finished with, "Damn woman, don't hold back on me now." His voice betraying him just a bit but he still managed a smirk at Michael.

Luckily, Michael didn't rise to the bait and appeared to be completely concentrating on her, his grip on her hip strong and sure, letting her know he was there with her all the way.

Stormy widened out the flow to a steady stream giving as much as she thought Raven could take. He once again closed his eyes appearing to be taking great pleasure from the rush of the energy flowing into him. It didn't take long for her to detect a feedback of energy. Raven opened his eyes, which were now glowing gently.

Michael rubbed the back of Stormy's neck. "He's good, Stormy. Draw the Life Force down and disengage from him, like I showed you before. You can do it and if you need more energy take a slight break and draw in more."

She did as he asked, ending the Transfer and removing her grip from Raven.

Raven stepped back, placing his hand over his heart. "Power Keeper, I, Raven, thank thee with the utmost gratitude for the gift of the Life Power that you have bestowed upon me. I pledge my Life and Power Sword in the defense of my Power Keeper, my people, and this world from the evil of the Wraith."

He had respect in his eyes for her and bowed deeply. Of course, being Raven, he couldn't resist and put out one last comment with a glittering amusement in his eyes.

"Looking forward to our next Transference together." And there it was, the wag of the eyebrows. Stormy just shook her head and heard Michael sigh near her ear.

"You're truly incorrigible, Raven." She laughed.

Over her shoulder, Michael indicated the next Warrior to step forward.

Joshua was next and he stepped forward in front of her grasping

her arms as she did his in the Transference hold and met her eyes with his strange silver ones. “Power Keeper, I, Joshua, marked by the Wolf and called in the old tongue, Khel, do ask for the gift of Life Power. May the Transference make me whole and give me strength for the battle to come.”

Once again, Stormy was amazed by the dedication and ceremony of these men. She began the Transference process again, drawing more energy into herself and then when she was ready opened the conduit and started the flow.

Joshua was better prepared for the Transference than Raven had been seeing the reaction from him but still was obviously affected by it. “By the Ancients. It’s incredible. I had forgotten how intense this can be.” He took a deep breath and sent an apologetic look to Michael.

“I'm good Joshua. We all know how this affects us with the Transference of Power. It’s a part of our physical being.” Michael brushed his hand up and then back down Stormy's side to her hip.

Stormy suddenly realized what Joshua and Michael were referring too. She remembered the reaction Michael had when her release of Life Power had run freely through him. She was controlling it now, but it sounded like it would still cause a reaction within the Warriors.

Just great. Revved up Warriors with nowhere to take it but to battle. No wonder they could be so vicious. And no wonder Michael seemed so possessive always maintaining close contact with her.

She continued on with the Transference monitoring for the feedback. It didn’t take long and as soon as she detected it, she closed the flow of Life Power. As Raven had, Joshua moved back, repeated the ceremonial vow, and took his place back in the circle.

After Joshua, came Ethan with his gold brown eyes, marked by the Eagle and called in the old tongue, Akhom. Next was Hunter with his green eyes, marked by a Bow and Arrow and called in the old tongue, Gahiji. Finally, the youngest, Caleb, with eyes of lavender, who was marked by the Panther, called in the old tongue, Mdjai. Each of them grasped her arms, went through the Transference, and always used the ceremonial statements before and after showing her gentleness and respect. Stormy was quite

proud of Caleb. He managed the Transference just as well as anyone else, even though he was the youngest.

Michael quietly murmured in her ear. “Don't be fooled. He may be the youngest but he is still ancient and is quite the ladies’ man. And just as deadly as the rest of us. So don't think of playing momma for him.” He nipped her ear.

Stormy jumped and let out a giggle. In the midst of the seriousness of the occasion, all of them still kept up the light banter to ease each other. She liked this. They were a close group. A family that would protect each other to the death if needed.

One Warrior had not come forward, Jacob who was still in the circle. He tentatively approached her and then paused looking at Michael as if seeking something. Joshua didn’t reach out and touch her for some reason, so she initiated reaching towards him. His eyes became panicked and he quickly moved back out of her reach. She dropped her arms back down trying not to look hurt but not understanding what she might have done wrong.

“It’s alright, Stormy.” Michael tried to reassure her. “He would accept the Transference from you if he could. There is a special circumstance with him. I can explain later and you don't have to worry. He’s able to draw plenty of Life Power to himself.”

By Jacob’s expression, Stormy could see he was grateful for Michael's intervention. He gave her an apologetic look. “Power Keeper, I, Jacob, marked by the King's Chess Piece, and called in the old tongue, Kamenwati would ask for the gift of Life Power if I could. I am whole and will give every bit of my strength for the battle to come. I thank thee for the gift of the Life Power that you give to my brother Warriors and my Khenti. I pledge my Life and Power Sword to the defense of my Power Keeper, my people, and this world from the evil of the Wraith.”

Jacob took several more steps back from Stormy. He suddenly reflexed his Power Sword, raising it vertically and bringing the hilt to his forehead. He dropped to one knee in respect of her. Stormy was beyond words, she didn’t know what to say. She had given Jacob nothing, but he was willing to give his life for her. Just as quickly, the other Warriors repeated the reflexing and all dropped to their knees as well. She felt honored, yet humbled at the same

time.

"Please get up. You honor me beyond words that I can even express. You're the ones who are great and I'm blessed to be able to give you this gift. I wish I could do more." Stormy focused on each Warrior trying to express what she felt beyond words as she didn't know what else to say. Michael massaged her neck, as usual being there for her.

One by one, the Warriors came back to their feet reflexing their Power Swords back into their Sefu Elements. Jacob took his place back among the other Warriors in the circle. Behind her, Michael's breathing changed, becoming deeper, quicker. It was his time for the Transference. Her own breathing and heart rate fired up. She shivered in anticipation as she was sure this was going to be incredible.

Michael moved around her, temporarily removing his hands from the back of her neck and her hip. He circled her, stalking her as if he was hunting her. Finally, he stopped in front of her but didn't quite touch her. Stormy wasn't sure what to expect from him, but stood breathlessly waiting. He looked at her with such intensity and hunger she felt like she was falling into his dark blue eyes. She reached out to initiate the Transference grip but Michael would have none of that. Evading her initial touch, he reached out capturing her at her lower back and pulled her up hard against him. He entrapped her hands, palm down, against his chest. His other hand burrowed back up under her hair massaging the nape of her neck. She liked this hold so much better.

Wanting to begin the Transference to him, Stormy wished he would get on with his pledge. Michael didn't disappoint focusing in only on her. His pledge was for her and her alone.

"Beloved Power Keeper, I, Michael, Khenti of the Sphinx Warriors, marked by the Crown of Leaders, and called in the old tongue, Kambythet ask for the gift of Life Power. May my Beloved's Transference make me whole and give me strength for the battle to come."

Surrounded by the Warriors in their circle, Stormy heard them whispering in the background. She couldn't make out what they were saying but there was something special in what Michael was

trying to tell her. The voices around her faded away as she became aware of Michael's physical reaction to her.

Stormy could feel Michael shaking, every inch of him tense. His control was immense. She suspected his inner Sphinx was ready to pounce but he was disciplined enough to not let himself completely go. Why did he do that, hold himself back? It was a wonder he didn't hurt himself. His words were spoken with such gentleness though, asking her for what he needed with every inch of his being. How could she not give him the gift of the Life Power? And she would without having to worry about holding anything back with him.

She reached out around her, into and out to every tiny space in the Garden Dome, calling to the Life Power. Reaching to the water fall, the air, the birds, the trees, the grass, the living, breathing pulse around her. She could feel it flow and pour into her body from the tips of her toes, to the top of her head. That pulsing, throbbing, beating energy glittered across her skin ready to explode within her. Michael's heart beat sped up beneath her fingers which were still resting against his strong muscled chest. He pulled her even closer against him as if to try and absorb her very being into himself.

Reaching out again, but this time to her Michael, she found the connection, aligning the conduit to him that the Life Power would flow through. With a deep breath she released it into him holding nothing back. He threw his head back, groaned, and shifted his hand from the nape of her neck into her hair, gripping it as if to hold on for dear life. With every wave of Life Power she pushed into him, she could sense his energy climb to new heights. He looked like a man trying to hide the fact he was in the throes of ecstasy. Closing his eyes, he rested his forehead against hers.

Stormy couldn't believe the amount of Power flowing through her and the reaction she could induce in him. His lips were so close all she wanted was to be able to taste him and enjoy the hard body which was against hers, so obviously enjoying what she was doing to him.

As though reading her thoughts, Michael claimed her lips. His energy surrounded her and she felt the Life Power humming through his veins. Michael's lips against hers were firm and

demanding and his hands had developed a mind of their own. She could feel his right hand play in her long hair while his left deftly pulled her shirt loose and started a journey of discovery over her soft skin.

Just as he furthered the depth of his kiss and she was more than ready to have him plunder the soft depths of her mouth, a very loud and direct clearing of throats shocked her back to where they were. She had been so completely lost in the incredibly seductive web Michael had been weaving she had forgotten they were in the middle of a Transference Ceremony. And he had been incredible at it too. She hadn't had to worry about how she affected him in that special way, but had been able to be herself and open up completely to him on so many levels.

Coming back to herself, Stormy blushed from head to toe as she noticed the position she was in. Michael had been openly seducing her in front of the other Warriors. She had wanted to give Michael the best Transference to reward him for the care and patience he showed her but didn't realize she could so quickly bring him to this heightened level. Luckily, as soon as she had felt the feedback she had started to close the conduit, even though she didn't want to.

Who knows how far Michael would have taken it had she continued on with her special Transference with him. She wasn't sure how he was going to proceed now but he peeked down at her and simply smiled. He took her hand in his, kissing it and placing it over his heart. "I thank thee for the gift of the Life Power. I pledge my Life and my Power Sword to the defense of my Beloved Power Keeper, my people, and this world from the evil of the Wraith." He gazed into her eyes and face as if trying to memorize her every feature.

"Khenti, we're out of time. The Gate is opening and the signal is huge." Guardian Arik urged as he checked the handheld device he had been monitoring.

Michael glanced at the readout of the device Arik held. He gave one last squeeze to Stormy's hand before releasing her. "Arik, take Stormy to Alexandria in the Trauma Cell. Make sure they're locked in tight. I don't want to have to worry about the possibility of the Wraith catching wind of her or anyone else for that matter in there."

He looked back at Stormy, “Be safe, angel.” Then to his men. “It's time Sphinx Warriors. To the Life Power!”

“To the Life Power!” roared the Sphinx Warriors and Guardians Elite.

Stormy moved out of the way, standing near Arik, who kept a hand on her arm. Wave after wave of strong battle ready men charged past her. She could feel the energy coming from all of them, especially the Warriors with their hyper-charged bodies ready to dive into the battle. As the last of the armed men passed by, Arik led her behind them. They made their way out of the Garden Dome to the main elevators. With so many bodies, it would be the first time she had seen so many of the elevators used and filled to the max.

As they made their decent to the lowest level of the Complex, Stormy could actually detect her Sphinx side ramping up as if to do battle. Her heart rate, breathing, even the Life Power running through her system was charged and made her tense. Her skin was on fire and she could sense a dark pulsing energy coming from the depths of the Complex. It was an uneasy feeling, making her want to pace and growl at something.

Over the past few days, it had grown in strength making her restless and edgy. Michael had told her it was the Dimensional Gate getting ready to open, but now it was like an ache at the base of her neck. A loud fire siren screaming in her nerve endings. Her whole body wanted to fight, to destroy the gate. She rubbed her temples trying to make it stop.

Arik squeezed her shoulder. “I know. You can feel it. You’ll get used to the uncomfortable feeling as you’re exposed to it over time. Take deep breaths and channel the energy into helping Alexandria. She’ll need it.”

“Thanks. I think.” She tried to smile up at him to let him know she understood, but all she wanted to do was choke something to death. Must be the interaction of the Sphinx to the dark energy of the Gate, she supposed.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, it was even worse. She surprised herself by growling loudly. Arik grabbed her arm and led her quickly across the stretch of the Staging Cavern between the elevators and the Trauma Cell. The Trauma Cell was located on the

same level as the Staging Cavern in order to provide a quick response for those who ended up injured or dying.

She wanted to check out the surroundings as they made their way to the Trauma Cell. The area was shaped like a large dome squared off at ground level. It was about the size of four football fields put together in quadrants of four. The walls were plain and roughly carved out of gray stone. Red mineral lines of color ran through the gray stone giving it an evil glow to it like the pits of hell. Lights above were plain and obviously for function, not looks.

The ground was similar to the walls but cleared better and leveled smoother so one could have better footing for the battles to come. Looking out onto the center of the Staging area there was a strange glow coming from the center of the air. It was shot with static or lightening and appeared to be increasing in size, spreading out, reaching towards the ground to solidify into what she understood now to be the Dimensional Gate.

As it touched the ground, the gate became opaque and she could see vague figures on the other side. Waiting, watching, preparing to jump into their world. She was so transfixed she stopped in the middle of their run from the elevators to the Trauma Cell. Everything in her was repulsed. The hair on her arms was standing straight up and a feeling of impending doom and death was licking at her nerves. She shivered and her Sphinx roared in her head. Stormy hissed toward where the Warriors and the Guardians were preparing to do battle.

“Stormy. Come on.” Arik was pulling on her arm urgently trying to get her moving again.

She came back to her senses and allowed Arik to lead her to the door that was open awaiting her arrival. Alexandria was looking out at her with worry in her eyes, waving at her to come quickly. Stormy just made it and was pushed through the door when it sounded like the banshees from hell had arrived. She could hear the roar of her Warriors as they clashed to do battle with the enemy. She didn’t look further as she passed through the door and spun around to help Alexandria close it and lock it. It was for their protection while the battle raged on. She rested her head upon the door praying her Warriors would be safe and that the Life Power she gave them

would be enough to get them through it.

Chapter Ten

A couple of deep breaths were all she needed and she would be fine. At least she thought. She slowly backed away from the now closed and locked door, but everything in her body and spirit told her she should be out there with Michael and her Warriors. Her Warriors, damn it! Not locked in here. Her inner Sphinx joined in, pacing, growling. Stormy rubbed at her Sefu Element. Her sensitive Sphinx hearing could hear through the thick walls.

The battle was tremendous. She could hear the impact of steel on steel, the metallic ring vibrating through her skull while Warriors fought against the Wraith. Although, she was not out there with them, she caught snatches of communication of the attack. Deep male voices shouting back and forth to each other of what needed to be done or who needed help. She assumed she was picking this up from Michael and the unusual link they seemed to share.

Every once in a while, she cringed inwardly when a cry of pain came from one of the Warriors. Sometimes inward sharing was not a good thing she decided. She tried to narrow her sensitivity to the feedback but it was difficult not being experienced of what to do. Just as she was getting the hang of it and tuning out some of the distraction, the horrendous screams of the Wraith came to her. The sound grated on her nerves. When would it be over? She paced back and forth before the closed door. It seemed to go on forever.

"Stormy, please. You're driving us crazy. Come help me prep." Alexandria pleaded.

Stormy turned and found she had an audience who had been watching her. And quite nervously too. She guessed she could see why as she must look like a crazed wild cat trapped in with them. She would bet her eyes were glowing again too. "I'm sorry guys. It's just...," she just didn't know how to finish. She sighed. "How can I help?"

Alexandria pointed to the trauma trays. "Come help me set these up. I sense we have incoming already."

Jumping into action, Stormy grabbed several kits and started arranging the sterile equipment beside the main surgical tables. Within the Trauma room, there were eight of them, plus additional stretchers on standby if needed. Curtains hung strategically so they could be drawn around the surgical tables if needed to create individual rooms.

Several of Alexandria's medical staff were also moving throughout the area prepping as well. They were donning gowns and gloves, placing out gauze and other expendables. Equipment was put into position including surgical lighting, oxygen tanks, cauterizing devices, and portable x-ray machines. Saline, blood products, medications, all the modern medical wonders were awaiting the first casualties. It didn't take long.

The doors swung open to admit the first injury. Arik and Joshua dragged in one of the other Guardians. He was quickly placed upon one of the surgical tables where Alexandria and the other medical staff converged on him. The man looked like he had been through a shredder, blood everywhere, gasping for breath.

The team was quick, staunching the flow of blood, stitching up sliced flesh. The man would recover, not quite as quickly as the Warriors with their superhuman healing, but faster than a mere human. As soon as they were able to get one person stabilized, two more were brought in. Minor wounds, major injuries, all types were seen and taken care of. Some men were down for the count for this battle, where others were patched up, and with a roar, they joined right back into the fray. In the midst of it all, Stormy assisted without even a second thought as though she was born to it.

Adrenaline pumped through her veins and she was on hyper alert. She could sense the battle through the occasional opening doors. Metal on metal, screams, calls of coordination among Warriors. As she looked toward the doors, she saw Raven thrown back and pinned against one of the walls. He was fighting furiously against three Wraith. Stormy could see the Wraith now and involuntary chills ran down her spine.

The descriptions in the book didn’t even begin to do justice to their fear inducing appearance. Her worst nightmare couldn’t begin to scare her more. Gray skinned, devoid of color, long claws, drawn

out jaws filled with jagged, drooling teeth. Bits of hair left on their bodies, eyes blacker than the pits of hell. Fear slithered down her spine, her skin prickled, she shivered. She gagged.

It was all so overwhelming but still something stronger than her own fear drew her away from the medical procedures she was participating in. The need to get closer to the battle screamed in her veins. Raven needed help, she knew it. She heard Michael shouting for additional coordination. He sounded in control but there was an edge to his voice. Closer, she got closer to the open doors. Raven was holding his own, but then there was a fourth Wraith sneaking up on the one side of him. Before she could warn him, he saw the one sneaky Wraith and adjusted his stance to account for it. One of the Wraith to his other side took advantage of this and its deadly claws ripped into Raven's side.

“No!” The scream was torn from Stormy's very depths. Ultimate fury was suddenly burning through her veins. Her wrist under her Sefu Element began to itch.

Stormy's warning had thrown off the rhythm of the Wraith and Raven was once again able to fight them off. Unfortunately, now that Stormy had gotten the attention of the Wraith, the one closest to the open doors spied her. Its dark eyes pinpointed on her and its evil lecherous grin showed her just how much it wanted to drain her of her very life. She shuddered. Before Raven or anyone else could get to it, the Wraith made a straight line into the Trauma Cell. Female staff behind her screamed in terror. There was scrambling as if one of the injured Guardians were trying to get up to defend them.

“Fuck! Michael!” yelled Raven, who was trying to get to the creature before it reached Stormy. An infuriated roar echoed off the walls in the Staging Cavern. It was Michael trying to reach the Trauma Cell. Stormy couldn’t see him, but she could hear the increased pace of swords as their wielders sliced through bone and flesh. Bodies of bloody, dead Wraith flew to the back of the cavern as Michael charged through anything between himself and the one deadly Wraith that had her caught in its sights.

She stood there not moving a muscle. She didn't feel fear at this moment in time, but pure fury as to the mere presence of this

creature that would come into her world and steal the Life Power and very life of her friends, her Warriors, her one true family. Her very muscles quivered with it, her Sphinx roared with it.

The Wraith stopped just inches from her. It grinned an evil grin, its putrid smell rolling around her, making her shiver in the cold of its deadly mist. It hissed, “Powerrrrr Keeeeper” and reached its razor sharp talons towards her heart. Everything from there became slow motion to Stormy's hyper alert mind. She saw Raven too far out to intervene, she heard through her inner Sphinx the anguished call of Michael's Sphinx, and his battle cry trying to clear the way to get to her in time. Her wrist under the Sefu Element changed from an itch to a slow steady burn as her natural instincts kicked in and her Life Power rushed to her Sefu Element.

