



PROTECTOR'S AWAKENING

SUPER HEROES OF THE
VAMPIRE WORLD

BY TAMI BLAKE

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By

Tami Blake



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This book is dedicated to my loving husband, David.
Thank you for believing in me and for all your support.

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I have always thought it would be a blessing if each person could be blind or deaf for a few days during his early adult life. Darkness would make him appreciate sight; silence would teach him the joys of sound.

Helen Keller

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Chapter One

SEEING ISN'T EVERYTHING

Those blessed with sight look up at the stars, gaze at their beauty, and think it's a perfect night. To Starla Moon, a perfect night was the feel of warm air as it moved around her, the smell of grass and pine trees, and the sound of happy bugs creating a symphony of harmony.

Max, her faithful wolf, walked her through the park. Emanating danger lingered in the warm air. Starla was born blind but gifted with the ability to communicate with animals and see auras.

Star, you do know you're going to be in mass trouble for this adventure? Max bumped Starla's leg with his nose to turn her away from the thorn bush in front of them.

"Probably, but Rachel's safety is more important."

"Deer give birth in the woods by themselves all the time."

"I know that, Max, but I promised Rachel I would be there for her. Now stop complaining and get me to the cave."

Going. Just let it go on record that I protested this venture in the dark.

"Duly noted."

You remember what I said about shifters.

"Yes, Max. Shifters can be any sort of animal or person. That doesn't matter to me. I just need to know what they smell like and how dark their auras are."

What do they smell like?

"Musty old straw, and their auras are dark. Now will you stop worrying? You've been listening to my father too much lately."

Tami Blake

No, I'm tired of them popping up every time you help a female birth.

They walked slowly through the dark park that skirted the edge of Swan Valley, Idaho, each of them smelling the air, anticipating danger. Starla felt them move off the path onto the grass and into the trees. Pine needles crunched under her boots. She inhaled; there was no scent of musty straw, which meant there were no shifters in the area yet. Max's eyes continued to dart back and forth looking through the trees. Unconsciously, he steered Starla toward the cave where the pregnant deer waited.

As they approached the mouth of the cave, a squirrel dropped on Starla's shoulder and chattered in her ear. He told her everything that had happened so far. Max greeted the animals that had gathered around the cave as he led Starla to the female deer.

I'll be outside. Birthing isn't my bag.

"Okay." Starla reached out to Rachel, the deer. "So girl, how's it going?"

I'm so glad you're here. I'm scared.

"Nothing to worry about; just breathe. Nature knows what to do."

Rachel's labor was hard and slow. Starla talked her through the event and helped to deliver a beautiful fawn. There were cheers from all the animals around her until Ralph, Rachel's mate, entered the cave.

Rachel, are you well?

Yes, thanks to Starla. I would have died without her help.

Ralph turned to Starla and bowed his head. *I was wrong, you are not a wicked human, and I apologize for making that comment. Thank you for saving my mate.*

"No apology necessary." She reached out her hand to him and he licked her palm.

Max ran into the cave. *Star, we gotta exit fast.*

"What?" The smell of musty straw drifted into the air. "Never mind, I can smell them. Ralph, take care of them."

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Starla reached for Max's harness, followed him out of the cave, and into the night. She could see dark auras glow through the trees, as the scent grew stronger with every step. Behind her there was a sound like a large flag flapping in the wind.

"Max, who's behind us?"

Shit, run.

"What is it?"

Two slayers -- now run!

Starla tightened her grip on Max's harness as Max moved closer to her leg to steer her through the trees. Shifters moved in from the right and the left, and the slayers came from behind them. Max quickly turned to the right to guide her out of the trees. Starla ran with him, holding on for dear life.

Star, do you have your phone?

"Yeah, why?"

Now would be a good time to use it. Turn right. Ten paces in front of you is an oak tree. Climb as fast as you can. I'll hold them off.

"Max?"

Don't argue!

Starla obeyed, but misjudged the distance and hit the tree with her face, cutting her cheek and the bridge of her nose. The smell of musty straw and charcoal made her nauseous. She climbed the tree as fast as she could. Shifters were vicious. Slayers were worse. They were black ghost-like beings that carried black swords, which could cut through bone as if it were bologna.

The sound of Max's howl echoed through the air. Starla heard every snap of his jaw, and every blow he took keeping her safe. She pulled out her phone and pressed the number three button. The tree shook and knocked her phone to the ground before she could finish dialing. The smell of charcoal dissipated. Bleeding and broken, Max struggled to bring down the last shifter. Starla jumped from the tree on top of the shifter, threw her arms around his neck, and squeezed with all of her might. The shifter fell

limp to the ground, then burst into flames, leaving a pile of black ashes.

“Max! Starla communicated telepathically with Max in case there was a shifter hiding in the trees. Her hands searched the ground, looking for him.

To your left, ouch!

Sorry.

