

AWAKENED - EXCERPT

For the zillionth time I thought about what an amazing place Sgiach's throne room was. She was an ancient vampyre queen, the Great Taker of Heads, uber-powerful and surrounded by her own personal Warriors known as Guardians. Hell, way back in the day she'd even taken on the Vampyre High Council and won, but her castle wasn't a nasty-outdoor-plumbing-medieval-version-of-camping (gross). Sgiach's castle was a fortress, but it was—as they say over here in Scotland—a posh castle. I swear the view from any of the sea-facing windows, but especially her throne room, is so incredible that it looks like it should be on HD TV and not in front of me, in real life.

"It's beautiful here." Okay, talking to myself—especially so soon after being, well, kinda sorta crazy in the Otherworld—might possibly be a not-so-good idea. I sighed and shrugged. "Whatever. With Nala not here, Stark mostly out of it, Aphrodite doing stuff I'd rather not imagine with Darius, and Sgiach off doing something magickal or kicking ass in superhero-like training with Seoras, talking to myself seems like the only option."

"I was simply checking my email—nothing magickal or ass-kicking about that."

I suppose she should have made me jump. I mean, the queen seemed to materialize from the air beside me, but I guess being all shattered and crazy in the Otherworld had given me a pretty high spookiness tolerance. Plus, I felt a weird bond with this vampyre queen. Yeah, she was awe-inspiring and had mad powers and all, but in the weeks since Stark and I had come back, she had been a fixture by my side. While Aphrodite and Darius played gross kissy-face and walked hand in hand on the beach, and while Stark slept and slept and slept, Sgiach and I had spent time together. Sometimes talking—sometimes not. She was, I'd decided days ago, the coolest woman, vamp or not, I'd ever met.

"You're kidding, right? You're an ancient warrior queen who lives in a castle on an island no one can get to without you letting them, and you're checking your email? Sounds like magick to me."

Sgiach laughed. "Science often feels more mysterious than magick, or at least I have always thought so. Which reminds me—I have been considering how odd it is that daylight affects your Guardian with such debilitating severity."

"It's not just Stark. I mean, it's been worse with him recently 'cause, well, 'cause he's hurt." I paused, tripping over the words and not wanting to admit how hard it was to see my Warrior and Guardian so obviously messed up. "This really isn't normal for him. He can usually stay conscious during the day, even if he can't stand direct sunlight. All the red vampyres and fledglings are the same about it. Sun does them in."

"Well, young queen, it could be a distinct disadvantage that your Guardian is unable to protect you during the daylight hours."

I gave a shoulder shrug, even though her words sent a shiver of what might be premonition down my spine. "Yeah, well, recently I've learned to take care of myself. I think I can handle a few hours a day on my own," I said with a sharpness that surprised even me.

Sgiach's green-amber gaze caught me. "Do not allow it to make you hard."

"It?"

"Darkness and the struggle against it."

"Don't I have to be hard to fight?" I remembered skewering Kalona to the wall of an Otherworld arena with his own spear, and my stomach clenched.

She shook her head and the fading daylight caught the streak in her silver hair, making it glisten like cinnamon and gold mixed together. "No, you must be strong. You must be wise. You must know yourself and trust only those who are worthy. If you allow the battle against Darkness to harden you, you will lose perspective."

I looked away, staring out at the gray-blue waters that surrounded the Isle of Skye. The sun was setting into the ocean, reflecting delicate pink and coral colors across the darkening sky. It was beautiful and peaceful and looked utterly normal. Standing here it was hard to imagine that hanging around in the world out there was evil and Darkness and death.

But Darkness was out there, probably multiplied times a gazillion. Kalona hadn't killed me, and that was really, really gonna piss off Neferet.

Just the thought of what that meant, that I was going to have to deal with her and Kalona and all the horrible bullpooie that went along with them again made me feel incredibly tired.

I turned away from the window, squared my shoulders, and faced Sgiach. "What if I don't want to fight anymore? What if I want to stay here, at least for a while? Stark's not himself. He needs to rest and get better. I've already sent that message to the High Council about Kalona. They know he murdered Heath and then came after me, and that Neferet was all involved in it and has allied herself with Darkness. The High Council can handle Neferet. Hell, adults need to handle her and the nasty evil mess she keeps trying to make out of life."

Sgiach didn't say anything, so I took a breath and kept on babbling. "I'm a kid. Seventeen. Barely. I'm crappy at geometry. My Spanish sucks. I can't even vote yet. Fighting evil isn't my responsibility—graduating from high school and, hopefully, making the Change is. My soul's been shattered and my boyfriend's been killed. Don't I deserve a break? Just a little one?"