Everything she had learned so far and some things she hadn’t in this life, came to a center point in her mind and exploded out. With the explosion of knowledge came her own deadly intension and movement. In less than a nano-second, her arm came up reflexing her Element into a Power Sword, both hands gripping it tightly. She swung up in an arc taking off the clawed hand that was reaching for her. Spinning out of its reach and on the backswing, she cleanly separated the head off the beast.

Not stopping there, she took the five remaining steps to the open door, grabbed Raven by the arm jerking him away from two additional Wraith who had just gotten their clawed hands on his shoulders. As the two in unison becoming one, Raven and Stormy thrust both of their Swords through the beasts’ chests. The monstrous Wraith fell instantly as their evil hearts had been destroyed.

Catching her breath as her hyper-speed world began to slow down, Stormy found herself just outside the Trauma Cell doors and could see the carnage. Bodies of Wraith everywhere, were covered in blood, guts, and gore. The nauseating smells began to overwhelm her. She took in the chaos of the battle and the glory of the Warriors and Guardians as they battled the last of the remaining Wraith.

Michael stood tall and glorious among it all, looking strong and undefeatable. She met his relieved eyes over the top of the line of fighting bodies and could see the pride in his expression. It was only

for a moment and then he was lost to her view in the remaining melee.

A Wraith beyond any form of life flew in their direction as someone's fury had finished mutilating it. Raven grabbed her and moved her out of the way just in time back into the Trauma Cell.

“Thanks for the assist, Power Keeper. I owe you a drink.” He winked and in Raven style, dove back into the battle.

Stormy leaned back against the wall by the door. Her Life Powers were returning to the center of her system causing the Power Sword to reflex back into its Element form. The reflex back was slower than the explosive formation of the Power Sword as her adrenaline and Power surge came down. Deep breaths of air, that was all she needed at this point.

She glanced over at Alexandria and her staff who were true professionals. They had gone back to work as if nothing had happened, tackling the injured. Determined to save each and every last one of them. Stormy wanted to rejoin them to help, but at the moment her body just didn’t want to move.

She leaned her head back against the wall closing her eyes and wondering what in the world had come over her making her react as if she was a fully trained Warrior. It had to have been on instinct but she wanted to be able to call on those skills at will. She was determined to truly learn the techniques. She should be out there fighting, not closed away behind doors. She had to be there in the fight, she just knew she was supposed to be there with her Warriors. She suspected she would have a whole other battle when she told Michael.

The fight against the Wraith had seemed like it had lasted forever, but in reality, it probably was only a few minutes. Stormy could still hear the clash of steel, ear-shattering screams from the Wraith, and yelling between Warriors and Guardians.

Finally, sounds and activity spiraled down to near silence indicating the end of the battle. Just as her own body started to loosen up and relax, a wash of danger and desperation reverberated through the air making her muscles tense up all over again. One of the Warriors was in trouble.

“Damn it, Hunter, behind you, it’s got Caleb.” yelled Michael.

There was an anguished cry, more cursing, steel on steel, a Wraith's scream cut-off, and then crushing silence.

"Fuck this." She cursed to herself and shoved away from the wall. She was tired of being trapped in the Trauma Cell, and the buzzing call along her nerves to help in whatever capacity she could was swiftly driving her crazy. She pushed out of the doors and towards the situation that had obviously turned desperate. There was no more Wraith to fight but now the Warriors were trying to reach Caleb who was down for the count. He was exceedingly pale and his eyes stared unseeing towards the ceiling. He was trapped beneath the shimmering edges of the Dimensional Gate which was slowly closing in on him now. The Gate had destabilized again.

"Joshua, can you reach him?" Michael urged, pacing back and forth. He had to save his Warrior.

"I can't, Michael. Raven?"

"Fuck no. Shit! The only one who can see the Gate edges is Jacob and he can't get any closer to get a grip on him either." Raven ran his hand through his hair in agitation. "I don't think Caleb's breathing, man."

Stormy couldn't believe the battle had turned in this direction, into another nightmare. Caleb was unmoving as if dead. "Help him!" Stormy shouted as she tried to run straight to where Caleb was lying. His life was slipping away and her Sphinx was clawing at her to reach him in time. Michael intercepted her, holding her close even when she tried to fight him.

"Angel, we can't get to him. There's nothing we can do." Michael choked on the words he didn't want to say.

"No. I can feel him. We have to get to him." She continued to try and escape his arms.

Michael grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him. "We can't. The Gate is closing and will kill anyone else caught in its void. The only one who can see the edges is Jacob and he doesn't have the ability to hold it."

With tears in her eyes, she pleaded with Michael. "I can see it. I can see the edges. I can feel the energy. Isn't there something I can do?"

Michael held onto her tightly, as if not wanting to let her go. She

sensed his unwillingness to risk the chance of her being caught up in the Gate.

"Khenti. If she can see it like I can, then she may have the ability to stabilize it or to at least buy us enough time to get to him." Jacob edged closer to the Gate to get some type of hold on Caleb.

"Michael, let me at least try. Please." Stormy needed him to understand she had to try. Everything in her cried she must do this.

He paused but a second, she saw in his eyes that he understood he must let go of her. Her Sphinx was frantic to get to Caleb, pushing its energy against Michael's Sphinx, agitating it. He nodded his head but added, "Don't get too close. I won't risk you being sucked into that damn thing."

She turned from him, edging her way closer to the Gate. She examined it; hearing the hum of the energy in her mind, the glittering rainbow colors fading, becoming smaller, closing in on the bloodied, pale Caleb.

Not Caleb. Can't lose him. Can't lose any of them. Please. She reached her hands out to the Gate, palms toward it. Feeling, listening, finding its energy rhythm, its beat. The key to make it widen just for a moment.

Drawing energy into herself she pushed it out towards the collapsing gate. It reverberated back into her body like being hit with an energy bolt. She gasped, staggering back.

The Gate was being stubborn, but she was more determined than ever. She drew energy again, pushing out against the Gate with all her might and holding it. Gritting her teeth, fighting with everything in her for Caleb. Slowly, the Gate began to reverse back outward giving just enough space for a possible recovery of Caleb.

Stormy wasn't sure how long she could hold it, but she was determined. The sooner the other Warriors grabbed Caleb, the better. She didn't want anyone else being trapped by it and glanced behind her to make sure Michael was still safe. He stood very near behind her watching her closely. He was far enough away so he wouldn't interfere with her interaction with the Gate, but close enough if anything should threaten her, he could snatch her back.

"Michael, I'm not sure how long I can hold this."

"You're doing great, angel, just a few more seconds."

Michael looked over to Joshua. “Can you reach him now, Joshua?”

“Yeah. I've got his leg. Raven, grab the other one.” Between the two of them, they pulled Caleb's lifeless body from the Gate and far enough away that they were all clear. “We're clear!”

Stormy wasn’t sure what to do now. She had the Gate propped open, so to speak, but she was starting to shake from the effort. Michael once again came to her aid. “Angel, give one strong push back and then withdraw the Life Force instantly. I'll pull you back.”

She nodded and did exactly what Michael had instructed her to do. True to his word, Michael's strong arms grabbed her around the waist and he drew her back as the Gate gave one last shudder, collapsed inward, and disappeared. Eerie silence and a vacuum to everyone's adrenaline was all that was left. And Caleb's lifeless body.

“Get Caleb and the other wounded into the Trauma Cell now!” Michael shouted as he continued to hold onto Stormy tightly. Even though the danger was past, he still wouldn’t let go of her. She could feel his inner Sphinx was still restless from the danger to her.

She glanced over her shoulder at Michael's worried face once she was certain Caleb and the other injured were being moved. “Michael, let me go help them. I'm fine.” At least she thought so at the moment with the adrenaline rush still screaming through her veins.

For a moment, she didn’t think he was going to acknowledge her request. Not that she wouldn’t mind staying in his arms forever, but she knew there was a mess to clean up, injured Warriors and Guardians to take care of, and Michael needed to direct it all. Finally, he relinquished his tight hold on her.

“Okay, but please be careful. There might still be danger lurking from the Gate.” He brushed a finger down her cheek and then stepped away.

“Hunter, bring in the crew to clean this mess up. Ethan, I want to meet for the after action as soon as we can.” Stormy watched Michael as he directed his men. He received several affirmatives from them. He also passed out additional orders to the remaining Warriors and Guardians to coordinate the follow-up on any

remaining items. He was incredible as a leader, she thought, efficient and direct in what needed to be done.

Stormy smiled to herself when Michael mumbled to no one in particular, “Damn, it. I’m going to have to meet with the Elders as well. I hope to hell Elder Turin is not there. I rather run the man through than have to report to him.”

Stormy moved over to the Trauma Cell to find out the status of the injured. Michael trailed along behind her. She suspected he wouldn’t let her get more than five inches from him right now, but she needed to check and see if Caleb had made it. Her inner Sphinx growled at the idea of losing him. She would love to get her hands on the Wraith who had done this to him and mutilate the creature. Unfortunately, it was already destroyed.

As she entered the Trauma cell with Michael shadowing behind her, she saw chaos reigned. Injured men lay everywhere, but not as bad as she had envisioned. Most of the Warriors were good to go with either minor injuries or more significant ones already well underway in the healing process. All they would have were pale scars by the early morning. There were several Guardians who were worse for wear, but would survive. The one remaining question was if Caleb would survive.

She had to help Alexandria, and was soon up to her elbows helping with Caleb, trying to staunch the flow of blood coming from his injured body. At least what was left of it as it oozed from the many claw marks. Every inch of the man appeared to have gotten caught in a blender. His eyes still stared sightless into space and she could detect only the slightest hint of Life Power. Her own Life Power started to swirl and demand something be done. She tried to grasp the conduit into his body, but couldn't find it as it was so collapsed it was lost.

“I can't find it. How am I going to be able to give him Life Power?” She was desperate, not sure how to help him.

Alexandria wiped at her forehead as she worked through the tedious task of stitching another area of skin which was sliced to ribbons. “Keep trying, Stormy. His body isn’t responding, not healing. I don't know what else we can do.”

Michael reached out grasping Caleb's hand, his face masked,

containing his grief of losing one of his close Warriors and friends. “Do what you can, but the Wraith had its damn claws in him for too long I fear.” He closed his eyes.

Minutes turned to more minutes. The exhausted Warriors stood by and paced waiting for the final outcome of their fallen brother. None appeared to be willing to leave until they knew one way or the other.

Alexandria's frustration was showing as even she growled. “Caleb, come on. You have to at least make an effort here, damn it.” Tears tracked down her cheeks as her frustration began to show.

To Michael she cried, “I'm sorry, I know I am not supposed to do this but I have to at least try.” She grabbed Stormy’s arm where it was in contact with Caleb's chest and then reached down and placed her other hand upon his abdomen.

The draw of Life Power was incredible. As soon as Alexandria had touched her, Stormy became aware of a different type of conduit opening and connecting between Alexandria, Caleb, and herself. It was a different sensation than when she Transferred Life Power to the Warriors. She pushed for them, but in this, Alexandria drew the Life Power from her and converted part of it into healing power.

Alexandria was going to burn through the Life Power fairly quickly, healing Caleb so Stormy increased the amount she was drawing from her surroundings. She funneled it as fast as she could through the new connection to Alexandria. Whatever Alexandria was doing was working, at least physically on Caleb. The terrible wounds stopped bleeding and started to close. Not completely but enough to allow his unique healing ability to catch up.

Stormy detected his heartbeat, slow, but there, and his breathing. A bit labored, but who wouldn't be having difficulty in the condition he was in. Finally, she found a weak conduit into Caleb's Life Power and Alexandria had over-extended herself anyway and needed to be stopped.

Now.

“Alexandria, it’s enough, stop. Michael, she’s getting herself into trouble, help. I've got this now.”

Michael went to intervene but Joshua jumped in grabbing

Alexandria as she was cut off from the connection and slumped into exhaustion. He lifted her into his arms and carried her over to one of the empty medical cots laying her down.

"Woman, I told you to stop with these actions. It will be the death of you." Even with his rough words, Joshua hovered over Alexandria with a worried expression on his face looking for someone to get her something to drink.

Now that Stormy was satisfied Alexandria was taken care of, she focused on the weak conduit leading into Caleb's Life Force. It was tenuous at best, but if she could just feed Life Power into Caleb slowly, then she might be able to bring him out of this. She hoped. To fail now would be a blow to all of them. She needed to be reassured she could do this and as usual Michael was there for her, "You can do it, Stormy. I know you can."

She closed her eyes drawing upon the Life Force again, and slowly trickling into Caleb, as if she was giving a dehydrated man a drink. A little at first, so it didn't sicken, but enough to sustain. Once she was certain he was holding the Life Power, she increased the amount a little more.

She tried to detect feedback, but so far, there was nothing. Did that mean it was working or was it too late?

"Caleb, come on." She whispered.

Her heart went out to him and the Warriors who would be devastated if he didn't make it. She pushed wave after wave of Life Power into him, feeling the toll it was taking on what strength she had left, especially after the entirety of the experiences she had this night.

Michael moved around the table to her, but she didn't want him stopping her yet. She could do this, she had to. She gathered a large amount of Life Power and pushed it hard into Caleb. She swore he twitched. She did it again making herself a bit light headed. This produced a harder twitch from him. She could do it.

She pushed Power one more time. Hard. Caleb arched on the table, gasped, and his eyes focused for a moment. He reached over grabbing Stormy's hand, breaking the contact and conduit.

"Michael, enough. I'm good. She needs to rest. She's weakening." He passed out and the medical team dove in to finish patching him

up.

He was right. As soon as the Transference was broken the light headedness became worse. She was weak, drained, spent up. She swayed on her feet, not sure if she could stay standing anymore. She was relieved she was able to help Caleb, but she had a suspicion she was going to feel the repercussions of over-extending herself. Michael was right there for her, drawing her into his arms, holding her close.

“Joshua, I'm taking Stormy up to our quarters so she can rest. Finish with the clean-up. I’ll be right back.” Michael gently drew her towards the exit from the Trauma Cell. As they passed by where Alexandria was resting, Stormy paused before her.

“Wait, please.”

Alexandria grasped her hand. “Thank you for helping me save him. I should have asked but didn't think we had time and I didn't want my brother or this brute trying to stop me.”

Joshua gave Alexandria a stern look although he was gently holding her other hand as she finished complimenting Stormy. “I was sure you were a natural and would understand what to do, Stormy. You’re a strong Power Keeper.”

“You did exactly what I would have wanted to do. We couldn't lose him. As long as I’m able, I won’t give up any of these Warriors.” Stormy looked fondly at each of the Warriors then back to Alexandria.

“You need this more than I do at this point.” She took advantage of the fact she already had Alexandria's other hand and pushed part of what little extra Life Power she had into her.

Alexandria sighed from the purity and energy of the Life Power Stormy contained and controlled so easily. It was but a short burst and all Stormy could do. Even that little bit pushed Stormy almost over the edge of exhaustion. She let go of Alexandria's hand and rested her head against Michael's chest.

Michael sighed, his exasperation with both women clear on his face. “Come on, angel, you've done more than you should have today. To bed with you for the rest of the night and tomorrow. And I won't take any excuses. I'll tie you down if I have to.”

To his men he directed. “I'll meet up with you shortly.” He tucked

Stormy under his shoulder, supporting her exhausted frame with an arm around her waist and headed to their quarters.

The short trip back to their room took forever, but it didn't matter as they had managed to escape the bowels of hell. Once in the room, Michael stood before her looking at every inch of her to make sure she wasn't scratched even in the smallest degree. She simply smiled at him and whispered, "I'm fine. I promise. Just exhausted."

Michael delicately framed her face in his strong hands. "I know. If not, there would have been hell to pay from someone. I couldn't take it if you were injured. Know I will do anything to keep you safe. Anything."

"Michael, we have to talk about ..." Stormy began.

"Not now. You're tired and I have a lot to get accomplished before I can rest." He seemed mesmerized by her pout, as she felt her mouth turning down at the corners. "Ancients, what a gorgeous mouth you have."

He couldn't seem to resist kissing her and captured her lips in a gentle exploring kiss. She wished he would take her to bed and hold her forever. But not now. Now demanded he finish his duties for the night. She almost heard his mind. Ending the kiss, he spun her around and gave her a gentle push.

"Go. Get ready for bed. I'll be back as soon as I can and I expect you to be resting when I return." He gave her a demanding look as she peeked at him over her shoulder.

Stormy turned to watch him leave. The weight of the world sat on his shoulders and she didn't know how he was dragging himself out to do even more. She was absolutely exhausted, torn up, wanting just to fall over in the bed and not ever get up. How was he even standing? Was it like this for them every time? How had they survived this long? She had to be strong for them both as a Power Keeper and a Warrior. The Power Keeper part Michael accepted; but as for the Warrior portion, she would have a battle on her hands to convince him and get him to accept.

The exhaustion was getting worse as she made her way into the bathroom. Up the stairs, past the tub, and into the shower. She stripped along the way, leaving a trail of clothes and boots. A bath

would be fantastic in the oversized white and blue marbled inset tub, but once she got in she didn't think she would have the strength to get back out. She fired up the shower jets and adjusted the settings so the water would be on massage and the temperature would be on steaming.

Once under the water she completely soaked her hair and body absorbing the relaxing heat. Oh, to be clean again and not smell the stench of the Wraith on her. Just being near the thing and not actually touching it didn't matter. It was as if she had been violated. She washed her hair and body making sure every inch of her shimmering skin was beyond clean so all she could smell was vanilla. Sweet, pure, clean. Too tired to care, she dried her long hair and body as best she could with one of the soft peach colored towels not caring if she got the bed damp.

Her nervous system began to pay for her recent experience. She started to shake from head to toe. It was a challenge to put her night clothes on so kept it simple with panties and one of Michael's t-shirts. She needed him near and this was the closest she was going to get at the moment. It was soft and surrounded her like his strong arms.

She climbed into the large round bed making her way between the hanging silks and satins and slid between the gold and blue sheets. She burrowed among the many pillows trying to get comfortable. Shoving one of the pillows behind her back, she laid on her side pretending it was Michael there with her. Holding her, lulling her to sleep, whispering of soft dreams to help her escape the nightmare of the battle.

Stormy had tried to sleep the whole night but her restlessness had awakened her sometime in the middle of the night. She was surprised she hadn't had nightmares, but perhaps she was just too exhausted. Even as tired as she was, though, something had awakened her. As she was about to get up to investigate, Michael passed by the bed. He had already returned and was silently moving around the room. He didn't turn up the lights but left them dimmed trying to be careful and not awaken her. She peeked from the bed to see him disappear into the bathroom. A few seconds later she heard the shower turn on.

She listened to him move around as he prepared to get into the shower and heard the change in the sound of the cascading water as it hit him. She couldn't resist, she quietly got up and moved over to the doorway. She didn't actually step into the opening, but placed her hands near the door jam, leaning in just enough around the frame so she could see him. And what a glorious view he was.

Michael, every inch of his luscious richly tanned skin wrapped around hard defined muscles. His dark black hair clung to his head as the glistening beads of water ran down the line of his body. He had the tightest and most fit body she had ever seen on a man albeit a bit battle worn at the moment with healing cuts and bruises, but he was still an absolutely stunning man. Even his ass looked hard as steel and she wanted to run her hands over it. If only he would turn around so she could see more of his delectable body.

She wished she had the nerve to join him in the shower and run her hands through the slick suds he spread over his skin, down his chest and stomach to even more interesting zones of his body.

What is wrong with me? I'm exhausted, he's exhausted.

He did look exhausted she thought. More than she had ever seen him. Even his skin didn't have quite the healthy glow it normally did. He was pale and she sensed his Life Power was low. Too low. Well she would just have to fix that.

Stormy moved away from the door and went back to the bed. She sat on the edge of it and closed her eyes focusing on the Life Power living in all things and slowly drew it into her body. Her system twinged a bit like a runner who had run too much and now had sore muscles, but something even deeper. Yes, she had definitely pushed herself to her full limit today. She didn't care, though and had to give Michael enough Life Power so he could heal properly. She was in some discomfort but more than willing to handle it for him.