It’s okay. I thought I told you to stay in the tree.

Since when do I ever listen to instructions? Can you walk?

More like limp, but I’ll get you back to town.

Do you see my phone?

Max limped over to the phone and picked it up. *I think you broke it again.* He dropped it in her hand.

Starla laughed and dialed her father’s number.

“Starla?”

“Hi.”

“Don’t ‘hi’ me, where are you?”

“In the park at the edge of town.”

“Damn it, you know...”

“Stop the lecture right there. Max is hurt, just get here quickly.”

“How bad?”

“Broken leg, and several large gashes.”

“I’m on the way.” He hung up before she could say anything else.

So how much trouble are you in now smarty?

“A lot.”

Was it worth it?

“Absolutely. And for the record, I would do it again, except the part where you got hurt. I’m sorry.” She petted his head gently.

No big deal. I’m used to it. It goes with being your guide. Max laughed.

Thomas, Starla’s father, landed next to them with a hard look on his face. “Starla, you’re bleeding.”

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“Misjudged the tree.”

“Max, can I pick you up?”

Tell him “yes,” Star.

“He said ‘yes.’”

“Okay Max, up you go; and Starla, you get on my back.”

He bent down and waited for Starla to put her hands around his neck. “The two of you are in a heap of trouble.”

Oh, wait a minute. You better tell him I protested.

Starla laughed. “Father, don’t be mad at Max. He protested. I was the one that made him go. If anyone is in trouble, it’s me.”

“You can be sure of that. What were you thinking?”

Thomas flew straight up into the air toward the mansion that stood above Swan Valley.

“Rachel needed me. It’s my sworn duty as a veterinarian to take care of the animals.”

“That reasoning won’t work with me, child. It is not safe for you to go to birthing animals in the middle of the night, especially without telling anyone where you are. Winston is worried sick. He has half the staff out looking for you.”

“Not anymore. They’re coming in behind us.” She laughed at the sound of fifty vampires circling around them.

“Not funny, child.”

“I’m sorry.”

Thomas landed at the front door of the mansion. “You go inside and stay there until I come back. I’ll take Max to the doctor myself.”

“Yes, sir,” Starla said to her father.

She took Max’s nose in her hands and kissed him. *Wish me luck; Winston is going to be pissed.* She was thankful for their silent communication.

Max licked her face. *Hey, just remember I told you it was a bad idea. Just smile. He’ll forgive you.*

You sure you’re okay?

I’m fine. It’ll take a lot more than a few shifters to get my ass dead.

Okay, see ya soon.

Starla walked through the door, bracing herself for the lecture that was about to erupt from her beloved guard. Winston was Starla's great-grandfather, but she didn't know that. Starla only knew he had been beside her since the day she was born. He was a Crystalian, like her mother was. Their society lives under the frozen tundra in Alaska, in the Crystal Caverns. When Starla's mother died after giving birth, Winston was allowed to leave the caverns and watch over Starla. He had become her mentor, guardian, friend, and comforter.

"Starla, you're bleeding and your dress is shredded. Where have you been?" Winston wrapped her up in a blanket and led her up the stairs. "Child, do you ever think about your safety?"

* * *

Thomas flew with Max to the barn. "Jaz?"

"Over here."

"Fix him up quick." Thomas carefully laid the wolf on the table. "Max, what would I do without you? Thank you for protecting her."

Thomas's large hands petted the wolf's head. Thomas had found Max when Max was just six weeks old, bleeding in the snow and left for dead. He brought him to Jaz, who nursed him back to health. Max was infused with Thomas's blood. He became immortal like the Protectors. Max was a very large white wolf. He stood four feet high and had powerful muscles, and a tail that he used like a whip. He was smart and sarcastic. His only goal in life was to protect Starla. He healed as fast as the Protectors, which was a good thing because protecting Starla was a hazardous job. With the infusion of Thomas's blood, Max also inherited knowledge. He could read and type, which allowed him to communicate with Winston and Thomas when Starla got into trouble.

"Max man, gotta hand it to you. You're one tough wolf." Jaz quickly examined the wolf. "Okay, looks like a broken leg, and

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four gashes that need to be stitched up. You'll be good as new. Good thing you heal fast."

"Thanks, Jaz." Thomas looked at his friend and brother-in-arms.

Jaz was one of the eleven Protectors. He and Thomas had flown together for over five hundred years. Jaz was gifted at healing animals.

"Tom?"

"Stop right there. I'm too tired and mad to have a conversation about letting Starla into our world. She's blind and innocent. I will not have her in the middle of danger."

"It's your call, bro, but you know as well as I do you can't keep her hidden among the humans much longer. If the shifters and slayers can find her, soon everyone looking will find her. Let us protect her up close."

"Not now, Jaz." Thomas's eyes were sad. "Bring Max up to the house when you get done. And Max, not one word to Starla about anything you heard." He walked away.