Utterly surprising me, Sgiach smiled and said, "Yes, Zoey, I believe you do."

"You mean I can stay here?"

"For as long as you wish. I know what it is to feel the world press too tightly around. Here, as you said, the world is only allowed to enter at my command—and mostly I command it to stay away."

"What about the fight against Darkness and evil and whatnot?"

"It will be there when you return."

"Wow. Seriously?"

"Seriously. Stay here on my isle until your soul is truly rested and restored, and your conscience tells you to return to your world and your life there."

I ignored the little pang I felt at the word conscience. "Stark can stay, too, right?"

"Of course. A queen must always have her Guardian by her side."

"Speaking of," I said quickly, glad to steer the subject away from questions of conscience and battling evil, "how long has Seoras been your Guardian?"

The queen's eyes softened and her smile became sweeter, warmer, and even more beautiful. "Seoras became my Oath Bond Guardian more than five hundred years ago."

"Holy crap! Five hundred years? How old are you?"

Sgiach laughed. "After a certain point, don't you think age is irrelevant?"

"And it isna polite to ask a lassie's age."

Even if he hadn't said anything, I would have known Seoras had come in the room. Sgiach's face changed when he was around. It was like he turned on a switch and made something soft and warm glow inside her. And when he gazed back at her, just for a moment, he didn't look so gruff and battle-scarred and I'd-rather-kick-your-butt-than-talk-to-you.

The queen laughed and touched her Guardian's arm with an intimacy that made me hope Stark and I could find even a little piece of what the two of them had. And if he called me lassie after five hundred years, that would be pretty cool, too.

Heath would have called me lassie. Well, more like girl. Or maybe just Zo—forever just his Zo.

But Heath was dead and gone and he'd never call me anything again.

"He's waiting for yu, young queen."

Shocked, I stared at Seoras. "Heath?"

The Warrior's look was wise and understanding—his voice gentle. "Aye, yur Heath probably does await yu somewhere in the future, but it is of yur Guardian I speak."

"Stark! Oh, good, he's awake." I know I sounded guilty. I didn't mean to keep thinking about Heath, but it was hard not to. He'd been part of my life since I was nine—and dead only for a few weeks. I mentally shook myself, bowed quickly to Sgiach, and started for the door.

"He isna in your chamber," Seoras said. "The boy is near the grove. He asked that you meet him there."

"He's outside?" I paused, surprised. Since Stark had come back from the Otherworld, he'd been too weak and out of it to do much more than eat, sleep, and play computer games with Seoras, which was actually a super weird sight—it was like high school meets Braveheart meets Call of Duty.

"Aye, the lassie's done fussin' about with his makeup the now and is actin' like a proper Guardian again."

I put my fist on my hip and narrowed my eyes at the old Warrior. "He almost died. You cut him to pieces. He was in the Otherworld. Give him a little break. Jeesh."

"Aye, well, he dinna actually die, did he?"

I rolled my eyes. "You said he's at the grove?"

"Aye."

"Okie dokie."

As I hurried through the doorway, Sgiach's voice followed me. "Take that lovely scarf you bought in the village. It is a cold evening."

I thought it was a kinda strange thing for Sgiach to say. I mean, yeah, it was cold (and usually wet) on Skye, but fledglings and vamps don't feel changes in weather like humans do. But whatever. When a warrior queen tells you to do something, it's usually best to do it. So I detoured to the huge room I shared with Stark and grabbed the scarf I'd draped over the end of the canopied bed. It was cream-colored cashmere, with threads of gold woven through it, and I thought it probably looked prettier hanging against the crimson bed curtains than it did around my neck.

I paused for a second, looking at the bed I'd been sharing with Stark for the past weeks. I'd curled up with him, held his hand, and rested my head on his shoulder while I watched him sleep. But that was it. He hadn't even tried to tease me about making out with him.

Crap! He's hurt bad!

I mentally cringed as I recounted how many times Stark had suffered because of me: an arrow had almost killed him because he'd taken the shot that had been meant for me; he'd had to be sliced up and then destroyed a part of himself to pass into the Otherworld to join me; he'd been mortally wounded by Kalona because he'd believed it was the only way to reach what was shattered inside me.

But I'd saved him, too, I reminded myself. Stark had been right—watching Kalona brutalize him had made me pull myself together, and because of that Nyx had forced Kalona to breathe a sliver of immortality into Stark's body, returning his life and paying the debt he owed for killing Heath.