"I told you to rest." Michael growled near her making her jump and lose the connection with the Life Power. She stood up before him trying to hide her guilty look and cried out reaching for him. He stood before her in nothing but loose blue sleeping pants so the large cut across the right side of his chest was visible to her.

It was barely healed and still oozing blood. He looked down at his chest, sighing, and took the towel he was using to finish drying his

hair and held it to the wound. “Don't look so concerned, Stormy. It will heal. I promise.”

She could see he really was aggravated with her on this, but she wasn’t going to back down. “Hey, I got some rest, so, in theory I did what you told me to. I plan on getting more just as soon as I am sure you’ll be okay.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I've been through worse, angel, and survived. This won't be the last of my injuries, I assure you, but one of my most important duties is to make sure you’re safe and taken care of. I would be remiss if anything happened to you.”

She bit her lip, staring at the floor gathering her courage. “About that. Things would have gone a whole lot smoother if I had been there, both to boost you and the others with Life Power and as an extra Power Sword for additional manpower against the Wraith. Are they always that bad?”

Michael's eyebrows dropped and his nostrils flared. *Okay…* She had evidently struck a nerve somewhere in there. “You will not be present during the battles. I’ll not have any of the Wraith get anywhere near you again. It’s my duty to make sure you’re protected.” The attitude coming from his Sphinx prowling, wanting to destroy anything that would hurt her was clearly being broadcast to Stormy.

“As far as the Wraith and their numbers, it’s highly unusual. It's almost as if something was organizing them and they have not had weapons in ages, only their teeth, claws, and their touch. Now they have swords and knives. We’ll get to the bottom of this. The danger has escalated, so you see why you shouldn’t be there.”

Stormy walked right up to him. In his face. “No, I don't. What’s the point in training me with hand to hand combat skills, giving me a Sefu Element and teaching me the Sword techniques? Why do your own Scrolls talk of the Power Keepers, not only as sources of Life Power but as elite female soldiers who are just as deadly as the male Warriors? Even the Priestesses were involved in the battles!”

“Don't make me just a convenient object to be used to your benefit and then thrown to the side when you’re through with me. I want to be a part of this family and that’s what you owe me at the very least.” Now Stormy's Sphinx was pissed. She hadn’t meant to

demand this of him, but the man was driving her crazy. She not only wanted to be a part of this family but to be a part of his life. More than just a Power Keeper. For God's sake, she was living with the man.

She watched Michael close his eyes. Was he trying to shut her out? She realized he wouldn't do that. It wasn't his way and was probably just exhausted like her. He was so tired. She sighed glancing down at the wound which still hadn't stopped bleeding. Stormy was sure it was unusual for a Warrior to not heal right away. Had he been poisoned or something? He was obviously suffering; both physically and now she was making it even worse.

She started to reach out to him, but then changed her mind and drew it back to her side. She couldn't blame him for being this way she supposed. He had Transformed her and still struggled with if he wanted to take care of her or keep his distance. She wished he wouldn't leave her hanging in this void of uncertainty. She wanted to be angry at him, but she just couldn't. She just wanted to be closer to him.

He opened his deep blue eyes. She loved his eyes and could look into their depths forever. Michael reached out and rubbed a strand of her hair between his fingers. "Your right, we'll talk more on this. I promise. But right now, I can't. If I don't lie down, I'm going to fall down. I'm all used up, Stormy. Give me a break just now?" He gave her a querying half smile.

Well, didn't that just take all the wind out of her sails? He was ready to fall down and that wound of his didn't look good at all. There was no way she could stay mad at him in the shape he was in. She closed the gap between them and placed a hand on each side of his waist. His skin was so warm and she was right; his muscles were hard as steel. She maneuvered him until his legs were against the bed and with a wicked grin she shoved him onto his back. He pushed himself with his elbows and heels until he was up farther on the bed and collapsed into the pillows.

"Now this feels good. I could just die right here."

Stormy followed him into the bed. "No, I don't think so. There won't be any dying for you." She swung a leg over and straddled his waist. He grabbed her by the hips.

Michael ran his hands up along her waist and back down to her hips, “Any other time this would be quite stimulating and you would be in trouble, but angel, I'm spent on so many levels.”

Placing her hands against his ripped abdomen, she rolled her eyes. “Don't flatter yourself, I'm almost as tired, and you’re in no shape. But, I will demand a rain check. Now hush and I won't take no. You need this.” She focused on the conduit which allowed for the Life Power to connect and transfer and pushed the small portion she had just collected into his exhausted body.

Michael’s eyelids fluttered closed and Stormy felt his grip tighten on her hips. He sighed and a look of ecstasy crossed over his features. Even though he said he was in no condition for more pleasurable activities, Stormy felt his instant erection against her core where she straddled him as the Life Power flowed into his body. She wanted to give him more but the amount of energy she had was small. She really didn’t have the strength be doing this, but he needed it more than she did.

As soon as some of the utter exhaustion left Michael’s features and the wound in his chest began to close, he grabbed her hands breaking the Transference contact. Suddenly he spun her over onto her back and Stormy found herself beneath him.

She was breathless and now exhausted again from the Transference, but still got out, “Hey, I wasn't done.”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “Yes, you are done. Now, let me hold you and rest with me. I think we've earned it. We have tomorrow to dive into all this insanity again.”

“Okay.” She agreed. It sounded heavenly to her just to lie in his arms anyway. Michael leaned down capturing her lips for a lingering kiss and turned onto his side gathering her in close. With the soft sound of the cascading water from the small water fall on the other side of the room, the gentle breeze created from the overhead fan, and the warmth of each other’s bodies, it took but a moment for Stormy to fall into a blissful sleep.

Chapter Eleven

Surrounded by Ethan's latest technology surveillance equipment, Michael leaned over Ethan's shoulder to view the latest video intel he had collected. He had sounded urgent when requesting Michael's presence so he could report his findings. Michael knew the accuracy of the information from Ethan was always top notch. It had to be with the computers and gadgets filling the surveillance room they were in.

Computer screens lined up on the table were showing images of documents, video, pictures, diagrams, and readings from the Staging Cavern. Other computer screens were mounted on the wall and showed images coming from strategically positioned video cameras for security. The cameras were located both in the Complex and above ground where they were hidden in the natural foliage of the desert surrounding their secret facility.

Pointing towards one of the screens, Ethan commented, "I was going over some of the surveillance tapes last night from the discreet cameras I added the other day. You know, the ones you had requested since we were having unauthorized activities. And look what I found." Ethan quickly tapped away at his keyboard and the video revealed an image of Turin exiting a secret door in one of the far walls behind a tapestry. Closely following were two of the Guardians who were usually accompanying him. In their arms were containers filled with unknown contents.

Ethan manipulated the mouse over one of the boxes where the writing was visible. The writing enlarged to fill the screen. Michael growled as he read it. "Apollo Wiring and Detonation Company".

"Son of a bitch. Why the fuck would he be bringing that kind of shit into the Complex? As if I couldn't guess. The whole Complex is in danger." He threw up his hands and ran his fingers through his hair. Now Stormy was in even deeper danger. Fuck. The nightmare of his life just got deeper.

"Why is he doing this? All of our life is defending this world and

he acts like he has no concern and is focusing to undermine it. It's like he has his own agenda. I'm going to the Elders now and request an inquiry. We'll need some of the Guardians Elite for this I'm afraid."

Nodding, Ethan reported, "I briefed Guardian Arik while I was waiting on you from your other meeting with the Elders. He stands by with the Elite and is trying to do some background intervention but didn't have any luck finding Turin. Dude, it's like he disappeared off the grid. Arik said he will stay on it, though.

Michael stared at the frozen image of Turin. A cold chill went down his spine. Time was running out and the shit was about to hit the fan. "Gather up the other Warriors. We're going to need to have an air tight plan in place for this one, otherwise, we're going to end up with a lot of casualties. I can feel it."

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Aches, pains, every inch of her body felt like it had been pounded on. Tiny scratches marred her smooth skin here and there. Reminders to keep her focus on her sword lesson. Of course, she couldn't complain too much as she begged and pleaded with Michael, presenting her case that to the benefit of her people and the Warriors she needed to be present at the battles.

With that, Michael had thrown a fit, his Sphinx growling and prowling in the depths of his mind as she predicted he would. In the end, he had grudgingly agreed on the condition she stay in the outer zone of the Staging Cavern with Arik and one or two more Guardians protecting her, and if things started to look hairy she would be taken to safety immediately. She had agreed to his many layered requirements but only because of her strong need to be there for them.

No matter what, she would do anything to make sure she was at the battles, including these killer lessons Joshua was putting her through. As far as a training area, she wasn't sure what to expect, but once she arrived she remembered from the tour the arena on the weapons level. Used for training, public competitions, and battle ceremonies, the dusty granite cavern was perfect. The hard packed dirt gave a firm foothold as she weaved and danced to avoid Joshua's attacks. The lighting reflecting off the Power Swords

challenged her to keep an eye on her opponent's deadly blade. The stadium seats surrounding the arena would give observers a bird's eye view of competitions as others did this life and death dance for real.

Michael had stayed and watched for a while, but it took him only a short amount of time and he had begun to pace and growl as his Sphinx wanted to protect her from the rough training. Several times, he had even reflexed his Sword and started toward her to intervene when the practice got a bit rough. Eventually Joshua had to tell Michael he either had to leave or they may as well give up the training. Stormy had voiced her displeasure and Michael had huffed out of the arena, grumbling under his breath.

Once Michael had left after the first day of training, it was much easier to concentrate on the lessons. They had progressed to higher levels of difficulty over the several days of training. Joshua had shown her basic cuts, blocks and stances of sword combat. He showed her core techniques and a few specific ancient sword styles as well as the more modern techniques that had been developed. She began by visualizing her attacker and attempted basic overhead, outside and inside body cuts while targeting vital areas like temple, neck, bridge of nose, ribs, kidneys, and other debilitating areas.

Next, were the blocks she used either for diverting or absorbing attacks Joshua threw her way. She then focused on the blade of her sword and the damage it could do by returning attacks in Joshua's direction.

By the end of the training sessions her arms, back, and everything else ached so badly she ate, soaked in the deep marble tub in her apartment, and passed out in the bed. Unfortunately, between her lessons, Michael's battle planning sessions, and two instances where the Dimensional Gate opened again, much smaller battles than the first one, she didn't get to see him much or have another night where he just held her. Once again, she didn't have enough time to spend with him and she missed him.

Stormy realized her mind had been wandering and her focus wasn't on the lesson where it was supposed to be. The first clue was Joshua slamming the guard of his sword into hers causing pain to

reverberate into her hands and down her arms. He shoved her back across the arena at a pace causing her to lose her footing. She landed on her butt, hard. At least to her credit, she rolled backwards pushing up with her hands just in time to get vertical and bring up her sword to block Joshua's attack to her ribs.

Upon the successful block, he stepped back giving her a disgruntled look. “Stormy, you must focus. One slip like that and the consequences can be your life. Having you as a Warrior is not worth it if we lose you. If we lose you, we lose our Power Keeper. If you’re to be both, then you must step up into that mind-set and sacrifice to be both.”

She sighed, “I know. I'm sorry. Every day I feel I’m closer to being useful to all of you and not just as a battery charger. I want to show Michael I can do this. That he doesn't have to hover over me all of the time.” She accepted a towel from Joshua wiping the sweat and dirt from her face. She must look quite the part right now.

“I understand and you’re doing very well considering this is all new to you. There really isn’t much more I can teach you in the basics and techniques. You’ll just need to continue your practice, sparring, and just build through experience.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze of encouragement.

He reflexed his Sword back to Element and indicated for them to go over to the side boundary where seating was available. Stormy followed and also reflexed her Sword back to its Sefu Element form. They sat in the tan padded seats for a breather. Joshua started to go over some additional items.

“Now, there are many reasons to become a proficient Warrior. One is to keep your own ass intact, another is to fight and destroy the Wraith, and the other is to protect your brothers in arms and others such as yourself. But also it is extremely important to what....?

Joshua had gone over this several times and she spoke up promptly, “To protect the Khenti. Khenti Michael.” She finished breathlessly, hating to think of Michael in any kind of danger, but he was a Warrior and that was a part of his life.

“Yes.” Joshua firmly nodded. He took on a distant look and then turned it directly at her. “The Khenti must be protected at all costs.

And I do mean at all costs. Not only is he our leader and family, but to lose him means to lose the Power Connection between all the Warriors enabling us to be synched during battle. It allows us to "see" on a Power level of everything going on around us. To not only rely on verbal and visual cues in battle but at a level we can actual feel and see through each other so to speak. Does that make sense?"

Smiling, Stormy contemplated this for a moment. "Yes, to some extent, although I haven't experienced it. I don't think, although when the Wraith tried to attack me, I seemed to know exactly what to do to stop the creature even though I hadn't trained yet."

"It sounds like you had synched up to the group at least partially. I saw you even haul Raven out of the way and cut down the two Wraith in a synchronized manner last week with him." Joshua was excited about this. "You wouldn't have been able to fight in synchronization if Michael wasn't there. Each Khenti inherits this ability. Like his father, he has this unique ability. To our knowledge, he is the only one who can do this.,. If we lose him, we lose the ability."

"We can't ever lose him. No matter what." Stormy whispered. Just the thought of him perishing was like a huge rock pushing against her chest, crushing her soul, making it difficult to breathe. Her hands were now shaking and she rubbed them together trying to concentrate on removing the dirt she had picked up during practice and not Michael being injured or dead.

She took a deep breath but it didn't relax her and the tension in her body only increased. Impending doom crept up her spine causing chills to run through her body. The need to run screamed through her system. Only one person caused that. She glanced up and knew who she would see.

Turin. The hated Elder she couldn't stand to be in the same room with. He had mistreated her in the past. She unconsciously touched the Collar quickly standing. Turin smiled and leered at her as if he were stripping her naked in his mind. Joshua jerked out of his seat as if he was affected by Turin's presence as well. He stepped in front of Stormy affectively blocking and protecting her from the advancing Turin.

"Elder Turin to what do we owe the pleasure?" Joshua's voice

sounded just as guarded as his stance.

Although Joshua's frame was large, Turin still tried to see around him to ogle Stormy a while longer. His hands always twitched around, her reaching out as if to try and touch her. She shivered uncontrollably and hated he was even anywhere near her.

Turin reached into his blood red robe, revealing a sealed announcement. It was a folded cream parchment with a gold seal which he handed to Joshua. “As Weapons Master, you are in charge of hosting the Warrior Initiation Ceremony here in the Training Arena. The Elders have been aware of the training of the Power Keeper and have deemed it time for her to be tested.”

“What? Stormy? Now? She’s extraordinarily talented and has learned fast, but this is unprecedented. What did you do, Turin?” Joshua thundered.

“Aaah. I hate to disappoint, but it wasn’t me. Elder Chloe brought this to the attention of the other Elders and initiated the request and approval. She was quite adamant about the Ceremony being conducted immediately and would not take no for an answer. I must say, though, I’m also looking forward to her initiation.” Once again, he smiled wickedly directing his glance towards Stormy.

“Good luck, Power Keeper.” Turin spun on his heel, leaving in the direction he had arrived, laughing to himself.

“Joshua? What’s going on?” Stormy touched his arm concerned by the expression on his face.

He turned to her unfolding the parchment. “I can't believe Elder Chloe would do this. She has always protected us. Always.” Joshua’s expression was concerned. “The Elders have determined you’re ready for the Warrior Initiation, although how in hell they can make that decision so soon I don't know. This isn’t good.” Running his hand through his strawberry blond hair, he started to pace

Stormy blocked him from pacing. “Can't I just refuse?

“You could, but then you would never be able to fight as a Warrior. You would be restricted from direct presence in the battle.”

She stood frozen in place for a moment, absorbing this new information and then began her own slow walk toward the middle of the arena. She stopped, looking up at the empty seats. So many of

them. So many occupants would sit in them and watch her fail. Sighing, she glanced at Joshua and the parchment. “Well, at least it will be entertaining for them. When do I get to fight this initiating battle?”

“It’ll be tomorrow morning.” He came over to where she was standing in the dirt, dust swirling around her boots, to demand her strict attention. “You will be successful in this. I taught you everything you need to know. The battle will play out here with Michael and you partnered up and two of us. Not me, since I taught you, but two of the others. Who is selected is up to the Elders. Remember, as the battle starts, you must link up with Michael as we would during a battle. That way you will have his sight, knowledge, and interpretation as well as to what is going on around you. Don't let him balk and cut you off. You’re strong enough to stay linked to him.”

“Why would he cut me off? Wouldn't that be undermining our offensive or defensive stance?” Stormy didn't understand why Michael would cut her off and wanted more from Joshua.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I can’t give you more. Remember, this is a test. Not only of what you have learned here, but deeper. A test of battle and a test of the pledge to be a Warrior. A Sphinx Warrior will stand with the Khenti and stand with the other Warriors no matter what. I have to be careful. What knowledge I give you here, Michael will be able to see in battle because of the link he will form with you.”

He continued, “Remember, don't let him unlink during the battle no matter what. Stay in his head, his battle thoughts. You’ll know what to do at the key moment. Remember the reasons for being a proficient Warrior and the true answer will come to you.”

He was trying to tell her something important to the battle and she had to figure it out before it was too late. Even though she was nervous and didn't know if she could pull this one off, she was determined. Not for her, but for Michael and the Warriors.

“Now go, get some rest. And good luck tomorrow. I’ll be out there cheering you on.” He awkwardly clapped her on the back almost knocking her over from his shear strength.

She made her way back to her living quarters. Her mind spinning

away on the lessons she had just completed, on the agendas of elders that made no sense, and on what message Joshua was trying to impress on her for tomorrow to be successful. How on earth was she going to rest with all of these thoughts going on in her head?

Stormy really had tried to rest. Truly, but all she could do was toss and turn while the night slowly ticked away. All of the gentle sounds in the room, the waterfall, the fan, the chirping of the tiny birds among the array of plants in the seating area couldn't bring her peace or sleep. Michael didn't even come to the room. Evidently, he wasn't allowed to see her before the battle. Which was crap in her opinion. How were they supposed to do any battle planning?

Near dawn, according to the internal monitoring system and the change in some of the automatic lighting, she gave up and climbed out of the satin sheeted bed. She took a quick shower and dressed in her usual day garb of black boots, black military styled fatigues, and black t-shirt with its silver swirled designs around the collar. For functionality, she braided her hair so it would be out of the way.

As she finished her light meal of fruit, toast, and cereal there was a soft knock on the door. Stormy went over to the door expecting it to be Michael. She opened it and was disappointed it wasn't; however, at the same time, she was delighted because Alexandria stood there. Overwhelmed and happy just to see a familiar face, she grabbed Alexandria and gave her a hug. Alexandria didn't seem to mind her exuberance and hugged her back.

"Please come in. I'm so glad you came." Stormy moved out of the way for her so she could enter.

Alexandria only entered just to inside the door. She was a bit pale with dark circles under her eyes as if she hadn't had any sleep either. "I can't stay long. I'm not really supposed to be here as you will be summoned soon, but Joshua let me come up to see you. I have a couple of messages for you."

"Tell me, please." Stormy reached out and took Alexandria's hands in hers to try and calm her down. Alexandria was overly fidgety and was making Stormy even more nervous.

"First, Michael says he's sorry he couldn't be with you last night. But the rules." She rolled her eyes shaking her head. "Just archaic, I

tell you. He'll meet you on the battle field. There won't be any time for conversation so you must use the Warriors' Power Connection and synch up immediately. The other two Warriors won't be synched, so that will be to your advantage. Second, Joshua says remember the lessons and remember the reasons for being a proficient Warrior. Got it?" Alexandria squeezed Stormy's hands.