* * *

"Child, if you don't hold still I will be forced to hold you down." Winston's patience was growing thin.

"Stop fussing. I hate it when you fuss over me."

The sweet smell of black licorice came into the room, followed by heavy footsteps. Starla knew it was her Uncle Marcus. Starla identified animals and non-humans by their personal scent.

"I suppose you're going to scold me, too."

"No, dear. I'm the fun uncle, remember." He kissed her forehead and gave Winston a wink. "Now let me see this nasty cut on your cheek. Mmm."

"You'll have to stitch this one," Winston said, handing Marcus a green, sterile package.

"Are you up to it?" Marcus asked Starla, wiping the blood and dirt from her cheek.

“Just do it, so Winston can yell at me some more.” Starla sighed and leaned her head back in the chair.

“Starla, I’m not yelling, but you need to be more mindful of where you are and when.” Winston handed Marcus a syringe.

“This will sting for a second, dear.” Marcus skillfully injected the novocaine into Starla’s cheek. “Okay, now that that is done, Winston, would you be so kind as to make us some tea?”

“Gladly.” Winston left the room, mumbling about stubborn children.

“You know, dear Starla, he cares very much.”

“I know.”

“But?”

“Why can’t I be a part of whatever it is my father is fighting for? Why does he keep secrets? I know that there is something he is afraid of.”

“Starla, please, you must understand.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know a Protector’s world is not for a young woman to know. I hear it every damn day from them.”

“Your time will come, my dear.”

“I doubt that. He won’t even let me meet those who watch over me.”

“How do you know you’re being watched?”

“Uncle Marcus, do you really think I’m that stupid?”

“No, I do not.”

“I’ll be old and gray before my father lets me into his world of Protectors. I’m too precious.” She wanted to scream.

Thomas was a Protector, a superhero of the vampire world. Protectors are born with a genetically enhanced gene that activates during their transition from human to Protector. It allows them fly at the speed of light and walk in the daylight. They are immune to anything, except human blood. Their hearts beat at a slow, steady pace that warms their skin. During their transition they don’t lose their skin pigment, and their bodies grow into warriors of strength.

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Starla was born from two very different species; her father was a Protector, and her mother, Maggie, was a Crystalian. Franklin, Thomas's father, named them over seven hundred years ago because they dwell in the Crystal Caverns and thrive on the crystals they grow there. Protectors have sworn an oath to keep humans and Crystalians safe from the evils of the world. Starla's mother was a female warrior with unimaginable strength, and she possessed magical abilities never seen before. All Crystalians have magical abilities, but Maggie's exceeded the average Crystalian's. When Maggie died, she passed her magic and her strength on to Starla. Evil seeks to gain these gifts.

Starla's father hid her among the human population for eighteen years. Starla grew up thinking she was a human until her sixteenth birthday party was crashed by shifters. Her father then was forced to tell her the truth. At sixteen, Starla struggled with the fact that mythical creatures really existed. It was then that she began to see auras. When she graduated from high school that same year, she went straight to college. Being a veterinarian was her only goal. Her recent graduation brought about change.

Starla longed to be a part of her father's world. He kept her away from the Protectors, but asked them to watch over her from afar, to keep her safe. They all have sacrificed their own safety to keep her alive. Starla's impetuous behavior often put her and Max in harm's way.

"Just one more knot and you'll be as good as new."

"Thanks."

"Starla, you must be patient."

"Oh, please, don't start quoting my mother's prediction. I can't bear to hear it anymore."

"I was going to say that this is the year of the millennium. Destiny will make its move soon, and you will be amazed at the outcome. Trust your old Uncle Marcus."

"See, you do it, too, only you never say she told you."

“Starla, your mother was extraordinary. She could see far into the future.”

“So I have been told since I was two,” she groaned.

“Well, enough of this bitter behavior.” Marcus stood up and held out his hand for her. “Come on, let’s see how Max is doing, shall we?”

“Gladly,” she said, reaching out for his hand.

* * *

Franklin paced in front of the fireplace waiting for Thomas’s report on Starla. He missed her terribly. The decision to hide her among the humans was an anguished necessity for those who loved her. Marcus had placed a spell on Starla when she was three years old to hide any memories she had of Franklin and the Protectors. That way, no one would be able to hold her hostage or kill her because she was associated with them.

A knock at the door jarred his thoughts.

“Come in.”

“Father.” Thomas entered the room and walked straight to the bar.

“How is my granddaughter?”

“Stubborn and impossible.” He gulped down half a glass of scotch.

“Thomas, maybe it is time to bring her here.”

“No, father. She is young and fragile.”

“The Ice Fortress is the safest place on earth.”

“I know, but she will want to fight.”

“Maggie said she would be a warrior.” Franklin poured himself a drink.

“After her awakening.” Thomas held up his drink. “Until then, she is helpless.”

