



Mandy M. Roth

WARRIORS
OF THE
DARKNESS

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New Concepts Publishing

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ISBN 1-58608-855-6

New Concepts Publishing

Lake Park, GA 31636

www.newconceptspublishing.com

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Dedication

To Shane for supporting me in all I do. Oh, and volunteering to be my research subject was also very kind. To my editor, Andrea, for dealing with my semi-regular freak out sessions and not taping me to a wall as revenge. Last but not least, to my mom for never being caught without one of my bookmarks on hand. Thank you for being my biggest fan.

Chapter One

Colonel Alejandro Vargas watched silently, ready and willing to shoot Lt. Fulk Rodriguez if he dared to cross the line with the two civilian doctors that were assigned until further notice to their team. Rodriguez would heal the wound—eventually. It's what their kind did. Some shifters took longer than others but in the end, he'd be just fine.

"So, what's that say?" Fulk asked, tapping the wall full of carvings with his M-16. It was the last thing he should do in a place as old as the temple they'd found but it was so typical of Fulk that no one commented, not even the attractive doctor that had been working so hard to decipher the writing. She seemed to be in a world all her own, the same as her counterpart who had not ventured from her post either.

Both women were more than attractive, though one had managed to not only capture his attention but seemed to demand it. Dr. Murray's golden waves of hair touched her mid-back and her blue eyes continued to flicker in his direction from time to time. Her body was so close to perfect that he had a hard time believing no part of it was altered. At five feet ten inches tall she came to his chin and that was a rare find. From what he could gather by staring at her, her army issued desert fatigues and dark tan tee shirt did little to hide a toned and well curved body. His cock liked what it saw, so the rest of him wasn't about to complain.

Alejandro couldn't tell if Dr. Murray was interested in him or nervous of him. Each time he caught her watching him,

she looked away quickly. It was kind of cute and left him feeling young again. He was dressed in fatigues and packing enough ammunition and weapons to take out a small army so it was understandable if it was the latter of the two. He knew he looked intimidating. Any other time, he'd have been pleased to think he was making someone nervous but the idea of scaring her sickened him.

Dr. Ondrea Harris, the petite friend of the blonde one stood slowly and ran her fingers over the markings on the wall. "They're based loosely off Egyptian hieroglyphics but they aren't like anything I've ever seen before. It's freaky."

Freaky? Great, this is one of our experts.

Fulk nodded, his chin length brown hair fell into his face. "This whole place is freaky. One minute we're standing in a desert and the next we're in a tropical rainforest. I keep waiting for a snowstorm to hit. This sure the hell isn't like our Earth."

She smiled. "I agree. From the base to here we spent less than fifteen minutes driving and covered that much of a climate and terrain change. It's remarkable.

"I just can't understand how it is that they have Egyptian writing here as well. From all outward appearances, this temple looks Mayan, yet, I'm positive these aren't Mayan markings. The strangest part of it all is that I'm sure some of this is Latin as well. I've never seen anything like it." Ondrea glanced towards her friend who was busy with her nose in a pile of books. "Dr. Murray, come take a look at this."

The blonde goddess continued to fiddle near a pedestal with her electronic equipment and books. She hummed softly

and moved her alluring hips to music only she heard. It was both erotic and endearing. It seemed as though she didn't have a care in the world. She'd arrived early in the morning and never once appeared shocked by the idea of being on a different planet or in another realm—whatever the scientist of the week was calling it. It was as though she did it daily. Maybe she did. Alejandro had requested files on all personnel coming aboard the project and was given all but hers. So far, he didn't even know her first name and hadn't heard her utter much more than a thank you. Granted, that one thank you had left his entire body cramping with the need to sink his dick into her.

He was sure of one thing, her smile made him weak in the knees. Already, she'd flashed her pearly whites at him twice, each time leaving his stomach flip-flopping and his heart racing. Alejandro felt like a love-struck junior high student. It was oddly liberating and terrifying all at the same time. There was also something familiar about her, but the idea of forgetting a face like hers was absurd, so he dismissed it.