"Got it." She would have to be quick with synching, recite the reasons to figure out what Joshua was trying to tell her, and keep her concentration so she didn't do something stupid. *Good luck with that.* She mentally rolled her eyes this time.

Alexandria hugged her again. "For me, be careful out there. I know you'll do just fine. You're already a Warrior at heart." She stepped back through the door. "Gotta go, I'm out of time. Good luck."

Stormy wished Alexandria could stay with her as she watched her leave the room. She found Joshua waiting on the other side of the door. She nodded to him. "It's time?"

He gave the affirmative. "I'll lead you in and then I'll be stationed on the sidelines." She followed him out, closing the door behind her and hoped it wouldn't be the last time she closed it. Together they worked their way downstairs and out of the living quarters. The elevator awaited them already and was open with Guardian Arik and three of the other Guardians Elite. Stormy and Joshua joined them in silence.

The Elite tried to give her a pep talk, but her focus was already on what awaited in the Training Arena. Joshua was stone silent as well, his eyes staring straight ahead as he tried to maintain a calm demeanor. She wasn't fooled by any of this. The tension and nervousness in the elevator was like an oppressive weight in her chest.

Not soon enough for her the elevator reached the Training and Weapons Level. As the door opened, Stormy could hear the cheers and roars from the awaiting crowd. Someone was firing the audience up with announcements in relation to the upcoming initiation. Just great! An arena full of Egyptians and Sphinx to possibly see her demise. Sweat was already running down her back, her palms were clammy, and her stomach was queasy. The area on

her wrist began to tingle and itch under her Sefu Element signaling the ramping up of her Life Power for the upcoming battle.

The group reached the opening to the arena and Arik and the Elite peeled off to find seating. Joshua turned to her and indicated for her to proceed with him. They sauntered into the arena with heads held high and headed towards the sideline. Immediate cheers and more roaring of the crowd assaulted her ears. Her heart accelerated rapidly and her breathing picked up as adrenaline rushed through her system.

She just wanted to get this over with or perhaps run for the hills, she didn't know which. Hysteria slithered its way into her mind as she scanned the hundreds of faces in the crowd staring down at her. They appeared to be supportive, but perhaps they were just there to observe a slaughter.

At the far end, she observed the Elders. There were four present, but she knew there were more. Each of them was dressed in their own color of ceremonial robe. Among the four was the Elder Chloe whom she had heard about. The woman was short and thin in stature, slightly stooped at the shoulders with long gray hair captured in a waist length braid. Grasped in her hand, supporting her weight, was a silver cane with a clear crystal stone on the top of it.

There was something different about her than the other Elders. Almost like a blur to the edges of her form. How strange. Stormy was surprised to see a kindness in her eyes encouraging her. At least there was one person on her side. To her relief, Turin wasn't present among the Elders. She shivered just thinking of the man.

As they reached their designated sideline, Stormy was relieved and excited to see Michael waiting for her. She quickly walked over to him and wanted nothing else but to be held in his arms. However, being the true Warrior he greeted her in Warrior fashion by grasping her forearms versus giving her the needed hug. She knew it was all for show though as he gave her a gentle smile that was meant only for her. He didn't say anything as Alexandria had indicated he wasn't allowed; there was no pre-planning. They would be going into battle with only the synch to guide them.

Michael surprised her by breaking the rules anyway and

whispering to her, “Be careful, angel. Please.”

She glanced up at the concerned expression on his face and nodded even though she found it hard to envision being careful in a sword battle.

The announcer Stormy had heard earlier was in the center of the arena. He was a short, squat man dressed in a blue robe and had the full attention of the audience as he spread his arms wide to address the crowd. “Welcome, one and all. We are present here today to witness the Warrior Initiation Ceremony for our Power Keeper. She will be tested in the art of swordplay and battle maneuver and to discover if she is truly worthy to be called a Sphinx Warrior.

The announcer turned to face Stormy and Michael. “Khenti Michael and Power Keeper Stormy advance to the center of the arena.”

Michael placed a hand at the base of Stormy's back and gently pushed her to the center of the arena. He then positioned himself several paces away from her, but parallel, staying on their side of the arena. Michael reflexed his Sefu Element quickly into his Power Sword and nodded to Stormy to do the same. She extended her arm letting her Power ramp up and pushed it to her Element. A quick reflex back with her hand and the Element shimmered to life. In the blink of an eye, the Element transformed into the dazzling silver Power Sword, its crystalline blade edged with deadly silver.

The crowd roared to life with approval and Stormy gazed up at them all. How crazy this was to her. Just thinking about what she was getting ready to do was making her shake with excitement and trepidation. She felt Michael's Life Power spread out from his body and touch her. It soothed her so that the nervousness subsided allowing her to focus better. As her focus sharpened, she searched for the Power Connection Joshua had instructed her to find as soon as possible.

As soon as she had it, she grabbed onto it with her own Power. The synch was formed and the result was spectacular. She could literally see and hear Michael's interpretation of his surroundings and the patterns in his mind as he formulated the physical movements and swordplay he would use to counter any attacks that would be coming at them.

"Good Stormy. You have it. Just stay with the synch and I'll show you what to do." Michael gave her an encouraging look. However, behind his encouragement she detected he was uncomfortable with the situation and appeared to be holding something crucial from her. Why would he do that? She had to find out what it was. Just think of the reasons for Warrior proficiency as Joshua had instructed. It had to be there.

"The challengers of the Warrior Initiation Ceremony will be Warrior Hunter and Warrior Jacob. Come forward to the center of the arena." The announcer pointed to both of them and then to the area directly across from Michael and Stormy.

Both advanced forward side by side and stopped at their designated locations. As Michael and Stormy had done, Hunter and Jacob reflexed their Elements into their deadly Power Swords. They both nodded to Michael and then to Stormy. Like Michael, both of their expressions were uncomfortable and concerned but determined.

The announcer withdrew from the arena floor back to the sideline yelling, "Let the Initiation begin!" The crowd again went wild, screaming and yelling.

There was no movement at first, just three Warriors and Stormy, the Warrior to be, staring each other down, gauging each other's first move to get the upper hand. Stormy's senses were in hyper drive. She could feel the flow and surge of Life Power around her, taste the gritty dust from the floor of the arena in the air, and hear the overly fast beat of her own heart in her ears. The only thing keeping her focused and not running for escape was Michael's link to her, his steadfast confidence and concentration in the face of danger and possible death.

The beginning pause didn't last long. It was just a moment in time and then Hunter and Jacob began to circle the floor. Michael and Stormy mirrored their movements to maintain a defensive or offensive position and stance depending on what they needed to do. Hunter was paired with Stormy and Jacob with Michael. At least for now. Although Stormy was linked with Michael, she wasn't able to maintain vision of him for long as Hunter attacked using a spearing motion at her. She answered with a defensive block, swinging down

and pushing his blade to her left. The ring of metal on metal reverberated throughout the arena. Stormy could hear blade to blade contact near her as Michael and Jacob had engaged in their battle as well.

She countered swiftly as she circled around from her block into swinging for Jacob's head. Well, Joshua did instruct her not to hold anything back. She was almost amused by the expression on Jacob's face when he realized she was actually going to be a challenge. He countered with an equally fast block.

His skills were incredible and he came back in a slicing motion towards her side. She quickly side blocked Jacob's move but wasn't quite as quick as she needed to be. The cut was minor on the outside of her arm but it still stung. She hissed before her natural healing ability kicked in numbing the pain. Michael picked up on the fact that she had been injured and growled deep and loud. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him give Hunter a mighty shove pushing him back several paces to get to her.

"I've got this!" She yelled at him. That was all she needed was to throw him off his game and get him into trouble. She concentrated on the link with Michael, receiving and analyzing moves and countermoves to put them in the best coordinated position, the best offensive and defensive postures. She circled and maneuvered to get closer to him as she realized the rival Warriors were trying to cut them off from each other. The exchange of swordplay continued; cut, block, overhead attack, block, side body jab, block. The occasional injury occurred, nothing serious though, as they struck points against each other--a sword guard to Jacob's nose, a slice across Stormy's hand, a nick on Jacob's side, a cut to Stormy's collarbone.

From the images and feedback she was getting from Michael, he was faring better, but then he had been doing this for centuries. She wondered how long this would go on as she was getting tired of entertaining people she didn't even know. More exchanges of attacks and blocks, another slice to her outer thigh. *Damn it, concentrate. Jacob can only go so easy on you without getting busted.*

She needed to settle her mind and re-focus so she silently recited

the rules. *A Warrior must be proficient to save his own butt.* With a quick counter blow and more force than she realized she was capable of, she ended up knocking Jacob off balance. She swept with her sword going for his legs. In his effort to escape, he misjudged his footing and landed on his ass. He was quick though and rolled back to his feet coming at her again. She swore she heard Michael laughing near her side as the ringing of his and Hunter's Swords picked up speed.

A Warrior must be proficient to defend against the Wraith. Jacob was fast. He spun around her, grabbing her from behind. Was that even allowed? She blocked his Power Sword from her neck with her own and then landed a satisfying elbow directly to his mid-section. With a whoosh of air leaving his lungs, he released her and stepped back. Stormy spun around so he didn't have time to re-group and attack from behind again. As she did so, she was now facing diagonal to Michael. She glanced his way and saw he was slowing down and faltering in the face of Hunter's attacks. She swore there was some type of unspoken communication going on. It brought up her guard even more. Something was wrong.

As she was trying to figure out what the danger was, the link she had with Michael vastly narrowed. *What the hell?* She boosted her Power level and hung on to the link with all the tenacity she could muster, but for some reason Michael was purposely trying to disengage her. Jacob took advantage of her temporary loss of focus on him and attacked. Once again, she paid the price for not keeping strict attention to her direct competition and focusing on Michael. The slice was deeper than the other cuts and nicks she had received and much more painful. She tried to stop it, but the cry escaped her lips.

The roar that sounded next to her was the only warning she got as Michael flung Hunter away from him and dove in front of her, his massive frame blocking to protect her. Michael swung his fist and connected squarely with Jacob's chin, snapping his head back and backing him up several steps. While Michael was distracted for that split second, Hunter tried to take advantage swinging his massive blade at Michael's back, but Stormy was there.

A Warrior must be proficient to defend others such as Power

Keepers. Her blade sang true as she swung it between Michael's back and Hunter's blade. The impact was bone jarring, but her strength held.

With her blade still engaged with Hunter's, she swiftly slid and rotated it up the length of his towards the guard of his hilt. The blade locked into the curve of one side of his guard and she twisted and pulled up. The goal was to de-sword him. To her disappointment it didn't work, but did throw off his rhythm, so he had to retreat and re-assess. For whatever reason, Michael was still trying to unlink from her which was quite frustrating as she needed the additional feedback from him. While the two other Warriors were re-grouping Michael maneuvered so Stormy was by his side. They stood ready as one team.

The link was almost completely gone and Stormy tried to see out of the corner of her eye to give Michael a dirty look. What was wrong with him? She noticed the silent communication between him and Hunter. She watched his expression change from one of determination to acceptance. He gritted his teeth and dropped his sword arm to his side. What little link there was left was not much, but she held on with everything in her to that one last thread. A vague thought reached her. She gasped in horror. No! Why would he do that? Drop his guard? Why?

All of the lessons in that instantaneous moment swirled in her mind. The movements, the history, the reasons of Warriors being closer than even brothers, their inseparable connection. Time in her consciousness slowed as the images and symbols Joshua had tried to communicate to her came into one diamond clarifying moment. *A Warrior must be proficient in order to protect their Khenti. At no matter what the cost.* My God, the initiation wasn't a test of skills or Warrior tenacity and strength, it was a test of commitment and what the Warrior was willing to give up to the greater good of the Sphinx and the life they protected. She felt like an idiot as she should have picked up on what Joshua had been trying to reveal to her all along.

As everything locked into place, Michael dropped his guard completely, ready to receive the killing strike. In her heightened state of awareness, she picked up on Hunter spearing forward with

his Power Sword. Hunter was fast, but not fast enough. Stormy was faster. In that frozen moment before she moved, she really had never known to what depth she was willing to give of herself, of her life. But all she knew was that no one would ever take Michael's life as long as she had hers. Her feet were fast, her movements sure as her Sphinx came breathtakingly to the surface propelling her with superhuman speed to intercept the blade. Just before the blade struck her, she fleetingly hoped her ability to heal didn't fail her this time, but still, it was worth it.

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No one expected it, not even Michael. One moment, he was fully prepared to take the required killing blow to end the Initiation, and the next from out of nowhere and at a speed no one should have been capable of, Stormy was there. There was no time for a defensive movement, a block, or anything to save her precious skin. He realized she had sacrificed herself to save the Khenti. The one requirement to become a fully initiated Warrior, if the Warrior survived it.

The blow was quick, Hunter's blade slid cleanly through her small body just below the rib cage through her diaphragm. The cry that escaped her lips was cut off as her breath left her body, her Power Sword instantly reflexing to its Element form with the shock to her Life Power. Michael roared his fury as her legs buckled and she fell to her knees. His inner Sphinx screamed in agony, his heart in instant mind numbing pain as Stormy's agony screamed through their Power Mate connection.

It burned through his nerve endings and all he could think of was to kill the person responsible for so fatally injuring her. He was in Hunter's shocked and guilt ridden face instantly and grabbed him throwing him several feet across the arena. He ran over to his precious Stormy and knelt carefully before her. The crowd was deathly silent. Not a whisper of movement or sound as they awaited the final fate of their Power Keeper.

Chapter Twelve

“Stormy. Oh, Ancients, no.” The agonized whisper fell from his lips. He gently grasped her shoulder to prevent her from falling face first on the Power Sword still protruding from her body. The shock of her pain reverberated to the depths of his sensitized inner Sphinx. Her eyes were glazed in agonizing pain trying to focus on him, occasionally gasping to try to take in a breath of air. She was pale as a ghost.

“I've got to remove the Power Sword so you can heal, angel. I'm sorry. Hold on.” He looked down. There was so much blood. Even an ancient Warrior might not survive a wound like this. She was so young, how could she survive? *She had to!*

He took hold of the sword grip, closed his eyes. “I'm so sorry, Stormy.” He slid the sword back out as straight and smooth as he could. Even with the care he had tried to give, he cringed as he still heard the air escape her lungs in a whoosh.

He shoved the sword back towards Hunter who had limped back over to their side. Hunter knelt down next to Michael and Stormy. His face was stricken with guilt, fear, anguish.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...” his words ended as he choked on anything else he would have said.

Michael briefly looked at him and acknowledged, “I know.” He turned back to Stormy and shuddered seeing all the blood coursing down her front. She started to fall forward, her eyes closing. He caught her in his arms gathering her close. “Stay with me, Stormy. Please.” He begged. *Why wasn’t she healing?*

He yelled to Joshua, “Get Alexandria, damn it.” This was killing him. Who told her what to do? He would kill them.

He lowered Stormy until she was in his lap, wrapped in his arms. She blinked up at him and appeared to be in less pain. Was the bleeding slowing down? Please be a good thing. “How did you know? Who told you? I’ll make them pay.” He watched her try and smile. How could she find humor in any of this?

“No one told me. Directly anyway.” She whispered haltingly. “They did ....what you needed them to do. They taught me the skills and knowledge..... to figure it out. And you were pretty obvious.... I knew you were up to no good when you tried to cut off the link.” She stopped speaking, closed her eyes for a moment trying to catch her breath.

Michael reached down kissing her forehead, praying to any entity who would listen to spare her. He was such an idiot not claiming her, not truly making her his Power Mate. Denying her, leaving her stranded alone in his world, not sharing the truth with her. He hoped he could still set it right.

In an effort to help her heal, he placed his palm over her heart and delved into her Life Force. He tried to stabilize her, but just as he was able to reach it and smooth the broken Life Power, it slipped away from him again. It just wasn't working. It always worked to some aspect. Why was it not working now?

Just as he started to panic and lose his patience with waiting for Alexandria to show up, she appeared. She rushed across the dirt packed arena in her medical garb and an expression of deep concern for her friend. She knelt down placing her hand on Stormy's arm rapidly searching the damage in her body. She gave Stormy a sideways glance, “I see you figured it out.”

“Yeah, I did.” Stormy whispered weakly. Michael saw her try and smile, but her expression showed the pain she was experiencing. He glared at Alexandria and growled at her. The only thing he was interested in at the moment was Stormy’s well-being. Enough with the side chatter.

Alexandria returned his glare and then turned back to Stormy, “Stormy, you’re healing too slowly. I need you to gather Life Power to yourself while I check on the other Warriors. I’m sure they’re fine, other than a bit of mental anguish.”

“Damn it! Hunter will be fine. Stormy needs your help. She can't draw Life Power. She's too weak!” Michael barked at her. His frustration and concern was showing.

“She can, through you, if you would stop being so stubborn.” To Stormy, Alexandria directed, “Your body has already numbed the pain and started basic repairs. Reach through Michael for the

energy. His system will support it, I promise."

Michael wasn't so sure, but his sister would never lie to him and she seemed unconcerned over Stormy's condition. He brushed his fingers over Stormy's soft cheek. His precious Stormy. He would do anything to save her.

"Alright angel, let's do this." She slowly complied, reaching over and placing her hand on Michael's chest. He hoped she had the strength even with him as a conduit. Stormy closed her eyes and got that adorable crinkle between her eyebrows when she was concentrating hard.

At first, he didn't sense anything. Then, slowly, a flutter of Life Power entered into his body. It was different being the source versus just drawing what he had in the past for himself or receiving the Life Power during a Transference.

As the draw ramped up higher, it was incredible. He felt the surge and flow of the Power shimmering through his body. He felt Stormy as it left him and spread through her body, and he felt the healing as her cells soaked up the energy. Thank the Ancients, for the healing. He didn't know what he would have done if she hadn't healed. He brushed his hands over her body as the Life Power hummed through him and into her. Her color began to return, her breathing took on a smoother flow, and her heart to beat stronger.

The terrible gash in her stomach closed and faded to nothing but a faint silver line. Surge after surge of energy rushed through his body, as always, a potent aphrodisiac to any Warrior's body no matter what the circumstances. Luckily, Stormy was in his lap. Trying to explain the hard-on he had right now would not be timely to the situation, although he was sure his Warriors would understand.

It seemed like forever, but to his relief, Stormy was now holding her own and her eyes had their sparkling glow again when her Life Power was up. Finally, the flow of Life Power through him slowed down, ebbed, and eventually ended. He was beyond relieved that she was healed and at the same time already missed the intimate connection that was only theirs. Stormy moved trying to stand up and Michael held on to her helping her.

The crowd instantly came to life applauding their approval and

bringing him back to where they were. Oh yes, the Warriors Initiation. All of his people watching her, judging her, seeing her as the ultimate instrument as a Warrior and Power Keeper. In the back of his mind, he heard the announcer giving the final decision that she would stand at the battles, be a part of the battles. His inner Sphinx spun up into instant agitation. *Protect Her!* It was the only thing he could hear repeating over and over in his mind.

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Stormy was overwhelmed by the cheering and yelling of approval from the Egyptians, Guardians, and Elders. She had almost died and yet now stood before all of them, a fully initiated Warrior and Power Keeper. She was mostly healed, but was still a bit weak and just wanted to rest. Michael was hovering over her and looked at her with those incredible fathomless deep blue eyes. What she saw in them was shocking. Fury; pure unadulterated fury. He stared at her, looking from her face, to her blood covered body, to the crowd, and back to her face. She could sense a low hot burn coming from his Sphinx directed at hers, which of course fired her up as well.

"Michael." She held up her hands as he reached over and quickly grabbed her around the middle lifting her up and over his shoulder. "Michael!" she squealed. Not caring of what the crowd thought or the ceremonial requirements, he stalked across the arena to the exit doors. The man was incredibly powerful to be sure. He didn't even seem to acknowledge he had weight on his shoulder and simply held her in place with one arm wrapped around her legs, his hand on her butt.