“In your eyes. Jaz told me what happened tonight. She killed that Shifter with her own hands.”

“Don’t remind me.”

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“Come sit.” Franklin wasn’t asking; he was demanding.

“Father, she is a blind child. It is my job to protect her. Maggie made me swear.”

“Yes, but she didn’t say to lock her up and treat her with kid gloves. Starla was born of two very strong warriors. Let her learn about our world. Maybe she won’t sneak off so often.”

“No!” Thomas threw his glass into the fire place and flashed out of the room.

“You know, Bumper, I do believe he is upset.” With a small laugh, Franklin petted his black panther Bumper on the head.

Vampires and Protectors have the ability to flash from anywhere to wherever they wish to go. They think of the destination, rise up on their toes, and let the magic take them.

* * *

“Max, you ride with Winston in the limousine. Starla and I will fly to the reserve. Winston, we’ll see you there.” Thomas picked up the silent Starla and flew into the air. “You’re still not talking to me?”

“No.”

“I see.” Silence loomed between them. “Look, I’m sorry about you missing the party with your friends last night.”

“Whatever, it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Starla, please don’t be mad at me.”

“Stop being so protective.”

“Can’t do that.”

“Then we have nothing else to talk about. Are we almost there?”

“Yes. I can see it from here.”

The 20,000 acre reserve was nestled in the mountains of Idaho. There were green rolling hills, rivers, and small lakes, surrounded by majestic mountains and cliffs. Meadows and miles of forest filled the land. Maggie had created the animal reserve for Starla. Animals from small to large hid from the

world with the assurance of love and protection. Starla knew the reserve not for its visual beauty, but for its sounds and smells and the feel of the ground under her feet.

As her father landed in front of the barn, Starla listened to the sounds of animals coming toward them. A soft smile grew across her face when a team of dragonflies hummed by her. She turned her head toward her father and heard the happy buzzing of the bees in the flowers below them. Sounds of harmony filled the air, but the hollowness of her father's heart echoed between them.

"Starla?" Kelly yelled from the barn door.

"What's wrong?"

"Come quick."

Kelly was one of the animal attendants, also a witch. She grabbed Starla's hand and led her to the first stall.

"She's dying. I think she is Tibeta's mate. Feel here. She gave birth, but we can't find the cubs."

"Oh, Shilou." Starla knelt beside the dying tiger. "What happened?"

Attacked. The tiger whispered

"Where are your children?" Starla stroked her fur gently. She could feel the tiger's weak heartbeat.

They ran.

"Rest, my friend. I will find them." A small tear escaped Starla's eye.

The tiger's breathing ceased. Starla said a silent prayer to the White King and Queen of the golden realm, asking them to guide the tiger's soul safely to its silent resting place. King Vasilis and Queen Oasis reside in the golden realm and watch over the Protectors and vampire warriors on earth. These pure deities were the first vampire warriors on earth that fought for human life. When the White King and Queen died in battle, they were blessed with reigning over the golden realm and with ruling the souls of true warriors -- both vampires and Protectors -- on earth.

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Thomas taught Starla to pray to them for strength when she felt weak and to ask for serenity when the darkness scared her. When Thomas became a Protector, the White King and Queen gifted him with the ability to see through solid objects. It came in handy when Starla was a child. After their transformation, a Protector receives a gift from the White King and Queen.

Starla stood up and reached for Max, then remembered he was with Winston. She was forced to ask her father for help.

“Father, we must find the cubs.”

“Come, daughter.” He held her hand and led her out into the field.

Starla whistled into the air, hoping Tibeta or Sheba would come. “I guess they are out looking for the cubs, too.”

“Probably. I never knew that tigers and lions were friends.”

“Not usually. My friends at the reserve don’t act like those animals in the wild.”

Starla relaxed in the comfort of the reserve; there was a freedom here. Her ability to see auras allowed her to walk with her father without holding on to him. The animals warned her of things that would make her stumble. Thomas’s voice felt as warm as the sun on her shoulders. He was the protective force in her sightless world, a guide to live by. The sound of his heavy footsteps told her where he was, a thud against a rock warned her.

“Starla.”

“I’m right behind you. Do you see Jefferson above us?”

The sound of freedom rustled through the eagle’s feathers. Starla walked with her head tilted up to the sky. She wished she could fly with him.

Thomas laughed at her. “You’re going to break your neck, walking like that.”

Starla lowered her head with a glowing smile, nodded to the bird on her shoulder that chattered in her ear, and stepped over a small boulder hidden in the tall grass. Starla heard everything around her. The constant communication from the animals that

guided her safely through the reserve was a delicate silent trust. Hidden from the world, the reserve allowed her to roam free, a sanctuary of safety.

“The hillside is full of wild flowers. Your mother loved this time of year.”

Starla heard the unspoken sadness in his voice and saw the slight flutter of his bright aura.