Ondrea snorted. "Hello? Dr. Murray? Anyone home there or are you too busy locked up in your world of science to come back to us?"

The blonde kept swaying her hips while she held a pen in her mouth. Alejandro never before wanted to be a ballpoint pen. He did now. She tapped keys on her laptop and glanced at a stack of papers to her right. "Hmm."

Ondrea smiled. "Hello, paging Dr. Murray. Is there a Dr. Murray in the freaky realm?"

Warriors of the Darkness
by Mandy M. Roth

Fulk chuckled. Dr. Murray danced in a small circle before returning to whatever it was that had been holding her attention all morning. Ondrea cast him a sideways glance. "Erm, I'd apologize for her but, really, she'll only keep doing it. Plus, I'm one hundred percent sure that she has no idea she's even doing it. She just sort of shuts off to everything around her when she gets going with something she's into."

Biting his lower lip, Alejandro did his best not to laugh at Dr. Murray as she tucked the pen behind her ear, picked up a piece of paper and danced while reading it. The worst part of it all was that not only was it funny to see a scientist not having a care in the world, it made him horny as hell to watch this one in particular.

Fulk grabbed a piece of native fruit from a tree near him and went to crack its outer shell. "I'm starved. I've got to admit these aren't so bad. Taste a little like a pear mixed with an apple. Weird, but good."

Ondrea glanced at him. "Hand me one."

He gave her an odd look.

She rolled her eyes. "Please."

Grinning, Fulk tossed a piece of what they'd taken to calling monkey-nuts because it was their job to go out of their way to be men and think of names for things to offend others. That and the monkey-like creatures that seemed to inhabit this particular section of the jungle seemed to like not only eating them but throwing them at the soldiers.

Ondrea caught the fruit and stared at Dr. Murray. A slow smile slid over her face. It was mischievous to say the least.

"You are not going to throw that at her," Alejandro said, before he even thought about it.

Ondrea winked. "Wow, a little overprotective, aren't you?"

Yes, but that wasn't the point. Alejandro shrugged. "No. I'd just rather not have to explain why I let one civilian doctor knock another out. That's all."

"She'll live. It's fruit."

"With a spiked outer shell," he said, giving her a hard look.

Alejandro could almost see the wheels in Ondrea's head spinning. Oh, she was going to throw it at Dr. Murray now just because he'd told her not to. He watched in what felt like slow motion as Ondrea hurled the fruit at Dr. Murray who was still dancing and reading from a piece of paper. The fruit had aligned perfectly with her head.

Drawing his bowie knife from its sheath, he sent it flying, ax-like at the fruit. It struck it, as he knew it would and changed the direction of the fruit. The knife wedged into a purple tree trunk to the right of Dr. Murray, spearing the fruit in the process.

Ondrea clapped. "Nice. But it wouldn't have hurt her. Just so you know."

Dr. Murray glanced at the tree and reached out tentatively. Taking hold of the handle, she pulled the knife free from the tree. She turned and arched a brow, appearing to be a little lost as to what was going on. "Did someone call me?"

Alejandro bit back a laugh as he held his M-16 close to him, needing anything to keep his mind off sinking his cock into her. The very idea of being able to touch her, caress her while he slid into what could only be a tight pussy made his

palms begin to sweat and his stomach tighten. She would be the death of him if he had to stand around staring at her shaking her ass every day.

Each time she hummed, Alejandro pictured that lush mouth wrapped around his shaft, taking him deep into the back of her throat. The very thought of it left him on the verge of coming. Reaching down, he did a slight adjusting of his rock hard cock, hoping she wouldn't notice.

She's probably married. Nothing that fine can possibly be available. Besides, my family would have a fit.