I walked through the beautifully decorated castle, nodding to the Warriors who bowed respectfully to me, and thought about Stark, automatically picking up my pace. What was he thinking, dragging himself outside after what he'd been through?

Hell, I didn't know what he was thinking. He'd been different since we'd been back.

Well, of course he's been different, I told myself sternly, feeling crappy and disloyal. My Warrior had made an Otherworld journey, died, been resurrected by an immortal, and then yanked back into a body that was weak and wounded.

But before then. Before we'd returned to the real world, something had happened between us. Something had changed for us. Or at least I'd thought it had. We'd been super intimate in the Otherworld. His drinking from me had been an incredible experience. It'd been more than sex. Yeah, it'd felt good. Really, really good. It had healed him, strengthened him, and—somehow—it had fixed whatever had still been broken inside me, allowing my tattoos to return.

And this new closeness with Stark had made losing Heath bearable.

So why was I feeling so depressed? What was wrong with me?

Crap. I didn't know.

A mom would know. I thought about my mom and felt an unexpected and terrible loneliness. Yeah, she'd messed up and basically chosen a new husband over me, but she was still my mom. I miss her, the little voice inside my head admitted. Then I shook my head. No. I still had a "mom." My grandma was that and more to me.

"It's Grandma I miss." And then, of course, I felt guilty because since I'd been back I hadn't even called her. Okay, sure, I knew that Grandma would feel that my soul had returned—that I was safe. She'd always been super intuitive, especially about me. But I should have called her.

Feeling really disappointed in myself and sad, I chewed my lip and wrapped the cashmere scarf around my neck, holding the ends close while I made my way across the moat-like bridge and the cold wind whipped around me. Warriors were lighting the torches and I greeted the guys who bowed to me. I tried not to look at the creepy impaled skulls that framed the torches. Seriously. Skulls. Like of real dead people. Well, they were all old and shriveled and pretty much meatless, but still, disgusting.

Keeping my eyes carefully averted, I followed the raised pathway over the boggy area that surrounded the land side of the castle. When I got to the narrow road I turned left. The Sacred Grove began just a little way from the castle, seeming to stretch endlessly into the distance on the other side of the street. I knew where it was not because I remembered being carried, corpse-like, past it on my way to Sgiach. I knew where it was because during the past weeks, while Stark had been recovering, I'd felt myself drawn to the grove. When I hadn't been with the queen, or Aphrodite, or checking on Stark, I'd been taking long walks inside it.

It reminded me of the Otherworld, and the fact that this memory comforted and creeped me out at the same time scared me.

Still, I'd visited the Sacred Grove, or as Seoras called it, the Croabh, but I'd always come to it during daylight hours. Never after sunset. Never at night.

I walked along the road. Torches lined the street. They cast flickering shadows against the edge of the grove, lending enough light so that I could make out a hint of the mossy, magickal world within the boundary of ageless trees. It looked different without the sun making a living canopy of branches. It wasn't familiar anymore, and I felt a prickly sensation across my skin, like my senses were on super alert.

My eyes kept being pulled to the shadows within the grove. Were they blacker than they should be? Was there something not quite right lurking inside there? I shivered, and that's when a movement farther down the street caught at the edge of my vision. My heart skittered around in my chest while I peered ahead of me, half expecting wings and coldness, evil and madness . . .

Instead what I saw had my heart skittering for other reasons.

Stark was there, standing in front of two trees that were twisted together to form one. The trees' interwoven branches were decorated with strips of cloth knotted together—some were brightly colored, some were worn and faded and tattered. It was the mortal version of the hanging tree that had stood before Nyx's Grove in the Otherworld, but just because this one was in the "real" world didn't mean it was any less spectacular. Especially when the guy standing in front of it, staring up at its branches, was wearing the earth-colored MacUallis plaid, in the traditional Warrior way, complete with dirk and sporran and all sorts of sexy metal-studded leather accoutrements (as Damien would say).

I stared at him as if I hadn't seen him for years. Stark looked strong and healthy and totally gorgeous. I was distracting myself by wondering what exactly Scottish guys did, or didn't, wear under those kilts when he turned to face me.

His smile lit up his eyes. "I can practically hear you thinking."

My cheeks got instantly warm, especially since Stark did have the ability to sense my emotions. "You're not supposed to be listening in unless I'm in danger."

His grin turned cocky and his eyes sparkled mischievously. "Then don't think so loud. But you're right. I shouldn't have been listening in 'cause what I was getting from you was the opposite of what I'd call danger."

"Smart-ass," I said, but I couldn't help grinning back.