“You miss her so much, don’t you?”

“Every day,” Thomas said, exhaling loudly. “But you, my child, you are a wonderful reminder of how beautiful she was.”

“Let me guess, my eyes?”

“When I look into your radiant pink eyes, I can see Maggie looking at me.” Thomas’s voice faded into the air.

“I wish I knew what pink really was.”

“Someday you will, dear.”

“Tell me more about her.”

“She simply radiated, the way you do when you get excited about something. I remember her face when she told me she was pregnant. She practically jumped out of her skin.”

“I don’t radiate,” Starla scoffed, with a crooked smile.

“Really, what would you call that squealing noise you make when an animal gives birth?”

“Okay, maybe just a little,” she laughed.

Thomas put his arm around Starla’s shoulders. He softly touched her hair. “Your white hair glistens in the sunshine, just as hers did.”

Starla knew she was different from the humans by the way they taunted her throughout her childhood. She always felt uncomfortable in her own skin, as if she were in the wrong body. Her stubborn front was a shield that covered the weakness she felt inside.

She tugged on Thomas’s shirt, and held him from taking another step. Thomas stopped quickly. He knew she heard something he couldn’t. He relied on her to hear or smell what was not obvious, even to the best Protector.

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“To your left, at eight o’clock, a rattler. He must be very small.” She whispered so softly, it sounded as if the wind spoke.

“Ah, yes, there he is. A newling,” he whispered back.

The bushes rustled in front of them, and the sweet smell of clover announced Sheba’s arrival. Starla walked forward, her steps quickening into a full run. She anxiously greeted her beloved friend.

“Starla, slow down. There is a large boulder at two o’clock,” Thomas shouted at her.

Out of the bushes leapt a large lioness that landed gracefully at Starla’s side. The lioness purred loudly; friendship and warmth flowed between them.

“Sheba, where have you been?” Starla wrapped her arms around the lioness’s neck and buried her face into Sheba’s soft fur. “Shilou’s cubs are missing. Have you seen them?” Starla whispered into the Sheba’s ear.

Thomas watched his daughter interact with the lioness. Starla’s flawless ivory skin blended into the lioness’s fur. When she smiled, her dimples showed and her eyes sparkled. She glowed with sunshine and warmth. Maggie had truly been reborn in the form of their daughter.

“Starla, we must keep moving,” Thomas called to her. “There are still several miles to search. Those cubs will not last through another night alone.”

“Sheba says she knows where they are. Come on.” Starla climbed on the lioness’s back and wrapped her arms around Sheba’s neck. “Follow us from the air, Father.”

A rush of adrenaline coursed through Starla’s veins. Sheba took off through the field toward the forest. Starla’s elation emanated. The wind blew in her face. Freedom was the look in her eyes.

I really hate it when she does that. Thomas watched his daughter run away on top of Sheba. It left him with an uneasy quiver in the pit of his stomach.

“Just because your father can fly, does not give you permission to take off like that!” His shouts were lost with the wind as he jumped into the air. He didn’t trust the animals as completely as Starla did.

Sheba gracefully ran through the field into the trees and out of the forest to the opening of a small cave. Thomas landed next to them, ready to scold her. Starla was crouched down with her ear to the ground. He waited for an explanation.

“Father,” she whispered, “the cubs are in distress. I don’t recognize the sound of this bear.”

Starla knew every creature that lived on the reserve by the smell of their hide and the sound of their steps. She stood up anxiously and waited for her father to speak.

“Stay put, both of you. I mean it.” He shook his finger at Starla as if she could see him. “Remember, you are my daughter first and foremost. Your veterinary skills won’t save you if that thing attacks.” His stern voice told her not to argue.

With tears in her eyes, Starla nodded her head yes. Thomas slowly entered the cave. He could hear the small cries of the cubs. In the darkness, his sharp eyes saw a bear. Vigilantly he made his way to it. The fight was short, with Thomas outmuscling the animal. He didn’t kill it, but simply knocked it unconscious.

“Starla, hurry. He won’t be out long.”

“I’m right behind you, Father. Darkness is my specialty.”

She looked down at the three small blobs of squirming aura, scooped them up, and searched their little bodies with her fingers to make sure they weren’t injured.

“Here.” She handed Thomas the largest of the three cubs, and then tucked the other two under each of her arms. “What about the bear?”

“He’ll be fine, maybe a headache, but nothing is broken. I promise.” Thomas held back a yelp as the small tiger bit him.

“Careful, they have teeth, and they’re hungry.” She smirked as her father cursed under his breath.

“So I have found out.” He repositioned the cub in his arm and walked through the cave.

Starla and Sheba followed behind him. Sheba learned early in their friendship how to guide Starla by watching Max. She leaned gently against Starla’s leg to steer her to the left or right, around objects she couldn’t see. The delicate ballet was so natural, neither one of them realized their actions. Outside, Sheba roared goodbye and walked off into the forest. Starla talked and giggled with the cubs as she followed her father through the forest to the field.