Beneath her, he moved like a prowling cat with the sleek movement of his muscles under her abdomen which was firmly pressed against his shoulder. She had to use her arms to keep her upper body somewhat stable; otherwise, she would have face-planted in his back.

Michael made quick work of the distance to the elevators. He punched the access button and swung them into the elevator as soon as the doors opened. He was cold stone silent even when Stormy tried to engage him. "Michael, I'm fine now. I just need to rest. No one did anything wrong. Please, put me down."

Her plea was ignored as Michael growled low in his throat. As

soon as the elevator opened, he was on the move again straight through the doors to the Warrior's living quarters, not even out of breath as he sprinted up the polished redwood stairs towards their rooms.

Their room's doors were opened and closed behind them in a blink and Stormy was suddenly deposited on her feet. It was so quick and she was a little woozy still, so she swayed a bit but steadied. Michael was obviously still upset. He paced before her, his hands closing and opening as if he would like to have them around someone's neck. She glanced at him concerned.

"Michael, please talk to me? What have I done?"

He stopped in his tracks, his head down as if tracking prey. "What have you done?" he growled. "What have you done?! You almost died. For me." He slashed his hand in front of himself.

"I'm not worthy of that sacrifice. You as the Power Keeper must always be protected. You as my Power..." he didn't finish what he was going to say, only growled again and restarted his insistent pacing.

"Yes, the Power Keeper must be protected, but the Khenti is first and foremost to be protected. Without you, all is lost. Your Warriors couldn't fight as one team and the Wraith would win, destroy this world. The Warriors need you to be safe; I need you to be safe. That's why I must be at the battles, to make sure you all have the Life Power and to help back you up if needed. You've already proven you can survive without a Power Keeper and you could surely find another." She pleaded with him to try and make him understand the burning need running through her soul that he be safe and that she fulfill her purpose. Otherwise, her Transition, her training, her very desire to give herself to him, if he would just have her, would be for nothing.

He stopped before her, his eyes fierce, his breathing heavy, muscles tense, pure Life Power rolling off of him surrounding her. "No! We can never lose you. To do so now would be too catastrophic. You don't understand. I can't lose you, damn it!" He wanted to say more, it was obvious, but something was riding him hard.

Stormy crossed her arms across her chest, her chin coming up.

She couldn't help herself, but she wouldn't stand down on this. "I have read through the eScrolls and I know in the depths of my heart I have to be there, Michael. If I have to, I will go to the Elders."

Michael's eyes narrowed to mere slits. She knew she was demanding too much too soon after the traumatizing event of her being stabbed through by a Power Sword right in front of him. He tried to talk but didn't seem to be able to re-focus from whatever inner demons were taking over his mind. She wanted to say something, anything to calm him down as she watched his agitated movements. He closed his eyes, ran his hands through his hair, the movement giving away his agitation.

His nostrils flared and he opened his eyes staring straight at her. Stared like a predator. "Blood, must come off."

Those words were all Michael growled out before he advanced at her and grabbed her around the waist. Stormy was picked up and carried with blurring speed into the bathroom and into the shower. Once he put her down, she regained her balance and put out a hand toward him.

"Michael?"

He reached over and activated the shower but didn't answer her. She could see he kept looking at the blood on her. So much blood covered the front of her. It was everywhere. The silvery scent must be driving his Sphinx crazy.

Suddenly, he advanced on her again. When he came at her, he reached out and grabbed the front of her shirt. His hands shook, but his strength was incredible. He tore the shirt from top to bottom. Pulling it from her body, he threw it several feet away from them. He then removed his own shirt pulling it over his head and flinging it behind him. He pushed her back into the warm spray and Stormy watched the red rivulets of blood make trails down her stomach. Michael fell to his knees before her.

Stormy was overcome with emotion. She had seen Michael aggressive, possessive, even upset and angry to some aspect before, but never all at once. His emotions were running off of him explosively. His Life Power swirled around them in its misty, glittering form, surrounding her, trying to cling to her and to him. It was warm, protective, sexual, demanding.

She was shocked when he had picked her up and had torn off her shirt. Now he was on his knees roughly untying her boots, not asking, just doing it. He made short work of it too, first one flying across the bathroom, then the other. His hands reached to her belt, popped it loose, and slid her pants down her legs and off each foot until she was left standing in nothing but her under clothes.

Standing, he seized her by the waist and brought her almost naked body flush up against his. Skin to skin contact where they were bare caused Stormy to shudder with need. Both of them were slippery wet and the steam surrounding them floated through Michael's Life Power which still continued to swirl around them, cling to them.

It was obvious he was beyond turned on as his hard powerful erection pressed against her. She licked her lips and Michael pounced, crushing his mouth to hers demanding entry into her mouth. His tongue thrust between her swollen lips while his hand reached into her braid releasing the clasp. Her long golden hair fell loosely around her shoulders wet and clinging to her skin.

She wasn't sure who was moaning or perhaps it was both of them, but she didn't care. This was exactly where she wanted to be, in Michael's arms, him powerful and seducing. She arched against him, rubbing, purring. She wanted more and in experiment, released some of her own Life Power entwining it in and among his, rubbing it against his body, against hers.

Michael shuddered against her, groaned, and deepened the kiss even more. He grabbed her hips, pushing himself against her so she could feel his arousal. He ground against her as if he couldn't get close enough.

Stormy was shocked when he broke the kiss just long enough to reach down and rip her bra and panties off. Both of the articles of clothing went flying behind them, leaving her standing before him in her natural form. She blushed as he slowly perused every inch of her body, starting at the top of her head and going to the tips of her toes. He paused, oh so briefly when his eyes skimmed past her breasts and the apex of her legs. He made her feel sensual, wanted. His eyes started to glow.

He whispered to her, "Angel, you are a Goddess."

Michael firmly took hold of her arms pushing her back against the shower wall, pinning her with his body, bringing her arms above her head and capturing them in one of his large hands. She felt him undoing the belt of his pants with his other hand, unzipping them. His energy was spinning around her, making her want him even more. Want something she couldn't even explain.

Michael was driving her insane. All she wanted was to be fully ravished by him and thought he had stopped when suddenly he shredded the last of the clothes from her. Backed into the wall now, he had her exactly where she wanted to be, between a hard wall and a hard male. She could feel every inch of him crushed up against her, from his hard chest to his ripped abdomen, to the hard ridge of his cock eagerly pressing against her. Everything in her blood shouted for her to wrap her legs around him and have him take her hard and fast. Oh, let him take her hard and fast.

He was so hard against her and it felt good. She was achy with need and tried to rub up against him. Anything to ease the pressure within her body. She wanted him to kiss her, to touch her, to tease her.

He must have read her thoughts because he did. He nipped at her earlobe, laved below her ear, kissed his way down her neck where he hit the damn Collar. She wished she could just rip off.

She sighed and arched into him harder as he continued to her collar-bone at the same time rhythmically grinding into her pelvis with his. She moaned when he sprinkled a line of kisses down to her rosebud tipped nipple, suckling it into his mouth, nipping, circling it, sucking again. He licked and lavished attention on the other one equally. To her delight, he was as affected by what he was doing as she was as he moaned and then purred. She could feel the vibrations against her skin and the sound was like heaven to her ears, pushing her enjoyment to the limits.

She didn't even have to tell him what she liked. He seemed to know exactly what she needed. His talented fingers found her warm, wet spot that she wanted him to touch the most. He ran his fingers through her feminine curls, along the petal soft folds of her sex, and inserted his thick finger into her wet opening. She felt his cock jump against her and wanted him to be inside her. Joined with

her as one.

Stormy sighed a long "Yessss" grasping onto his hair pulling at his thick locks. He was definitely more than willing to comply and continued his kissing exploration between her breasts, working his way towards her smooth stomach, and stopping as his lips touched on the silver scar. The scar she had gotten protecting him.

He stood up before her grasping both of her arms at her sides, looking into her eyes. He just stood there looking for all the world like a man devastated. Stormy could tell he was conflicted.

He seemed to be about to say something to her, but he didn't. He closed his eyes, released her, and turned his back on her. He leaned up against the wall bracing himself with his arms. The steaming jets of water ran over his head and streamed down his body.

Stormy was uncertain what to do. She didn't think she had done anything wrong but Michael was acting so strange. His mood swings were crazy. One minute he was caring, the next angry, the next passionate, then he just seemed confused. She carefully walked up behind him gently placing her hand on his back, pressing her cheek against him, feeling the powerful muscles and the tension in them, his deep heartbeat.

She wished she could do something to help the man she was desperately in love with. She paused her thoughts for a moment. Yes, she loved him. She thought she had always loved him. Knew it, because she wouldn't have almost given her life up like she did today for anyone else. He had captured her heart the moment she had seen him at her work in his full Warrior mode, when he had sworn he would take the Transformation himself if he could, and when he had reached into her with his own Life Power risking himself to save her. If he would only take the risk with his heart.

She sighed. "It's alright, Michael. I can finish in here. I think I've caused enough problems for you for the day. I just seem to be underfoot all the time. Perhaps it's time for me to find my own place. I think you've done enough for me." She turned away to finish on the other side of the shower.

"No!" Michael spun around grabbing her from behind. He drew her backside tight up against his body wrapping his arms around her and resting his chin against the top of her head. His entire body

shook, his breathing labored, his Life Power erratically flowing around them, still entwined with hers.

"Michael, please tell me," she quietly whispered. "I can't fix what I've done if you don't talk to me." Her voice wobbled with her emotions.

He barked a sharp laugh. "Stormy, angel, you have done nothing wrong." He kissed the top of her head. "It's me. I've done the unforgivable. I've taken the most precious thing away from you and you'll hate me for it." His Power swirled around them again, erratic as his moods.

Shaking her head she firmly claimed, "Damn it. I know you had to Transform me and I told you I understood. I'm not angry about that. I could never be angry when you did it for your Warriors, your people, the whole world. You even risked your life for me to save me during the Transformation. You gave of yourself. How could I be angry about that? I love you for that."

She gasped realizing what she had said, felt him become still behind her. She hadn't meant to declare it, put even more pressure on him as he seemed to be conflicted about their relationship.

"Great Ancients." He groaned, held her tighter. "If it were only that simple. Stormy, I know you're not angry about the Transformation." He paused, opened his mouth to speak again, and took a deep breath before he continued. "I don't know how much you remember, but during the Transformation things were not going the way they were supposed to. I had to Join with you to save you, to Join our Powers, our souls, our very lives together to make sure you survived." He released her stepping back and waited for the rejection.

She turned towards him. She didn't understand why he was so upset. Calmly she said, "I know all that. Alexandria told me."

He ran his hands through his wet hair. "But did she tell you Joining is forever?" His voice grew tense, louder. "That you're Joined forever to me. You can never be Joined properly to anyone else even if you decide to Mate with them? You'll never be able live above ground on your own and you'll have to live with me, for the rest of your life? I did that to you. I took your life, your freedom to be Joined to someone you could love forever. I took everything from

you."

He looked at her with sadness in his eyes. It suddenly dawned on her he was waiting for her anger, her revulsion. He was waiting for her to totally and completely reject him. And she knew he would take it too. Even though he didn't deserve it. This man who took all of the responsibility upon his shoulders and gave up everything for his people, the world, and even her. My God, he meant everything to her. She could never reject him.

Her poor Michael. He looked so dejected. Hearing this from his sexy lips was actually the best news she had heard in a long while. She could be his and only his, if he was willing to have her. She loved him and didn't want anyone else. Ever. She could be his forever and ever. She slowly walked up to him and placed her hands on his bare, wet chest. He gazed down at her as if he was holding his breath, his eyes uncertain. She gifted him with a slow sensual smile and her eyes began to glow softly as her Life Power swirled and caressed his skin.

"I don't want anyone else. I only want you. Can't you tell that?" She stood up on her tiptoes, nipped at his lips, lightly kissing him.

"Michael, I'm not angry. You saved me. Not just during the Transformation, but from what I called a life. I never felt like I was where I was supposed to be anywhere else. I was drawn to this place and didn't even live in my own apartment most of the time, just stayed at the temporary rooms in the top of the Complex."

Looking down at his tanned muscled chest, she placed a kiss over his heart, felt his deep steady heartbeat beneath her lips, took a deep breath and looked him straight in his gorgeous deep blue eyes. "There was and never will be anyone else for me. I could never find that one person who made me feel alive and whole. As soon as I saw you, I knew you were the one. I wasn't even afraid when you grabbed me to transform me. It just felt like you had rescued me from an unending nonexistence. I could never hate you for that. I love you. Michael, I love you."

He appeared in shock or maybe startled by her revealing speech. She wasn't sure, but as he opened his mouth as if to speak, she quickly placed her fingertips over his lips. "It's okay. You don't have to say anything. I wanted you to know and to stop punishing

yourself as you did nothing wrong. Just everything right. I don't want to make you feel pressured to any of this. If nothing else, let's just enjoy what we have for now. No matter what the odds are in all the battles, let's just enjoy each other while we can. Joined. I'm willing to take the chance. Please."

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Michael closed his eyes, letting her gentle re-assuring words and her warm Life Power swirl through his thoughts and around his body. He still couldn't believe she hadn't rejected him, turn around and run screaming from him. Damning him for even finding her. No, his precious Power Keeper and Power Mate accepted him. Not only accepted him, but loved him. Hearing those words brought more joy to his heart than any joy he had had in forever. Her fingers were against his lips and he grasped her wrist moving her hand just the small fraction so he could place a gentle kiss into the center of her palm.

He said not a word but looked down into her beautiful sea green eyes, reached around to the base of her spine and pulled her body firmly up against his. He tangled his other hand in her damp silky hair and claimed her mouth. Firm, demanding, passionate, she wouldn't escape him. She would be his, Joined, forever. His tongue ran along the seam of her mouth, and as she opened for him, he plunged deep. Both his tongue and his Life Power swirled, plunged, caressed, enticed. It took but a moment and they were both lost to the sensation and the Power.

Grasping her firmly, he lifted her up and at the same time, she wrapped her long slender legs around his waist, locking her ankles behind him. Not giving a second thought to the water dripping off their bodies, he broke the kiss and carried her across the bathroom, down the stairs and into their bedroom. Once at the side of the bed, he leaned her over it, laying her down among the gold and blue satin sheets and pillows, he fit himself snug and tight against her, his hips locked with hers.

From his leaning position above her, he gazed down at her passion glazed, glowing eyes, her blushing cheeks, and her long golden hair spread around her. She was a goddess. His goddess.

"Stormy, I need to tell you something. I have to tell you

something. I knew. I knew the moment I saw you that you were the one. You were the Power Keeper. The one to bring us out of our dark existence with the true Life Power. I knew you would be everything. Not just everything to our life, our mission, but everything to me. When I looked into your eyes, when I touched your Life Force during your Transformation, when I held you even before we were Joined, I knew you were the one. Mine. My true Power Mate."

As she tried to speak, he quickly pressed his lips to hers. A kiss of passion, of need. When the kiss was broken and they were both breathless, he rushed to finish his declaration.

"I knew no matter what that I had to save you. Not just for our people, or for the world, but for me. I felt selfish, claiming you, Joining with you. Taking all your choices away and throwing all of this uncertainty at you. But no matter what the uncertainty, I swear to you, no matter the danger, no matter what life may throw at us, I will always be yours. I will always give you the love and protection you deserve. I do love you, Stormy, if you'll have me. But this is your choice and this choice is forever. Joined forever, if you'll have me."

Slowly, he moved away from her and stood before her awaiting her judgment. He watched her braced up on her elbows, sprawled in all her naked glory. By the Ancients, his Stormy truly did look like a goddess. Standing there, he felt like he didn't deserve her even if he did love her with every part of his being.

A crazy, all-consuming love. How had she gotten under his skin so easily? To be Joined was incredible but this was so much more. He wanted to run his hands all over her, touching, tasting her golden skin.

"Yes, Michael. I want, need to be yours. To be your Power Mate. To be your only one and you my only one. Forever. Please, Join with me. I need you. Now." Her words rang true and powerful to his ears and she reached out to him. She reached out to him.

Michael needed no further affirmation. He could see it in her eyes. He could feel it in her Life Power and how it weaved and swirled with his. Their Powers in tune with their passion and love. It took him less than a second and he had his boots and fatigue pants off. He watched as Stormy gazed at his body and as her eyes

paused on the part of his anatomy that was quite obviously ready and erect. She licked her lips sending his pulse racing, the fire in his veins burning, and his Life Power swirling and glowing.

He leaned back over the bed, crawling up the length of her body, positioning himself between her legs. Skin to skin wasn't even close enough for them. Michael claimed her lips again. Deep, demanding. She parted them at his demand for entrance, his tongue diving deep, penetrating. She sighed, moaned her pleasure.

His hands touched her everywhere. He caressed, teased, brushed along her neck near her pulse line, over her collarbone, across her breast, over her nipples. She arched into him, rubbing against his rigid cock, sending shock waves of pleasure through every inch of him. She rotated her hips slightly, so that the head and then the shaft of his erection slid over her clit, but he denied her the final release from her torment at least for the moment.

He laughed and whispered in her ear, "Soon, angel, soon."

He licked below her ear and followed the path of his hands to her nipple, drew the sensitized bud into his mouth, nipped, and sucked. She moaned, wrapped her legs around his waist, trying to draw him in. But no, not yet.

He turned to the other breast, treated it to the same stimulation and then slid back up to claim her mouth again. As he plunged his tongue into her mouth, he reached down with his hand turning his body just a bit so he could rub her sensitized flesh. He brushed his fingers through her feminine curls, found her wet and ready, and slid a finger deep inside. She gasped, digging her nails into his back, and arched trying to find her release.

He directed his energy into and out of her as he slid his finger into and out of her bringing her to higher and higher levels of ecstasy. Soon he slid another finger inside of her putting pressure on her sweet spot. Plunging in, sliding out.

Her moans and the way she was rubbing her body against his were driving him crazy. She was so damn wet and ready, but he wanted their first time to be pure rapture, their complete Joining to be explosive. He angled his hand so his fingers were still inside her but his palm could rub up against her clit giving her even more pleasure. Plunging in, sliding out, faster. His energy flowed in and

out, faster, brighter. Both of their breathing became harsher, faster.

Fire. He was on fire. His energy was becoming more charged and at the same time more closely aligned with Stormy's becoming one with it. Life Power glowed and shimmered flowing over both of them, through them. He held on tightly to his Stormy as he felt her body spiraling higher and higher for the ultimate release. He was on the edge and he didn't want to go over without her.

His talented Stormy reached down between their bodies and found his hard manhood. She grasped him, squeezing and it felt so good he groaned deep in his throat. His lips slid against hers, his tongue licked, plunged, danced with hers. His hand rewarded her with deeper thrusts as his hips thrust his cock through her fingers. His breaths came faster, his muscles tensed, energy poured off him in waves.

"Aaah, Stormy," his lips brushed against hers. He removed his fingers from her wet tunnel and he captured her wrists drawing them above her head. He rolled his body back firmly against the entire length of hers. He lifted his hips just enough so he could rub the head of his engorged cock back and forth across her wet feminine lips. Back and forth among the folds, the wetness. Teasing, not quite entering, but oh so close.

She arched her back, trying to claim more, but he kept himself just out of reach. She gasped, panting, biting at his lips, thrusting her own tongue into his mouth. He groaned, his hips grinding into hers. He reached down squeezing her outer hip. She wrapped her legs tightly around him, her hands gripping at his shoulders.

Sliding his hand up her bottom and under her back, he touched the base of her spine massaging in gentle circles. At the same time, he ended their shared teasing torture by shifting his hips bringing his thick cock directly against her wet opening. She tried to push up for that final penetration, but he held her in place.

Sea green eyes beseeched him. "Please, Michael. Now. Please. I need you."