"Yep, that's me, but I'm your smart-ass."

Stark held out his hand to me as I reached his side, and our fingers twined together. His touch was warm—his hand strong and steady. This close to him I could see that he still had shadows under his eyes, but he wasn't as deadly pale as he had been. "You're yourself again!"

"Yeah, it's taken me a while; my sleep's been weird—not as restful as it should be, but it's like a switch flipped inside me today and I finally recharged."

"I'm glad. I've been so worried about you." As I said it I realized how true that was, and I also blurted, "I've missed you, too."

He squeezed my hand and tugged me closer to him. All of his cocky kidding evaporated. "I know. You've felt distant and scared. What's up with that?"

I started to tell him he was wrong—that I was just giving him some space to get well, but the words that formed and slipped from my lips were more honest. "You've been hurt a lot because of me."

"Not because of you, Z. I've been hurt because that's what Darkness does—it tries to destroy those of us who fight for Light."

"Yeah, well, I wish Darkness would pick on someone else for a while and let you rest."

He bumped me with his shoulder. "I knew what I was getting into when I swore myself to you. I was cool with it then—I'm cool with it now—and I'll still be cool with it fifty years from now. And, Z, it really doesn't make me sound very manly and Guardian-like when you say Darkness is 'picking on' me."

"Look, I'm being serious. You want to know what's up with me, well, I've been worried that you might have been hurt too bad this time." I hesitated, fighting unexpected tears as I finally understood. "So bad that you weren't gonna get well. And then you would leave me, too."

Heath's presence was so tangible there between us that I half expected to see him step from the grove and say Hey there, Zo. No crying. You snot way too much when you cry. And of course that thought made it even harder for me not to bawl.

"Listen to me, Zoey. I'm your Guardian. You're my queen; that's more than a High Priestess, so our bond is even stronger than a regular Oath Sworn Warrior's."

I blinked hard. "That's good, 'cause it feels like bad stuff keeps trying to tear me away from everyone I love."

"Nothing will ever take me away from you, Z. I've sworn my oath on it." He smiled, and there was such confidence and trust and love in his eyes that he made my breath catch in my throat. "You'll never get rid of me, mo bann ri."

"Good," I said softly, leaning my head against his shoulder as he drew me inside the half circle of his arm. "I'm tired of the whole leaving thing."

He kissed my forehead, murmuring against my skin, "Yeah, me, too."

"Actually, I think the truth is that I'm tired. Period. I need to recharge, too." I looked up at him. "Would it be okay with you if we stayed here? I-I just don't want to leave and go back to . . . to . . ."

I hesitated, not sure how to put what I was feeling into words.

"To everything—the good and the bad. I know what you mean," said my Guardian. "It's cool with Sgiach?"

"She said we could stay as long as my conscience lets me," I said, smiling a little wryly. "And right now my conscience is definitely letting me."

"Sounds good to me. I'm in no rush to get back to all the Neferet drama that's gotta be waiting for us."

"So we stay for a while?"

Stark hugged me. "We stay until you say to go."

I closed my eyes and rested in Stark's arms, feeling like a huge weight had been taken off me. When he asked, "Hey, would you do something with me?" my response was instant and easy: "Yep, anything."

I could feel him chuckling. "That answer makes me want to change what I was gonna ask you to do."

"Not that kind of anything." I gave him a little shove, even though I was feeling waves of relief that Stark was definitely acting like Stark again.

"No?" His gaze went from my eyes to my lips, and he suddenly looked less cocky and more hungry—and that look made my stomach shiver. Then he bent and kissed me, hard and long, and he completely took my breath away. "Are you sure you don't mean that kind of anything?" he asked, his voice lower and gruffer than usual.

"No. Yes."

He grinned. "Which is it?"

"I don't know. I can't think when you kiss me like that," I told him honestly.

"Then I'll have to do more of that kind of kissing," he said.

"Okay," I said, feeling light-headed and weirdly weak-kneed.

"Okay," he repeated. "But later. Right now I'm going to show you how strong a Guardian I am and stick to the original question I was gonna ask you." He reached into the leather satchel that was strapped across his body and pulled out a long, narrow strip of the MacUallis plaid, lifting it so that it floated gently on the breeze. "Zoey Redbird, would you tie your wishes and your dreams for the future with me in a knot on the hanging tree?"

I hesitated for only a second—only long enough to feel the sharp pain that was the absence of Heath, the absence of a future thread that could never be—and then I blinked my eyes clear of tears and answered my Guardian Warrior.

"Yes, Stark, I'll tie my wishes and dreams for the future with you."