“Father, why did this happen?”

“What, child?”

“Shilou’s death.”

“Starla, sometimes for life to move on and the world to grow, things must die to make room for the newlings. Nature can be cruel. The bear was hungry.”

“I understand how nature works. I don’t understand how the bear got here.”

In an attempt to calm the irritation that flowed through her when he insinuated that she was naïve, she rubbed the ears of the cubs with her thumbs. Just because he tried to shelter her from the world didn’t mean she wasn’t aware of how cruel life could be.

“Sometimes there is no explanation.”

“Like...” She swallowed hard. “...when mother died.”

“Yes, just like that.” He closed the gap between them. “Walk with me.” He put his free hand around her shoulders.

“Where?”

“Just walk to the barn, please. We need to talk.”

“What do you want to grill me about now?”

“Where do you go when you go to town?”

“The Flame in Swan Valley.” There was defiance in her voice.

“Starla, have I not asked you to find another place to go? There are many dangerous beings that gather in there.”

The Flame was a club for vampires, witches, warlocks, and any other type of non-human, to gather safely away from human eyes. It was a hub of information for the Protectors. They also owned it. Good, as well as bad, visited the club. It was definitely not a fit place for Thomas's daughter.

"Don't worry. I always take Max, and Anthony takes good care of me."

"Who's Anthony? Someone I should be aware of?"

"The waiter. Don't worry. I'm not interested in him. But he is a good pair of eyes." She danced a few steps in front of him.

"Good to know. Why do you like to go there so much?"

"I fit in. No one stares at me there." She laughed lightly. "It's a good place to feel normal. Some even talk to me. One even asked me to dance." A small shriek of delight sprang up in her voice. "I refused, of course, but it was a glorious feeling to be asked."

Starla managed to put the cubs to sleep in her arms. Silently, sadness swept through to the empty space she wished love would fill. In her younger years, Starla consumed herself with schoolwork. Dances or parties in college were deflected by excuses of homework.

"How do you know that people are staring at you?"

"Max tells me everything." Even things she didn't want to know.

"I'm sure he does."

"Tell me a story about my mother." Starla didn't want to talk about herself anymore.

"Did I ever tell you about the first time we met?"

"No."

"Oh she was..."

Starla knew by the sound of his voice that he was day dreaming of Maggie. He had described her mother a thousand times; it was always the same picture. Maggie in red leather pants, black silk shirt, and white braided hair tied with a golden

thread. Her ivory smooth skin invited him to touch her. He told her that Maggie's voice reminded him of an angel.

"I was surprised that she knew my name, and that I was there to fight with her. Maggie was more than skilled with a sword. She was like watching a ballerina. Her moves were graceful and fluent. It was as if her sword extended from her arm." His voice filled with love as he continued to talk.

"Did you fall in love with her then?" Starla held back a schoolgirl giggle.

"Yes. My love thread took hold at that very moment."

"What does it feel like?"

"It is a flow of energy from a man to a woman, asking for acceptance. I can't explain it, other than to say it will consume both of you for eternity. The most wondrous rush of electricity will flow through you every time you touch. That is the sure sign you are connected. You'll find out soon enough."

"Yeah, unlikely Father," Starla scoffed.

Her mother had predicted a love like no other would find her and carry her away. Starla had endured twenty years of Winston's and her father's repeated reminders of her mother's predictions. She believed none of them.

"Starla, do you still not believe your mother's visions?" He dropped his arm from her shoulder and stopped.

"Oh Father, please." She walked a few paces in front of him and then turned sharply to face him. "No man in his right mind would ever want a blind girl with a complicated background." With a look of frustration in her eyes, she stared at his bright aura. "I know you and Winston have told me that Mother could see the future, but so far I have no proof. I am still very alone, and my body remains fragile."

"Starla, you must believe," he pleaded with her.

"Believe?" She exhaled loudly. "In what? I've waited twenty years for this mysterious man to show up and save me from loneliness. All I have is a reserve full of animals, which I have grown to love. I've accepted this as my future. Why can't you?"

She twirled away from him and refrained from saying anything about falling in love with a man who entered her dreams most every night. She kept this secret from her father. She thought of his warm sensual voice. The first time he visited her dreams, she melted when he said her name. His scent of oak and spices soothed every fiber in her body. The only problem was that he existed only in her dreams, a man with no name and no flesh.

“Starla, I know your mother was right. Love will come to you, in a very strong way.”

Starla stood before her father and dropped her head into his chest. “Father, that man only exists in my dreams.” She raised her head with a smile, and started to walk forward. “Now, are you going to finish the story or are we going to keep arguing about my imaginary lover.”

“Very well,” he continued. “After the small battle was over and the last shifter was burning, your mother turned and kissed me. I was deep in love after that. She was gentle, passionate, and stubborn, just like you.”