He looked deep into her eyes. "Feel me, Stormy. Not just my body, not just my Life Power, but that which is me. The part of me which will be entwined with you forever and you with me forever. My Life Force."

She focused on him and he felt her deep inside the layers of his energy finding the bright force deep within him, pulsing with life, a warmth filled with an intense powerful love for her. Her pupils dilated as she was deep within him. He knew his eyes would dilate as well, and as he had done in the past, moved his Life Force deep within her finding hers as well. Their Life Forces brushed and twined with each other. With the Joining, the Life Powers in parallel ramped to new higher levels, glowing, shimmering, swirling around them.

They both felt it, knew it was the ultimate moment. The ultimate moment of becoming one. He leaned down capturing her lips in a powerful kiss and slowly thrust his hips entering her tight feminine channel in one long slide. She was small, tight. An exquisite torture surrounding him. He held for a moment with his entire length inside of her. He released her hip and grabbed on to the satin sheets on both sides of her, fisting the fabric to try and get some type of control. He slid almost out of her and then plunged back in to the hilt. She gasped. Heaven to his ears.

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Stormy was in heaven. Surrounded by Michael. Connected by physical means and by their Powers. She had him exactly where she wanted him. Deep inside her. The moment he had entered her something had changed. A shift in the center of her being. She could feel him deep inside her both through the joining of their bodies and the Joining of their Life Forces. She wrapped her arms and legs tightly around him wanting more. Needing more. His cock was hard, throbbing inside her. She was throbbing.

“Michael, please.”

He slid out, thrust in, slow and steady. She needed faster and tried to speed up the motion, her hips circling, grinding against him. He groaned and reached down grasping her hip, sliding all the way to the hilt, again. Holding for a moment. One last time, he broke the kiss and looked into her eyes with a passion and love she had never seen in anyone's eyes before.

He whispered, “I am yours, you are mine. Joined as One. Forever.” His dark blue eyes began to glow intensely, brighter and brighter, his Life Force circling, shimmering brighter than she had

ever seen before, his Life Force engulfing hers in light and love until she was completely blinded in shimmering glowing light, lost in him and he in her. She arched up against him needing absolutely everything from him and she gave absolutely everything to him.

His lips locked down on hers in a mind-blowing kiss drawing her life into him and giving his to her. His hips began a frenzied dance with hers, his shaft sliding almost completely out of her and then sliding back home along her sensitive nerve endings once again. He thrust in, pulled out, faster and faster. Harder. His fingers pressed into her hip, her nails digging into his back, the energy around them blindingly bright, swirling. Intense. Their breaths labored as they reached for the ultimate goal, their bodies and energies aligning as one.

Bare skin sliding against bare skin, their bodies grinding together. She could feel him deep inside of her and knew she was spiraling out of control. She wanted him to come with her and see him lose control. She wrapped her legs tighter around him and his thrusts became harder, faster, more frenzied.

Stormy could take no more. She was at the precipice of ecstasy, ready to fall. Her body coiled for the sensual explosion, pressing intimately against Michael, her inner walls beginning to contract around his hard cock. Michael shivered against her and she could feel he was ready to explode with her into ecstasy. He broke the kiss and whispered in her ear, “Come for me, Stormy. Come with me.”

The words were an aphrodisiac, and on his last long thrust, her world exploded with his. Her body arched into his and his into hers as both of them spiraled into heights they had never been before, both blinded by the Life Power surrounding them and their Life Forces entwined on the inside. Stormy was lost to the exquisite pleasure and the feeling of complete oneness that she had never felt before in her life. Her consciousness didn’t seem to be her own and her world was a bit fuzzy on the edges as the multiple orgasms, too numerous to count, began to slow and quiet. Her breath sighed from her lips. She had died and gone to heaven. Her Michael sighed as well against her ear.

It took a bit to come back to herself, but as she did she realized her position had changed. Somewhere between the ecstasy and this

warm cuddling within Michael's arms, he must have shifted their positions. They were now both on their sides, Michael holding her close within his arms, her cheek against his warm chest, his strong heartbeat beating against her ear, soft blankets surrounding them. The room was in semi-darkness, their Life Powers and Life Forces quieted, but not separated. No, they were Joined. She could hear Michael in her head. Masculine thoughts, gentle thoughts, amazing thoughts. It was incredible and she had never felt so complete.

She lifted her head up so she could see him. What she saw was amazing. Michael was looking at her with an intense, all-consuming love, as if he could never lose her. She was sure she was looking back in the same manner as she just wanted to tunnel inside him forever. And his eyes....they were Michael's gorgeous, handsome dark blue eyes, but within the depths of his irises she could see her sea green color shimmering within his deep blue. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. “Michael?”

He smiled his sensual smile at her. “Don't worry, it’s a marking of the Joining. Your eyes exhibit the same affect. Your sea green with my blue. I’m in you and you’re in me. They are exactly the way they should be, angel, and it looks damn sexy.” He placed a gentle kiss on her lips. She could hear his sensual thoughts and returned some of her own to him. It had the exact affect that she had wanted as he growled and rolled her underneath him.

Chapter Thirteen

A loud knock on the door. Exaggerated clearing of throats. How could anyone interrupt the best dreams she ever had? A hard masculine body shifted against her and drew her even closer in his arms, his gorgeous mind brushing intimately against hers. Oh yeah, not a dream, but a heavenly reality. Michael and she were Joined.

"Go. Away," Her Michael commandingly mumbled. Yes, her Michael. She smiled to herself.

"I'm sorry, Khenti Michael. We can't. This is urgent." Joshua announced through the thick wood door. "Ethan has surveillance showing Elder Turin and some of his cronies with the explosives. The men have gone to intercept as it appears they're making their move and the situation has gone critical."

Michael stiffened beside her, his mind swirling with battle plans. He rapidly narrowed their shared Joined link to a low hum. *And there goes the heavenly reality. Crap.* Stormy sighed as Michael quickly bounded from the bed. She sat up watching him step into his mostly dry fatigue pants from the night before. He brushed his hands through his hair and over his face as he went to the door. As he reached for the knob, he turned toward her to make sure she was covered, his thoughts unhappy that he had to admit his men in her undressed state.

She tightly wrapped the satin blanket around her body and climbed out of the bed to sit on the edge of it.

Michael rolled his eyes, shook his head, and gave her a smile. He turned and opened the door. Joshua and Hunter entered with dire expressions on their faces. As they spotted her, the dire turned to open surprise. She was sure she looked quite the piece as she was sitting before them with nothing but a blanket around her, her hair in disrepair, and her guilty expression of having been completely ravished.

The two Warriors glanced from her to Michael and their surprise turned to recognition of what had occurred. They fell to their knees,

their Sefu Element hands over their hearts, heads bowed. In unison, they begin to recite, “We honor thy Joining...”

“We don't have time for that.” Michael barked. “Tell me exactly what’s going on.”

Michael closed the door behind them and bid them to stand and finish telling him what was going on. They stood back up and Joshua continued as Michael grabbed the rest of his clothes and gear in preparation to depart with them.

“Hunter couldn't sleep again, so he was up late checking the video coverage. He saw two of Turin's men enter through an unmarked doorway in the meeting area near the back. They had additional equipment and it looked like it was an assembled device of some kind. Ethan says it looks explosive. It doesn't look good, Michael.”

With authority and frustration in his gaze, he commented, “So it has finally come to a head. Damn him to hell for doing this to us.” He paused for a moment, shook his head. Stormy could hear through their Joined link the worry and frustration rolling through him. “The men are already en route?”

Joshua nodded the affirmative. “The rest of the Warriors and the Guardians Elite should be on the Gathering Level now awaiting your orders.”

Michael grabbed the last of his protective armor snapping his forearm covers in place. “Then we better get down there and stop this before it gets any worse.”

Stormy stood up and rushed over to Michael, placed a hand on his arm. She implored him, “It’s a trap. I know it is. I should be there.”

He gently enfolded her into his arms. “It could be, yes. More than likely it is. The more reason for you to stay here. You know that idiot will try and use you against us, against me. I need to focus and know you’re safe. Please, Stormy.” He beseeched her.

She saw his desperation and concern. Felt it in their link. The absolute certainty and panic in him if he should lose her and the conviction the trap wasn’t just against him and his men, but against her as well. In this, she would stand down. Just this once.

“Alright, but please be careful. I can't lose you either.” She gave

him a tentative smile.

He didn't resist it. Even with his men as audience, he reached down and kissed her. A powerful claiming kiss. It gave no doubt she was his, now and forever. She read his mind loud and clear. She must stay safe and alive.

Clearing of throats made him sigh and end it, but he ran his fingertips along her soft cheek and returned her smile.

To his men he said, "Let's go."

Stormy reached out one more time. "Michael, please be careful." She encompassed her look to all three of them. "All of you be careful. Please."

Michael grasped her chin angling her face only to him. "We will, angel." His Life Force swirled within her, warming and calming her. She nodded accepting his words. Knowing he would do everything in his power to keep everyone safe. Still as he left with his men, leaving her in the room alone to her own thoughts, she was uneasy. Something wasn't right, something beyond the obvious trap. Too obvious of a trap. There was more, she just couldn't put her finger on it.

She pondered this as she cleaned up and dressed in her usual garments. Strong garments for the everyday routine or the everyday battle. Yes, only the everyday battle she mused. She hysterically giggled to herself but quickly calmed as she could still feel Michael's strong presence within her. She absolutely knew she should be there with him. The conviction was intense but she had promised she wouldn't go, so she clamped down on her wayward desire to rush to him.

She was making excellent headway with those thoughts too and finishing with braiding her long hair when suddenly there was a horrendous vibration of pain within her system. It wasn't hers, but Michael's. "No!" she screamed to the empty room. She desperately searched for the connection to Michael. Was he alright? Injured? What the hell had just happened? He was still there, but the connection was much weaker. Damn it. She didn't care what kind of promises she had made. No promise was important enough if she lost him.

The desire to be with him rode her hard as she exited their

private quarters and made short work of the grand stairs. She was so focused with internally monitoring Michaels Life Force she didn't even notice the large body suddenly blocking her way. Startled anyone would so blatantly block her way, she stopped to see what dire news was about to be delivered. It wasn't who she would have ever considered at this moment.

"Good morning, Power Keeper." A leering, soulless-eyed Turin stood before her only an inch away. He smiled evilly at her, visually stripping her body, licking his lips.

"I'm amazed the Warriors would leave you here all by yourself unprotected. Silly them." Her skin crawled as he examined her face, his expression becoming thunderous.

"That spoiled prick has Joined with you?" He shrieked.

"Well, we'll just have to fix that." He reached for her with hatred glittering in his eyes.

Everything in her screamed to not let him touch her. Her skin crawled, her heart rate skyrocketed, she panicked. Before she even knew what she was going to do, she swung at his face. She was fast as her Sphinx propelled her to do it. Her nails raked across his face leaving bloody gouges in his cheek and across his eye. Turin hissed, stepping back from her covering his face. He brought his hands back from his face, the left one covered in blood. He reached up to his eye and pulled something from it throwing it to the floor. Stormy was repulsed; felt as if she was going to vomit.

Turin focused on her expressing surprise, outrage, and then full unadulterated fury. His eyes narrowed in on her as he advanced again. The eye she had scratched no longer matched his other one. It was solid black across the entire eye, bottomless, soulless, just like a Wraith's eyes.

Oh, God. She had no time and her panic and fear must have become obvious to Michael as their connection with each other flared back to full glory. Michael's pain from whatever had happened and his desperation to get to her, as she reached out to him, was obvious. She started to reflex her hand and send Power to her Sefu Element to form her Power Sword, but Turin was quick. Quicker than she could have ever imagined.

"No you don't!" Turin's ungloved palm slammed into her chest

knocking the wind out of her, effectively cutting off her Power, stopping the reflex process. Tears came to her eyes as pain ripped through her body. Turin grabbed her hair pulling her up against him, his fetid breath in her face. She gasped for breath that wouldn't seem to come as her Life Power was forcibly ripped from her. She heard one last furious roar from Michael in the depths of her soul before it too was shredded by Turin's Power drain. She could barely feel a thread of connection with Michael. She sadly thought she had to snuff what was left of their connection out as well if Michael was to survive whatever Turin had planned for her. She weakly tried to push away from the Elder.

Turin just laughed at her, pulling her up hard against him, and breathing right into her face. “You see Power Keeper. You all have been stupid and overlooked the one thing that has stood before you. Your very enemy. As you all pompously think you’re winning the war, we, the Wraith have been planting the seeds of your utter destruction and demise.”

Gasping, Stormy only wanted to find an escape. “You... you can't be Wraith. You’re an Elder.” She yelled at him.

“No, sweet Stormy.” He smelled her and licked the side of her cheek. She gagged. If only she could get her Element to reflex, she would stab the man through the heart.

“You see, as the Warriors fought their battles long ago, arrogantly thinking they had killed all the Wraith during them, occasionally a Wraith has been smart enough to escape, at least for a short time.” He leaned in close to her ear still holding her captive to his Power stealing hand.

He whispered in her ear. “One said Wraith happened on one of the Warrior’s mothers. She was alone, unprotected. The Wraith raped her before meeting its end and I’m the glory of that result. I was never discovered as to my true form because in her insane agony she couldn’t tell anyone.”

He laughed in her face. “And you, sweet Power Keeper, will do the same for me as I make you my concubine and mother to my new breed who will soon overpower and destroy the Sphinx Warriors and all of this world.”

Repulsed and desperate to escape him, Stormy hiked up her knee

and slammed it as hard as she could into his groin. The whoosh of air which came from Turin was quite gratifying. Unfortunately, she paid dearly for it as Turin dug his nails into her chest. Jagged pain ripped through her body as he drew more Life Power from her, making her weaker. She tried to draw more from her surroundings to steady her erratic heartbeat, but Turin somehow blocked her with another painful pull on her energy.

His face was sinister and twisted as he continued to pull and pull. She gasped, tears streaming down her face, her hands fisted in his shirt, she could feel her connection with Michael slipping away as she was fading fast. She didn't want to lose the connection with him but at the same time didn't want him to feel her death either.

Michael, I love you. Her heart rate was slowing, her breathing becoming shallow as her Life Power was almost out. Some strong Warrior she was that she couldn't even fight an asshole like this. She had just found her whole purpose in this life and now it was all going to be lost from Turin taking her Life Power and ultimately her Life Force.

The pull of her Life Power stopped just short of completely taking her under. Turin shook her hard, jarring her back to consciousness. “No Power Keeper. You’re not going to go that easily. As I said I have a purpose for you.”

He picked her up and unceremoniously slung her over his shoulder. She noted in her hazy condition while hanging upside down that Turin didn't have his usual Elder robes on. He was dressed in Warrior fatigues and was armed. Strange she hadn’t noticed it earlier. Once again, her lack of concentration had gotten the best of her.

Turin moved with quick efficiency. His shoulder pressed painfully into her stomach, her head bouncing off his back in her semi-conscious state. She was battered inside and out and the ripping pain it was generating was the only thing keeping her conscious. She focused on this and her heartbreak at what little was left of her connection to Michael. She detected he was there, but she couldn't feel him, hear his thoughts like she did before. It infuriated her and her inner Sphinx gave her enough strength to clear her thoughts and try to figure a way out of this insanity.

Outside the Warrior's quarters, Turin moved to the elevators punching in one of the controls. If Stormy got out of this, she had to let Michael and the Warriors know he had unauthorized access. Turin should never have been able to get into their section. There obviously was some type of security breach. As soon as the doors opened, he wasted no time, but swung both of them into the elevator. He punched another button she couldn't see but, she could feel from the long drop that they were headed deep into the lower levels of the Complex.

Once the elevator stopped and Turin had them at their final destination, he dumped her hard onto the earth packed floor. She was still woozy, but managed be coherent enough to check out where they were from her location sprawled on the floor. Somehow, it didn't surprise her in the least where they were. They were in the Staging Cavern where the damn Dimensional Gate would open. Why did all of this horror make sense to her? She had always known there was something wrong with the man.

She tried to stand, but Turin used his booted foot and shoved her back down hard into the dust. She placed her hands on the floor to try and draw Life Power but the move ended up being unwise as suddenly she had a hard cold blade shoved up against her throat. She looked up at the bronze sword extending from Turin's hand.

“Don't even think about it.” Turin scowled at her. “I would just as soon remove that pretty head of yours. It would undermine my plans for a bit, but the Warriors would have to find a replacement for you, otherwise they would all die.”

He smiled evilly at her, lifting his shoulders in a shrug. “Of course, then I would just have to steal her too to finish my plan. Knowing your Michael, he would briefly miss you then Join with the new female.”

He lowered himself closer to her. “You know you’re just a battery to him. He only Joined with you to control you and to make sure he had unending Power. He is no better than me. You should just realize that now.”

“No! You lie, you disgusting pig!” She weakly screamed at him. She wanted to swing at him, but the slightest movement and she would only end up with a slice in her neck. In her heart, she knew

Michael would never do that. He loved her. She had felt it to the depths of her soul.

Turin reached into his pocket and pulled out some type of device. It resembled the device he used on her which controlled the Collar. She wasn't afraid as she had the capacity to overcome it. She almost smiled that the Warriors had one over on him but didn't. She figured Turin would just further torment her for rubbing the fact in his face. Turin punched buttons on the remote while maintaining the sword against her throat. Even incapacitated as she was, Turin was still afraid of her. Good. Let him be.

As Turin completed the manipulation of the device in his hand there was a shift in the surroundings that Stormy could detect internally coming from her Sphinx. Her inner Sphinx prowled, was restless and what Life Power was left within her body swirled within her making her a bit dizzy. The air around her destabilized as dark rainbow swirls appeared in the center of the Staging Cavern. Oh, God, Turin had somehow caused the Dimensional Gate to open. She whispered breathlessly, "Turin, what have you done?"

He laughed his dark laugh. "Yes, Power Keeper. I'm controller of the Gate now. And it's glorious." The air pressure changed and a wind formed swirling within the cavern. The breeze ruffled her hair, brushed against her skin. Strangely, it felt good, cooling her down a bit. Turin was quite taken with his work. He opened his one arm wide, closing his eyes, taking in a great breath. His other arm still maintained the sword near her neck but it had moved enough Stormy decided to take the risk of getting up.

She pushed up almost regaining her feet, but Turin wasn't as unaware as she thought. He sliced back into position against her neck and Stormy had to swiftly fall back to not sustain a significant injury. Still she wasn't quite quick enough and as she fell the blade cut into her neck. She cried out from the pain, as in her weakened state, her injury wasn't absorbed as quickly by her advanced healing ability. She reached up to try and put pressure on the cut as the warm blood ran down her neck onto her chest.

"Leave it!" Turin yelled at her. "Next time you try anything, I'll gut you. I don't have patience for your heroics, bitch." To make his point, he moved the blade to her collarbone and dug it in deep.

Excruciating pain and more blood ran down her chest. Her Sphinx side growled in fury and all of her wanted to kill the man for this treatment. Shred him one painful inch at a time. If only she could gather the Life Power without getting herself killed.

Turin simply smirked at her in his dark manner. He moved the blade to the other side pushing it against her arm and slowly slid the tip down drawing a deep angry line of red. Stormy gasped and tried to crawl away.

"Turin, enough!" Michael's roar of fury spurred Turin into action. With a swift spin, he grabbed Stormy by the hair, yanked her up and pinned her in front of his body. He placed the blade of his sword firmly against her already ravaged throat.

Michael took in the sight of her abuse and growled long and low, the effect reverberated throughout the cavern as he lowered his head as if to charge. He didn't move though as Turin tightened his hold and pressed the blade harder against Stormy's throat. If she could, she would fight, but he had drawn so much Life Power from her.

Stormy looked up between tear drenched lashes. She had never been so happy to see the vision of Michael charging into the Staging Cavern. He was followed closely by the rest of his Warriors and Guardian Arik, with his Guardians Elite. All of them were a bit worse for wear. It was obvious they had been through hell to even get to her location. All of them were covered in dirt and blood. Cuts, burns, and bruises marred each of them. Some worse than others. Michael was holding his left arm close against his side but didn't appear to be in pain.