“And what did my Grandfather Gabriel have to say about your newfound love?”

“Well, that was the difficult part about our life together. You see, it was forbidden in those days for a Protector to bind with a female Crystalian Warrior.”

“But I thought you said that you and mother were bound.”

“Yes, eventually we were, thanks to you.”

Secretly Franklin had turned Maggie into a vampire and then preformed a simple binding ceremony. The only way a Protector or vampire can be bound is to another of the same species. At night, Maggie fought outside the Crystal Caverns with Thomas and slumbered inside the caverns by day, protected from the sunlight. Thomas and Maggie hid their secret from her father, Gabriel, for over three hundred years.

“When your mother became pregnant with you, the council allowed us to bind together in the royal binding ceremony. That was the second happiest day of my life.”

“Second?”

“Yes. The first is the day you were born. Unfortunately, that day is also the worst day of my life.” He bowed his head.

“Because mother died?” She felt his sadness.

“No.” He looked down at her with a tender smile. “Your mother prepared me for her death. We celebrated our four hundred years of life together and said our goodbyes.” He paused. “On the day you were born, I found out that Nash, your great-grandfather, who had been head of the Crystalian Council, cursed you with blindness.” Pain of the past swept through him. It nearly knocked him to his knees.

“Oh.” She whispered. “May I ask why he did that? Winston always avoids this question.”

“You must understand, our love changed many things for the Crystalians. Inside the walls of the Crystal Caverns things hadn’t changed for centuries. The Crystalian people live under the ground, hidden from our modern world. Maggie’s choice to love a creature like me was unimaginable to them. Protectors were only known to the council. They thought we were originally created to protect their existence and hide them from the world.”

“You’re talking in riddles. What does that have to do with my blindness?”

“Nash defied the nature of a Crystalian. He was consumed with wanting power. In the first month of your mother’s pregnancy, we found out that Nash had been planning with a very powerful vampire, Lector Jarren, to gain great wealth in the human world from the gems that grew in the Crystal Caverns.” He paused to gather his words carefully. “The Crystal Caverns hold crystals and gems of a magnitude that humans have never seen. Nash thought that from that wealth he would become a powerful leader in the world.”

“No,” Starla gasped.

Starla was forced to visit her Grandfather Gabriel every year on her birthday. This agreement allowed Thomas to take her from the Crystal Caverns. Starla could not imagine anyone that

would want to hurt them. Aside from her Grandfather Gabriel, Starla knew Crystalians to be sweet, gentle people.

“Your mother told the council of Nash’s plan, and they banished him from the caverns. Before they could strip him of his memories, he cursed you in your mother’s womb.” Thomas lowered his head, and his voice lightened to a whisper. “They cleared his memory, and sent him out into the snow. The Protectors went after Lector and extinguished his light of life.”

“Did my mother know that I would be blind?”

“Your mother knew everything, dear. She knew of Nash’s curse, but didn’t tell me for fear I would go after him.”

“Besides her prediction of love, what else did she say about me?”

“She told me what you would look like, and what your future would hold. She said you would defy the world, becoming the first blind veterinarian.” He laughed. “She even told me how stubborn you would be.”

“Don’t start that again.” She took a step forward, then stopped abruptly.

“What is it, Starla?” he whispered into her ear.

“Tibeta, he’s feeding in the field.” She exhaled shaking her head. “Oh, I’ll never understand how they eat such foul-smelling food.” She stepped closer into the open field. “Tibeta.” Her voice was soft and careful.

The tiger looked up at Starla. *Are those Shilou’s and my children you hold in your arms?* He bit off another chunk of meat.

“Yes, we rescued them from the cave. Do you know where the bear came from?”

No, but I think that is what happened to my mate.

“Tibeta, are you sure?” She kneeled down beside him.

Starla petted his head, as the male tiger sniffed the cubs that wiggled around his paws. She waved her father over so Tibeta could smell the cub he held.

Protector's Awakening

“Tibeta, with your permission I will take them to the barn. They will need nourishment and protection. You can come and go as much as you want.” She scratched his ears.

Thank you, Starla. I owe you my life for the protection of my children. I will come after I attend to some business in the forest. He growled low in his chest.

“He’s planning to go after the bear. He said the bear is the one that killed Shilou.” She looked up at her father.

“Do what you must to avenge your mate. Your children will be safe with us.” Thomas bowed his head with reverence to the tiger. “I understand.”

Tell your father I said, thank you. Tibeta bowed his head in Thomas’s direction.

“He says, thank you.” She turned back to the tiger. “You know that you don’t have to do this.”

I would not be able to live if I don’t.

She kissed the top of his head, and he licked her face in return. There was an unspoken statement between them that she understood what he must do. Starla knew the importance of avenging a wronged death; to ignore it would cause torment to one’s soul. At least, that was how Winston explained it to her. She supposed she would feel the same way if her father was killed by an evil being.

Thomas held her close to his chest and let her cry. “It is the way of life for us.”

“I know Father; my tears are for Shilou and her children. I know how they will feel growing up without their mother.”

“Come, it is getting dark.” He handed her the third cub and cradled her in his arms as he did when she was a child. “Flying is faster.” He laughed as they rose into the air.

* * *

“Zear man, are you crazy?” Jaz yelled at him.

“No.”

“Stupid then, right?” Jaz laughed.

Zear stood six foot six, and had long, thick, black hair. His smooth olive skin glowed with warmth. His muscular body made women lust for him and men envy him. Zear was a fierce warrior. Franklin found him in Italy, 425 years ago. Zear had just buried his family and friends after they were killed by the hunters -- evil beings who wanted to rid the world of vampires. Zear gladly took the oath to protect the world from evil. He looked down at the glacier with his snowboard clutched in his hand. Adrenaline was what he craved.

“Not like we’re gonna die or anything.” Zear flashed a crooked smile at Jaz. “What is the point of being immortal if you don’t exercise it once in awhile?”

“You have a point there.” Jaz looked down at the fresh powdered snow that covered the steep glacier. It glistened in the sunlight and called to him.

Jaz was one-hundred percent Cherokee. He was born in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. Fighting was in his blood; his father died a great warrior of the tribe, and his mother had been a healer. Six foot two, long, black waves of hair hung down his back. He bulged with power and glowed with honor. On a snowy mountaintop many years before, forty-year-old Jaz collapsed at Marcus’s feet, near death. Jaz left the human world that day to join the fight against evil. He believed being a Protector was an honor bestowed upon him from the spirits of fallen warriors of his tribe. At the age of 520, he was wise and strong.

“Go!” Jaz shouted, as his board hit the snow.

“Damn,” Zear called out, as he followed him.

Together, Jaz and Zear had lived, agonized, and battled with evil for over 400 years. They were Protectors of the world; the good side of the scale that balances good and evil. They lived dangerously and hungered for the ultimate rush of adrenaline.

Fresh snow flew in all directions as the two men sped down the glacier. Howls of built-up tension flowed from their mouths.

Protector's Awakening

The crisp bite of cold Alaskan air cleansed their delicate souls. A positive rush of adrenaline calmed their nerves and dissolved the negative residue of battle.

At the bottom of the massive glacier stood Marcus, father of the Protectors. His face showed his love for them. It was Marcus who had discovered the rare gene that allowed the Protectors to exist. He was a jolly, red-headed Scot. Life was a bowl of opportunity in his eyes.

“I do believe Jaz won this round,” Marcus said.

“Marcus, I...we...I mean, we were just...” Jaz stuttered for an excuse as to why they were playing and not working.

Marcus put up his hand with a healthy laugh. “Jaz, my son, you’re not in trouble. I envy your abilities. Fun is good for the soul. Right?”

“That’s what you keep telling us.” Jaz shook his head back and forth.

Zear grabbed his board from the ground and chuckled nervously. “So if we’re not in trouble, what’s wrong now?”

Marcus waved his wand and three La-Z-Boy chairs appeared in the snow. “We need to talk.”

“Pleasure or serious?” Jaz looked at Zear.

“Serious boys, heart to heart serious.” Marcus held up a bottle of scotch in one hand and three glasses in the other.

* * *

“Starla, come inside. It is time for dinner.” Thomas reached for her arm.

“They must be sleeping.”

“Yes, they look like one big ball of fur. Come, Starla.” He pleaded for her to follow him.

The fresh smell of hay was replaced with the clean scent of cinnamon as they entered the house. The three-story house was half the size of the mansion in Swan Valley. Thomas knew Starla considered the reserve her home and the mansion to be his.

“I don’t know what I would ever do without you. I guess it’s a good thing you’re immortal.”

“You remember what I told you if something should happen to me?” His voice cracked.

“Yes. Winston knows exactly what to do and will guide me.” She paused. “Oh, and if anything should happen to you after my awakening, which will never take place because I’m destined to be alone and weak, Uncle Marcus will come to get me. But why do you ask?”

“I guess being a professor for so many years leads me to quiz you once in a while.”

Thomas closed his eyes as she walked past him. A simple prayer to the White King and Queen to keep her safe whispered from his lips. He didn’t have the courage to teach Starla what she needed to know about his Protector’s world, but he did teach her to pray to the White King and Queen.

Thomas smiled as she slipped her arm in the crook of his elbow and gave a squeeze.

“I love you, Father.”

“I love you too, my child.”

Thomas knew his destiny; Maggie had told him before she died. His heart suffered silently. He would never see his only daughter fall in love. His sworn duty of protecting her to adulthood would soon be over. As their time grew to an end, he looked forward to being reunited with his soul mate, Maggie.

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