She tried to use their connection to warn him to be careful and to why she couldn't fight. She was so weak and he was desperate to reach her. He ramped up his Life Power to send her energy from the distance through their shared link.

"Ah, ah, ah. I can't allow that." Turin had evidently sensed the exchange. He took his non-sword wielding hand and placed it over her heart blocking the Life Power and firmly grasped what she had left. Stormy gasped trying to catch her breath her vision becoming dim.

Michael started to charge forward but stopped as Turin warned

him. “One step closer and I will finish her.”

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Michael was panicking. What the fuck? He knew Turin was demented in his own way but why was he doing this? Stormy’s complexion was pale and getting paler and Turin had a death grip on her preventing her from doing anything. He appeared to be draining the Life Power from her. Time was running out and Michael had to get to her before Turin killed her. Any further movement towards her though and Turin would go through with his threat.

If only he could strengthen their connection and get Power to her. He had to get her out of Turin’s clutches. If anything happened to her, he couldn’t take it. Someone might as well put a sword through his heart as he would only suffer endlessly. Ancients, anything but that. He needed and loved his Stormy with all of his being.

To make matters worse, the Gate was opening. Just what they didn’t need. As far as he knew there was nothing on the monitoring system indicating an occurrence should be happening now. The shimmering in the air was becoming more prominent, the air currents stronger and similar to before a thunderstorm would cut loose. It was swirling and blowing throughout the Cavern as though looking for an escape. Just like Turin with his crazed eyes, glancing behind himself occasionally as though he was looking for an escape. His eyes.

Raven tapped Michael’s shoulder. “Khenti. His eyes. They don’t match. His one looks like…”

“A Wraith’s eyes.” Michael finished for him. The others behind him cursed at the recognition. “Something you want to tell us Turin? What the fuck is going on?” Michael was starting to put it together but needed to keep Turin engaged until he could figure out a way to extricate Stormy from him without getting her killed.

Turin sneered at him. “Oh, you poor dense fool. Don’t you see it? Don’t you see me? I’m one of the illustrious creations of the Wraith. I’m the best of them and the best of the Sphinx.”

Hunter growled. “You’re no Sphinx. You are an abomination of Egyptian and Wraith blood.”

"No. I am of Sphinx descent. One of your precious Power Keepers of the old days was honored with the seed of the Wraith and didn't have the state of mind to destroy me. Although she did destroy herself. You know this to be true." Turin slyly shifted his sight to somewhere behind Michael.

Michael heard a choking sound from behind him and then an anguished groan. Suddenly Raven was charging from behind him, Power Sword in hand, ready to run Turin through. Michael and Joshua grabbed him by his arms, holding him back, hearing his anguished denials. Michael grabbed his head, turned it, demanded his attention. "Raven, you can't kill him. He has Stormy."

"No, he can't kill me. Can you...brother?" Turin laughed again, evilly, in his demented way. "Blood can't kill blood."

Raven was crazed, his eyes glazing over, his Sphinx blinding any sanity he had to the situation. "Arik, take him out of here now!" Michael commanded. Arik jumped to action and had three of his other men assist in dragging the furious, outraged Raven from the Cavern.

Michael could see they were running out of time as the Dimensional Gate began to open. There was movement behind the now opaque Gate. There were Wraith on the other side ready to strike at them, and damn it all to hell, Stormy was right in the middle of where the danger would be. It was his worst nightmare realized. His heart squeezed in desperation and fear as he searched for the avenue to rescue her. He had to keep Turin occupied as Hunter and Joshua tried to circle to separate sides of Turin's flank.

"A very convenient trap you set for us. You want to explain why you're doing this, other than the obvious fact you're related and on their side." He nodded towards the pacing, waiting Wraith on the other side of the Gate.

"You liked my little explosives did you?" Turin cackled insanely. "It was quite the useful distraction while I went for what I really wanted." He leaned down and licked Stormy's cheek.

She shivered in revulsion trying to break free of Turin's grasp. He simply tightened the sword blade against her throat and drew a small bit of her Life Power from her. She paled even more and Michael knew she could barely stand anymore.

"What do you want with her?" Michael yelled. He was trying desperately to refocus Turin from his evident hunger to drain her dry of her Life Power and possibly her very life.

"But to torment you, oh great Khenti Michael. You don't deserve her. You don't deserve any of this, you ungrateful pup. All of your life you have been spoiled. You have only felt the true pain of our existence when your father died and you had to take on the mantle of leader. Some leader you are as I have proven the Wraith will win and you all will die."

Turin sneered at him, his lip curling, his eyes crazed. "You see, you don't deserve her. You don't deserve the Power she holds in this body, but I do. I'll take her with me and use her properly. She'll bear me strong half breed pups while I keep her drained and her Sphinx tamed. And when she is done, I'll finish her and send her used, broken body back to you."

Michael roared his fury at the images invoked in his mind. He would die before he let Turin even touch another hair on her head. He would go to his grave to save her. He began to move forward to close the distance between himself and Turin.

Turin shook his head pulling a device from his pocket. The Collar activator. "Stop right there, Khenti, and tell your Warriors to back off. I would like nothing more than to fry all of your asses and put an end to you."

Michael stopped and simply raised an eyebrow at Turin. "Well, go ahead. Try and do your best." Anything to keep Turin occupied as Joshua and Hunter were making progress positioning themselves so Turin wouldn't have an escape route.

"Fine. Have it your way." Turin smashed down on the activator button. Michael almost enjoyed the consternation on Turin's face when nothing happened to Michael or any of the Warriors.

"What?"

"Sorry Turin. That never did work on us. Do you really think we would have ever let you or anyone else enslave us? We're here and fighting because we have sworn our lives to it. We love these people and this planet. It's our home and no one or nothing will destroy it."

Michael ramped up his Life Power and fired it through his system and into the Collar around his throat. He built a barrier

between himself and the dead black crystals of the Collar. He could feel the fight between the two energies, his Life Power and the Collar's but there would be no contest. The Life Power would always win. Finally, he was going to rid himself of the Collar and the façade they had all had to maintain for so long.

Turin's expression showed his shock when the torture he had expected to occur didn't, and the Collar suddenly disintegrated to the ground. Reaching out through the Warrior's Link, Michael instructed each of the Warriors to do the same, to rid themselves of the damned Collars and be done with the fiasco.

The sound was truly satisfying as Michael heard each one of the Collar's sizzle around the other Warrior's necks and smash to the ground at their feet. They would all be able to stand tall in the face of this enemy now. Turin could no longer control them. They were finally, truly free of Turin's so-called enslavement.

Turin's expression turned livid and Michael knew the Elder was not taking their escape from his control as he watched part of his well-laid plan turn to literal ash at the Warriors' feet. Turin was so furious his entire body was shaking, and the sword he held pressed deeper into Stormy.

The demonstration of Turin's lack of control over them with the destruction of the Collars was supposed to distract him from Stormy and make Michael the target. Michael hadn't counted on Turin turning his fury against Stormy, but to his utter despair that is exactly what he did. Turin dug his nails into Stormy's chest. Tears came to her eyes, but his Stormy kept her silence as best she could.

Damn it, he had to find a way to get her away from this monster. An Elder who had tricked them all, used them, and was now trying to take the one woman who meant everything to him. Michael felt cold chills of dread run through his body when Turin gave him a look clearly telling him he was going to get even.

Turin grinned wickedly, and his eyes took on the appearance of two black unending pits. Stormy screamed and Michael could feel the man delve his evil ability deep into her. Deep into the core of her very Life Force where she and Michael were Joined.

Michael roared his reflected anguish as he fell to his knees feeling Turin's ability to slice between his Life Force and Stormy's. The

pain was beyond anything he had ever felt before in his life. How could she survive this? Was she even still alive? He watched as Turin continued to pull not only Life Power from her but Life Force now as well. He was sure he had lost their shared connection, but it still held. He could still feel her. If anything, his tenacious little mate was trying to build the connection stronger and was keeping this hidden from Turin as he would have killed her by now if he knew what she was up to.

Michael glanced at his men who were now in position to launch an attack against Turin if he could just get Stormy clear. It was a position tenuous at best because the Gate was about to fully open. Damn it, they were out of time.

He pushed hard on the connection he shared with Stormy. *Angel, I need you to hear me. I need you to widen the connection between us as best as you can. I'll do the same. I'm going to push my energy to you as I have done before when I was trying to protect you. Use this to get away. Come on, Stormy, I need you. I love you. Please.*

He prayed she could hear him. Her eyes were closed, her body hanging loosely from Turin's arms. She was pale as a ghost. Was she too gone from him? Please let her be alright. His heart beat too erratically with the shear fear of the thought, it felt like it was going to explode. If she died, he wanted nothing else but to do the same. Please.

Just as his mind turned to the dark somber thoughts of everything being lost, his Stormy opened her beautiful sea green eyes, glowing with his deep blue. She had harnessed their Life Force to draw enough energy to open their Joined connection. Her look of raw determination told him exactly what he needed to know. She was willing to try this, so he used his rare ability to draw Life Power from the earth.

It wasn't as much as a true Power Keeper, but was enough to do what he needed. He forced as much as he could possibly hold and paired it with his love for her. He pushed it hard to Stormy through their Mated connection.

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She was ready, more than ready. When Michael had fallen to his knees in pain as Turin had tried to sever their connection, her fury

had been all-consuming. Her Sphinx had roared to life and she had been determined to find a way to make Turin pay. Hurting her was unforgivable. Hurting her Michael sealed Turin's fate of dying by her hand or anyone else's if she could assist in making it happen. She didn't care. As long as he was dead and gone.

From the corner of her eye she noted Joshua and Hunter were ready for the kill. With everything she had left in her, she focused on Michael and her connection and widened it. She had no choice but to make it work too because she could feel the Gate opening. Shit, they were out of time.

One last push and she heard Michael's loving voice through the connection. *Do it, angel.* Oh, how his voice caressed her soul. She held on to the link with him and sent her energy to him to strengthen their bond. As he reached to her through the link, he continued to draw upon the Life Power around him. He silently communicated to her his intention and then sent a huge jolt of Life Power through their connection and into her.

Their combined Power instantly disintegrated the Collar around her throat and the feedback was intense energizing her to a level Turin wasn't expecting. Stormy's head snapped back with the force of the energy surging into her and smacked Turin in the chin. The shock was too much for him as Michael's Life Power surrounded and protected her. Turin was thrown several feet back into the Gate releasing her. Stormy slumped to the ground winded, but safe and protected within Michael's Life Power aura.

Michael was on his feet in an instant and ran to Stormy. He kneeled down gathering her in his arms and ran his hands over her checking her injuries. She knew he had to make sure the Life Power he had sent to her was closing her wounds and stabilizing her Life Force. She was already recovering rapidly as she drew more Life Power into her as quickly as she could.

"We're going to need it, Michael." She peered over at the Gate. Yes, they were.

The Gate had opened and Stormy could hear Turin cackling in absolute glee. She shook partly from fear but also from the adrenaline rushing through her system as the ghastly, horrid Wraith began to emerge.

She heard Michael directing his men to protect and watched them move in unison to put themselves between the Wraith and their Power Keeper. Sefu Elements reflexed into Power Swords by the Sphinx Warriors and deadly steel swords were drawn by the Guardians Elite.

Stormy and Michael were still strongly connected and she could tell he needed to hold her one second more. His strong hands brushed her hair back from her face and he kissed her. She could feel his desperation at having seen her being tormented by Turin and feeling he couldn't save her.

He held her close for one moment more and then handed her to Arik. "Go with Arik back closer to the Trauma Cell. Please. I can't take seeing you hurt anymore today."

Stormy nodded, knowing he really couldn't. She could feel it through their Joining, how it had hurt and crushed him to see her that way. She wouldn't push him on being sent to the rear. At least not this round. She would still be close enough to him and the Warriors anyway if they needed her.

Michael released her over to Arik who guided her farther to the rear. They both turned facing the Gate and stood ready. Stormy reflexed her Element to Power Sword. Ready and willing if needed. Arik stood strong beside her with his own sword more than eager to kill a Wraith or twenty.

Michael's fury at Stormy's treatment showed as he engaged the flood of Wraith coming at him. He wasn't one to stay anywhere near the rear and positioned himself firmly in the front with his men. Stormy watched him with pride and love as his movements and sword play were sure and capable. His Life Power occasionally surged as he directed it through his Sword causing Wraith to go flying. It was obvious his one true goal was Turin who stood behind his army of Wraith.

It was all too clear now in everyone's mind. Turin had been the one to arm and organize the creatures through his half breed bond with them. Stormy sensed Michael's determination to punish him and his other rebels and what they had done against all of them. Especially what he had done to her. Turin had no remorse but showed his bond proudly with the Wraith as he removed the

contact from his other eye. Both of his eyes were completely black, dead. Stormy shivered as Turin directed his gaze at her communicating a promise of his own retaliation to the day's events over the top of the battling Wraith, Warriors, and Guardians.

She stood at the back of it all watching the vicious battle with trepidation. The violence in this battle was even worse than the previous she had witnessed. Blades of steel and crystalline silver flashed in the light of the cave. The sound of metal on metal carried on the breezes flowing through the Staging Cavern as the Gate continued to shimmer and flow around all of the battling men and Wraith. Grunts, groans, and yells were heard as the coordination between sides went on and men took on injuries too numerous to count.

Both sides had casualties as the furious battle went on and on. An occasional roar of fury came from one of the Warriors and shortly after some body part of a Wraith went flying. Blood, guts, and remains were everywhere. The stench of blood, both human and Wraith alike assaulted her senses. Stormy didn't know when it would end. She only knew she wanted it to end now. How much more could Michael and her Warriors take?

Just then, Alexandria and her medical team arrived, hastily scrambling across the rear of the Cavern before any of them got caught in the battle. Alexandria paused just long enough to give Stormy a hug. Stormy hugged her back and then gave her a shove towards the Trauma Cell.

"Don't stop. It's too dangerous. I'm fine." She suspected Alexandria wanted to check on her, but she couldn't let her risk herself. The fight was coming to a head and a Wraith in desperation would do anything. Just as she was relieved to see that her Warriors were winning, her inner Sphinx set off an internal warning that something was off.

She made sure Alexandria was closed up in the Trauma Cell and then grabbed Arik's arm. "There's something wrong. I can't put my finger on it, but I can feel it."

Looking at her with concern Arik asked, "The Gate?"

"No. Not the Gate. Something else. Some smaller energy. Something off. Like it's winding down. I can't give anything else

specific, Arik. But I can feel it." Her words were more agitated.

"I believe you." Arik took a few steps away from her trying to detect if there was anything obvious he could find in the Cavern. Stormy moved up beside him again, not backing up even when he put up his hand to warn her. One of the Wraith spotted her and tried to get past the line, but it didn't make it more than a few feet as Raven was on it with a cry of fury. After making short work of the creature and leaving nothing but a bloody mess, he placed a hand over his heart bowing his head to her before diving back into the fray.

She knew there was still something wrong. It was like fingernails on a chalk board shredding her nerves. To calm herself and prepare for the unexpected, she drew more Life Power from the earth collecting as much as she could hold until she was bursting with it. She wanted to be prepared this time and leave no chance of Turin pulling some slick crap. She couldn't lose Michael or her Warriors. It would be too much for her. Her end would be imminent if that happened.

Arik grabbed her shoulder pulling her back. "Something's up. Look." He pointed at what was left of the remaining Wraith and Turin who was backing towards the center of the Gate. Many of the Wraith already had disappeared through it. "What did you say? Something winding down?"

"Yes. Like a clock or a...timer." She paled and glanced at Arik who confirmed her thoughts with the look of horror on his face. Both of them moved forward to warn Michael and the others. As Stormy tried to locate Michael in the chaos, she ran across Turin who gave her one last gloating smile as he faded back through the Gate.

Just as Arik yelled "Bomb!" and Stormy sent the same warning through her link to Michael, their entire world became one earth shattering, blinding, pain-consuming explosion.

Chapter Fourteen

Stormy threw up her hands in sheer and utter terror. Not for herself, but for Michael, for the Warriors, for the Guardians. When shards of body shredding stone and debris would have mutilated everyone in the path of the explosion, she pushed everything she had into directing the huge amounts of Life Power she had rapidly collected in her body against it. Pain tore through her as almost the entire amount of absorbed Power burst back out of her body.

Even with her intervention, the reverberations from the explosion were still enough to throw her and everyone else to every corner of the cavern. As she was thrown into the air head over heels and landed in a heap at the back of the cavern, all she could think of was Michael and how desperately she needed to get to him.

She rolled over and crawled back toward the center of the cavern. Blood dripped down her forehead and into her eyes as she coughed up the grit and dust that was everywhere in the air. But she didn't care what condition she was in as long as she could find Michael. *Oh God, Michael*. Where was he in this catastrophe? *Please be alright.*

Even in her weakened Power state, she pushed through her Joined connection to find him. She had felt his anguish and pain at the point of the explosion and had been desperate to do anything to save him even if it would have fried her Power Keeper ability. Even before she sent the thought out to call to him, his Life Force was there engulfing her and his strong voice called out to her in desperation.

"Stormy! Angel, talk to me."

"Michael! I'm here." She barely got the words out as her throat was swollen and raw. She continued her track across the stone littered ground. Rocks and debris dug into her palms.

From the dust clouded air, Michael finally emerged staggering towards her. His face was covered in dirt and blood, pieces of rock imbedded in one of his arms, his pant leg torn away from one of his

legs and wrapped around like a make-shift bandage.

His expression was one of heartfelt relief as he fell on his knees before her. He scooped her up from her crawling position gathering her as close as he possibly could. He ran his hands over her body checking for injuries and then grasped her head firmly between his hands. He captured her lips with his. He was shaking badly but his grip on her was strong.

He ended the kiss and held her close choking out, "I thought I had lost you. Can't ever lose you." It was all he could say.

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Michael had never felt so desperate in his life when Stormy had reached out through their connection and warned him. After that, his world had become pure hell. The explosion had lifted him clear off the ground, but instead of being shredded to pieces, Stormy's very essence surrounded him in a protective cocoon. He assumed the rest of the Warriors and Guardians had been somewhat protected as well, since as a whole they seemed to be alive. Albeit quite a bit worse for wear.

As he had been caught in the catastrophe, he hadn't been able to maintain a clear connection with her. When she had been so silent as he had reached out to her, he had had a moment of sheer terror thinking she had been killed. It had taken a century of life from him.

When he heard her sweet voice and felt her Life Force, it had been like being given back something more precious than life. Her life. He cuddled her close. rubbing his cheek against her hair convincing his terrorized system she was fine and truly in his arms.

"Alexandria, bring out the trauma team now!" Michael knew his sister would get the medical needs assessed and taken care of in no time. All he knew was he wanted to hold Stormy and feel her energy flowing through him. She must have sensed it too, because she burrowed in as close as possible to him, her arms tightening around him, holding on for dear life.

He didn't mind her clinging to him at all and felt the better for it. He was afraid to ever to let go of her, in case anyone tried to take her away from him again. Suddenly distracting him from his thoughts, he heard the shocked sounds of the medical team as they

came out of the protected Trauma Cell.

Stormy evidently heard the commotion as well. She stirred in his arms trying to see around him to find out what was going on. He wasn't sure he wanted her to see any of it. The air had cleared somewhat so the sight of the carnage surrounding them would be evident to her. So many down, so many injured, but at least the majority was still alive. Those who had perished appeared to be Guardians. The Warriors and Arik were still alive but definitely needed some medical attention.

As she watched the medical team distribute among the injured, the Gate which had been closed suddenly snapped into existence, but there was something dangerously wrong with it. It reversed on itself and the normal rainbow colored shimmering became a dark blood red. The Gate wasn't right.

"Michael!" Stormy gasped.

From across the cavern, Jacob, the only other person who could see the edges of the Gate shouted. "Everybody down!"

The thunder of the Gate was heard throughout the Cavern as the edges of it snapped outward several feet. At least three of the medical attendants standing upright were disintegrated by it and a hair-raising scream came from across the Cavern as someone else fell. A loud roar came from Joshua as he dove and grabbed onto Alexandria pulling her down to the ground with him as the Gate expanded outward again.

Michael's entire body went rigid as his Sphinx fired up with aggression, ready to attack the new threat. Stormy clutched the front of his shirt and gained his attention.

"Michael. Help me. There's something wrong with the Gate. I can see it. Everyone on that side is trapped beneath it." She yelled, pulling at him, beseeching him to get her closer.

"She's right, I can see it too." Jacob had managed to work his way over to their side. All three of them stood in the only area not covered by the dysfunctional Gate. "The explosion must have affected it somehow. We have to stabilize it or get the damn thing to close so we can get everyone out of here."

Michael recognized the precarious situation they were in and agreed. Still holding Stormy close, he slowly moved her closer to the

edge of the Gate.

"Let me know where you need to be, angel. I can't see the damn thing."

She nodded. "Not much farther. Just a couple of feet in front of you." Michael kept close contact with her and continued to maneuver them until Stormy held up her hand to stop.

She reached out extending her Life Power to stabilize the Gate and quickly recoiled away from it as if burned. She doubled over trying to catch her breath and appeared to shake off the sensation.

Gathering her close again Michael grasped her hands.

"Stop. What is it? Talk to me." He couldn't stand to see her in pain anymore.

"How can I help?"

"I don't know." Frustration colored her words. "It's different than before. The energy is different. It's more of a negative versus a positive energy. I can't explain exactly." She fidgeted. "I need to do something. To help them before anyone else gets hurt."

As soon as the words left her lips someone screamed from the other side of the cavern as the damaged Gate touched them. Michael encouraged her even as he kept a constant touch upon her, not daring to let her go. He had to do something more to help her and exchanged a silent glance with Jacob.

As Stormy reached out gathering Life Power to herself, Michael stood behind her and encircled his arms around her holding her close and steady. Once she was ready, she initiated contact with the Gate's energy again, and recoiled slightly but held this time. Michael sensed the energy the Gate punished her with was hot, searing, an inverse darkness from the positive normal.

The heat was tremendous, burning her up from the inside, but she kept going. She pushed out with all of her might and kept a Power barricade between what she was doing and Michael. Only his Stormy would think of protecting others when she needed to be the one protected.

The fight against the Gate was tiring and draining but she persisted. The stubborn Gate didn't budge, but it didn't collapse either. The tug of energy went back and forth until she was dripping with sweat and shaking. Her heart rate drove through the roof, and

her breathing was labored. Michael didn't know how much more she could take.

Her frustration began to show itself to him. She thought she was losing. Tears formed in her eyes and she cried, "I will not admit defeat, damn it! I refuse!"

She shoved outward with her Power, the reverberations even reaching through their link back to him. An expression of pain crossed Stormy's face and blood ran from her nose. She used one hand to wipe it away and looked down at the damage she had done.

"Damn it." Michael ripped a piece of mostly clean cloth from his shirt and held it to her nose so she could bring her hand back up to keep holding the Gate. Michael stared over Stormy's head directly at an obviously conflicted Jacob.

"Jacob. I wouldn't ask you to reveal yourself. You know I have stood by your side for decades, centuries in this. But look at her, your Power Keeper and my Power Mate. Look at our friends and colleagues. What more can we do? I know this is difficult for you. Impossible. But...the alternative is their death. I'm sorry, we need you. I don't have a choice. You don't have a choice in this."

Jacob ran his hands through his blond hair and over his face, closing his brown eyes. "I know. You're right. It's selfish and unforgivable. I'll just deal with the consequences as I should have centuries ago. Whatever happens is what I deserve."

Michael reached out placing a hand on Jacobs's shoulder. "I have said it before and I will say it again. You did nothing wrong. The circumstances warranted actions on everyone's part that day to save lives. Just as they do now. I'll support and defend you against anyone who says otherwise."

Nodding in agreement, Jacob turned to Stormy. "Stormy. I can add my energy to yours to stabilize the Gate long enough to get everyone out. It would be an honor if I could assist."

Stormy glanced at Jacob, "Please. We need to help them, our family and friends, before this Gate does any more harm."

Michael was relieved Jacob was willing to reveal his unique Life Power and help Stormy. She was exhausted and even with Michael's Life Power and Life Force stabilizing and assisting her, she was losing the battle against the Gate. For Jacob to step forward said a

lot about his desire to help his Power Keeper and possibly face the past which was so painful to him. Jacob hadn't even spoken of it in centuries. But now was not the time to dwell on the past.

Stormy turned slightly away from the blood red Gate so she was facing Jacob at an angle that would still allow him to see it as well.

With her arm farthest from the Gate and Jacob's they formed the Transference grip. Hand to forearm below hers. Hand to forearm above his. Her other hand was still up with the palm facing the Gate. Jacob reached up and placed his hand over hers. Michael remained behind her with his arms still strongly encircling her waist, his body pressed up behind her and his Life Power still feeding into her.

Jacob added his as well, but avoided looking at her, instead focusing on the Gate. As Jacob's Life Power mixed with hers and Michael's, it was quite the shock at first. Michael had forgotten how Jacob's energy was dark, a negative energy similar to what the damaged Gate released. An opposite Life Power versus the positive Life Power which Michael and the others had. It was a hot static electricity traveling through their systems. Not painful, but not pleasant either.

Jacob gave them a brief apologetic look, then returned his gaze back to the Gate, his eyebrows drawn low over his eyes as he concentrated on controlling his dark Power. A cool soothing energy flowed from Michael into Stormy. He wanted to try and counter some of the effects of Jacob's dark energy. Michael was careful to soothe her, but not interact in any way with Jacob's Power. Stormy and Jacob worked together to build up the Power level and then pushed it towards the broken Gate. Back and forth, working as a team, determined in their mission to save those trapped beneath it.

Finally, they seemed to be making progress as they repeated the process of drawing Life Power and pushing it at the Gate. It was a splendid thing when finally the Gate gave one last horrendous roar, swirled, blowing a heat like the fires of hell at them and literally smelling of brimstone as it snapped back into non-existence.

There was a collective sigh and cheer from everyone as the all-clear was called with the closing of the broken Gate. Stormy collapsed back into Michael's arms. He turned her so she was facing

him and pulled her close, kissing the top of her head and looking out at his Warriors and people. He heard her sigh as she snuggled herself into his body pressing her face into his chest. He looked over at Jacob who had earned a new respect from him and wished Jacob could get over the actions of his past because he was truly an honorable man. A man who at times was still lost to those past events which had so deeply affected who and what he was now.

The medics worked tirelessly at the endless task of patching up the injured, moving them to the Trauma Cell and up to the Medical floor. Michael noticed his sister Alexandria who was working her medical magic on Joshua. Wiping blood from his forehead, re-assuring herself that her favorite Warrior was alive. He sighed. What a mess. The only positive thing from all of this was another possible reprieve from fighting the Wraith. At least for a short time.

The Dimensional Gate appeared to be temporarily broken, but he had no doubt it would be back and functioning again. In the past, there had been damage and the damn things always came back. And with it would be the Wraith and battles and death...again. And Turin. If it was the last thing he did it would be to punish the man from whichever dimension he appeared and destroy him for all the damage he had done.

Just as Michael was preparing to take a much needed break, Stormy stiffened in his arms. The change in the atmosphere was tangible, a heavy oppressive mist formed and she pushed back from Michael. Damn it, wouldn't it just end? She pointed to the center of the Cavern and shouted.

"Get back!"

Michael grabbed her, pulling her back from the shimmering light, and blocking her from it with his body. Having her anywhere near danger was something he couldn't take anymore today. Or ever for that matter. Everyone around them immediately stopped to see what the new threat was as they were drawing or reflexing weapons in anticipation of more fallout.

The small shimmer of light expanded. This was different from the original Gate or the broken version. The area the white shimmer covered expanded just to over the size of about eight feet tall with a domed shape circumference of about six feet.

The inside was misty, foggy, but clear enough it could be seen through. At its center sat a young woman, kneeling, her eyes closed. She was dressed in what once must have been a beautiful white and gold robe which now hung from her in tatters. Her waist length white blond hair tangled around her shoulders. Her skin was pale; its natural shimmer almost non-existent. She wasn't quite solid, but not quite transparent either. She appeared to be caught between one world and another.

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A gasp of anguish sounded near Stormy and she moved in Michael's arms to see what had happened. It was Jacob and he had fallen to his knees at the site of the apparition. His hands were in his hair pulling at it. Tears rolled down his face, his velvet brown eyes in an agony that seemed never ending.

"No! I watched her die! I watched her die..." He reached out towards the fair woman and then grasped at his heart as if it was being ripped out.

Poor Jacob. Stormy wasn't sure what to do for him. She glanced up at Michael whose face was almost as anguished as Jacob's. "Who is she?"

Michael touched her cheek, his pain evident as well as the other Warriors who were able to come to Jacob's side to help him.

"She was a Priestess and Jacob's Life Mate, Eleina," he was barely able to grate the answer out. He gathered her close to him and she sensed he remembered his utter agony when he thought he had lost her. How could anyone live after that?

From behind them came a soft but commanding female's voice. "Great Ancients! It looks like hell opened up in here."

Stormy and Michael faced the newcomer and found it was Elder Chloe standing before them. Her short stature was never an indication of her true Power. Michael bowed his head in greeting.

"Elder Chloe. This isn't a place for you. I can give a full report as soon as we finish cleaning up here."

Elder Chloe raised a silvered eyebrow. She didn't appear to take insult to the lack of a full bow, but did chastise Michael for his comment.

"Young man, I can go anywhere I so choose. And you will be

giving me a full report. Personally. I have had enough of the intrigues as of late. Until we finish with the in-depth investigation and grilling of those involved, I won't risk any of you further. You will report to me and only me."

She took in the whole of the Cavern and as her vision passed over the entrapped woman, she shook her head. She cast her glance to Stormy who returned her stare without a blink. Elder Chloe smiled at her and even in this situation still kept up a cheerful demeanor.

"You have done exceptionally well today Power Keeper. And Khenti Michael you have chosen well. We agree with this Joining."

Elder Chloe directed her attention back to Michael. "Now, Khenti Michael, take care of your Warriors and your mate. I don't expect to see you until late tomorrow." With that, she swept up the hem of her long robe and left the cavern, her crystal topped silver cane clicking across the floor as she departed. From one of the corners of the Cavern, Raven watched her covertly without comment but evidently had something nagging on his mind. However, for now he kept it to himself.

Curiously, Stormy asked Michael, "She doesn't normally come to battle sites, does she?"

"No. Definitely a first. I think she has taken a fondness to you, Power Keeper Stormy." Michael smiled down at her and she felt the love he was pushing through their Joined connection. He captured her lips in a powerful kiss effectively showing her in more than words or Power connections how much he really did love her and couldn't live without her.

Together they watched hand in hand as the remaining injured Warriors and Guardians were taken away for care and rest. The other Warriors and Guardians who were able made their way back to their quarters. They slowly straggled out once they were satisfied their friends were taken care of. The clean-up crew worked at removing the debris and re-enforcing those areas of the Staging Cavern that were damaged by the explosion.

"What will they do with Jacob? I hate to see him like that." Stormy asked sadly.

Michael sighed heavily.

"Alexandria has set up a room in the Trauma Cell so Jacob can

stay close to Eleina until we figure out what to do."

She nodded. If she had someone who was injured or in trouble, she would want to stay close to them, too. She returned to observing the clean-up with Michael and once he was satisfied with the progress he indicated it was time for them to leave. He didn't relinquish his hold on her hand as he guided her back to their quarters.

Their return trip was in silence. Not a word from him. Stormy began to feel a bit self-conscious as she had seen him serious and quiet before, but he had an intensity to him that made her nervous. The day's events had been hell and his unhappiness with her being anywhere near danger had been a point of conflict. She didn't really want to fight with him over it now. She was too tired and just wanted to be held.

Once in their room he led her over to the table and sat her down. Someone had brought food for both of them and she found she was famished. She watched Michael and wondered why he wasn't joining her.

"Michael?"

He placed his fingers to her lips, "Shh. I'll be right back. Eat." He disappeared into the bathing room.

While she waited for him, her stomach growled loudly so she dove into the stew and potatoes making short work of her tray of food. Just as she was going to check what was taking Michael so long, he reappeared. He was freshly showered, wrapped in only a towel, and smelled like heaven. Next to him she felt horrible with the grime and blood still coating her clothes and skin.

Michael reached out to her. "Come here, angel." She grasped his hand, and without another word, he took her into the bathing room to the shower. The jets were already in full spray, the heat and moisture permeating the air. He began to undress her slowly, one piece of clothing at a time, peeling away layers of bloodied, torn clothing revealing newly healed skin in some areas where she had been injured. He closed his eyes to the sight of so many healed injuries.

"Michael, it's alright. I'm fine. I can do this." If the sight of her injuries hurt him so much, then she didn't want to put him through

the anguish.

"No. I have to do this. Please, Stormy." He finished with the last of her clothing, tossing it well away from them including his own towel and backed her into the shower drawing her beneath the steaming water. He started with her long hair, unbraiding it, running his fingers through it to remove some of the tangles. He took some of her vanilla scented shampoo into his hand and massaged it into her hair. He pushed it through the strands making sure each inch was covered in the silky bubbles.

Stormy closed her eyes enjoying the feel of his fingers massaging her scalp as he thoroughly cleansed her hair. Once he was done, Michael backed her under the streams of water again running his hands through her golden locks until not a bit of soap remained. He repeated the washing and rinsing process over her skin taking extra care with any spots that appeared to be in the process of healing in any way, even the barest of pink spots. Once he seemed satisfied, he turned off the jets and took one of the soft fluffy gold towels and gently dried her. She felt like a pampered princess.

He wrapped her in the towel and led her back into the bedroom keeping her close by his side. He stopped them at the side of the bed and turned her to face him. He drew her close into his embrace and placed a soft kiss upon her lips. She could feel his passion both in the kiss and the feel of his body against hers, but all he did was look at her seemingly mesmerized. He brushed the hair away from her face, pushing it behind her ears, framing her face with his hands.

"Stormy, you mean everything to me. Everything. I can't live without you. Today was difficult watching you in the arms of that maniac being abused, risking your life to save me and the others from the explosion and the damaged Gate. And seeing Jacob's mate trapped like that...I can't imagine being brought to that level of pain if I lost you."

She grasped onto his wrists. "You won't lose me, but I don't want to cause you pain. I promise. I won't ask to be at the Gate anymore if that is what you want. I love you, Michael. I'll do anything for you. Just know it will be difficult to watch you go without me when I know you need me there."

Michael drew her even closer. His arms tight around her as if to

protect her from the world. “I know. I know I need you there. The Warriors need you there. You were amazing today. A Warrior in your own right. It’s just so difficult.”

His voice cracked with the conflict he was trying to work through. “It will be hard for me. Harder than you know, but you need to be there. I’ll not ask you to stay away, but I want you to train more with Hunter and always have Arik or one of the Guardians with you during the battles. And you must promise me you’ll stay to the rear of the battles.”

She loved him all the more that he was willing to make a huge concession for her even when it was so difficult for him. He would do this for her. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “I promise. I’ll train and I’ll always have someone to back me up. I will do anything to be there for you.”

“By the Ancients, I do love you. You’re more than I deserve, my angel.” He kissed her with a passion and love she could feel to the depths of her very soul. His Life Power surrounded her and hers answered his call. His tongue plundered her mouth as his hands roamed over her skin. She couldn’t get enough of his touch and knew she never would.

He broke the kiss looking down at her and she fell into the depths of his dark blue eyes. Entranced by the hunger and need in his expression, she was more than willing to follow him as he pulled her down onto the bed with him. She shivered when Michael licked a lazy circle on the swell of her breast right above the line of the towel still wrapped around her.

He smiled at her reaction and nipped at her shoulder. When she pressed her body closer to his, he reached beneath the towel to fondle her breast. She stopped him for a moment with a concerned expression on her face.

“What is it?” Michael asked her.

“Eleina. We have to find a way to save her from the Gate. Perhaps there is something in the e-Scrolls to reveal how to do that.” She ran a finger down Michael’s chest, circling his nipple. He drew in a quick breath which pleased her. She loved the fact she could play his body with just a simple touch.

His voice was deep and rough when he replied, “If anyone can

find a way, I have no doubt that you can. I'll give you anything you need. We must save her and save Jacob. I don't think he can survive seeing her death again. Not like that."

He placed a finger under her chin bringing her eyes to his. "There is nothing at the moment we can do though until everyone has rested which includes you. You need to rest your body and your abilities so you don't burn yourself out. I won't allow you to over exhaust yourself."

Stormy gave him her best pouty look, so he captured her lips with his and rolled her underneath him. She giggled, nipping at him. He gave her his best intimidating look.

"Besides, Elder Chloe gave strict orders everyone is to take an extended rest while the Gate is temporarily out of commission. We may not have another break like this in a while and I plan on taking full advantage of the situation."

She reached up and used her fingertips to try and smooth out the lines on his forehead as he was attempting to scowl at her.

"I hope that means taking full advantage of me as well." She rewarded him with an enticing smile fluttering her eyelashes at him.

"Don't you know it my Power Keeper." He kissed her lips and then continued a line of gentle kisses down the smooth column of her throat and farther down to her breast. He made short work of the towel which was in his way, flipping it down to the floor as he rolled over positioning her on top of him.

She straddled his hips and could feel how motivated he was in doing just that as his full arousal brushed against her wet core. Back and forth, teasing her, his Life Power surrounded her, brushing her with all the love he could put into it. She returned her love to him with everything she had through her own shimmering, sparkling Life Power as it weaved around his and brushed against him, through him.

He arched with the sensual energy flowing through his body, looking up at her. She brushed her hands over his chest, down his stomach feeling his skin, his muscles, wanting to give him everything as he wanted to give to her. He grasped her hips holding her still for just a moment longer. He looked deep into her eyes

which were marked with shimmers of his dark blue showing his claim on her.

"Stormy, I love you more than life itself. I am yours, you are mine. Joined as one. Forever."

She leaned in close to him knowing she had finally come home to where she truly belonged. With him and the Warriors. No matter what the danger, no matter what the trials, all of it was worth it to have him, to love him as she had never loved anyone else.

"I love you, my Warrior. I am yours, you are mine. Joined as One. Forever.

She gave him everything in the most powerful of kisses with both her lips and her Life Power as she took him within her body. He answered as he entered her in one swift strong stroke giving the same and taking them to heights as only two Joined Power Mates could. Together their Powers would sing and mark the beginning of a new future for the Sphinx Warriors, humans, and the world as they continued to fight against the darkness seeking to destroy them.

The Power Keeper had truly been found and her Sphinx Warrior resurrected.

About The Author

Traveling throughout the United States and locations throughout the world, I finally found the perfect place to call home and settle down in a small town outside the Tampa Bay area in Florida. Looking out my back lanai, there is a small pond where the wild-life will gather and the flowers bloom in exotic pinks and purples. This is my place of peace and freedom that I have searched for and where my husband and crazy African Gray Parrot, Raider, hang out with me. It's the place where my creativity runs wild as I spin tales of adventure and passion. I have been writing in my head since I was a teenager and I finally realized I needed to capture these unique characters, civilizations, conflict, passion, and love in writing. To capture the strong, spirited, and powerfully attracted characters and all of their adventures and share it with others who are searching for that very thing to make their lives more exciting. If I accomplish nothing else in life, I hope to share the romantically magical worlds and the lovers that I see with all of the passionate readers out there.

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