Bringing a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, girl home with him for a weekend would lead to his mother casting some sort of spell over him that would no doubt leave him impotent. Since she did possess the gift of magik, it was a very real threat. All she claimed to want out of life was for her children to settle down, have lots of babies and stay close to her. Somehow he didn't think she'd be okay with a blue-eyed grandbaby. She was a proud Brazilian woman, but Alejandro guessed she'd be willing to make an exception as to what South American country his future mate originated from, only that she did indeed have ties to one and was nothing like Dr. Murray.

Staring at Dr. Murray, he doubted very much that she had ties to anything remotely close to him. It was a shame. She made his blood pump fast and his entire body light with need at the mere whiff of her scent. Fresh berries and cream seemed to permeate from her every time she moved. It drove him mad with lust so much so that he'd found himself taking the outer perimeter watch three times already since they'd

arrived—each time to give himself a much needed break or risk pinning her to the ground and claiming her.

Stop thinking about her as mate material. She's human and you aren't looking to be tied down to any one woman. Now, a few nights of pleasure are another story. That is a definite possibility.

Alejandro watched as she put on the army DCU hat that he'd given her when he saw her nose and cheeks burning from the scorching sun. The soft smile she'd given in return had left his muscles tightening as he fought the urge to bend and capture her mouth. It would have been so easy to just press his lips to hers but she hadn't shown an interest in him as of yet and stealing a kiss wasn't what he did. Though, if he had to be forced to endure much more of her swaying hips and smooth looking skin, he just might. Maybe, he'd get lucky and she'd be willing to share so much more than just a kiss with him.

She made her way towards Ondrea and paused before him. "I think this is yours," she said, handing him his knife with the fruit still attached to it. "Thank you."

Did she know?

She arched a brow and glanced at her friend. "Be careful. Foreign objects seem to fall from the sky."

Ondrea whistled and glanced upwards. "No clue what you're talking about."

"Right. Thanks again, Colonel."

Alejandro raked his gaze over her, noticing how red her arms appeared to be. She claimed to have put sunscreen on

Warriors of the Darkness
by Mandy M. Roth

prior to coming and he believed her. Problem was, it didn't seem to be doing her a damn bit of good.

Major Issac Barrett was the only member of his team that was fair skinned but even he tanned before burning. Dr. Murray seemed to go from white to red in less than sixty seconds. It had to hurt. If by some miracle it didn't, it sure the hell would later. "Why don't you head out of the sun for a bit, Doctor, and take a break?"

Fulk stared at him with wide eyes. "Excuse me, sir, but did you just suggest someone take it easy? I think my hearing might have gone. You're a slave driver. We never get breaks."

Issac appeared, carrying a jug of water with him. "Nothing is wrong with your hearing, asshole. I think were-coyotes have an excellent range. What do you think, sir?"

Alejandro watched Dr. Murray closely, trying to see how she would react to the talk of supernaturals. She either didn't hear Issac or didn't care. Sure, they'd existed among humans for close to a hundred years but not all humans took kindly to them. Some even went as far as to try to exterminate his kind.

Dr. Murray, as far as Alejandro knew, was not registered in the Non-Human Database (NHD). It was the government's way of keeping track and monitoring the number of supernaturals in a given area. The idea of an uprising left many humans paranoid. To alleviate this worry, President Harding implemented the creation of the NHD in 1920. Since then, it acted like a homing device for supernaturals but

allowed humans and supernaturals to live side by side without incident.

Ondrea tapped her friend's arm, causing her to cringe. "Oh, sorry. I didn't realize ... holy shit, Dr. Murray ... err ... Deryn, you're burnt."

Deryn? Had her parent's wanted a boy?

Deryn offered a soft smile and bent down to check out the portion of the wall that her friend was so interested in.

"What's up, Onnie? And why do you keep calling me Dr. Murray? I've known you since we were kids. Didn't we bathe together?"

"Ahh, that's a sight I'd pay money to see," Fulk said, with a daydream-like look on his face. Alejandro would have smacked it off him had he not thought the very same thing the moment he heard the words fall from Deryn's lips.

"Lieutenant, enough," Alejandro said, doing his best to sound as if he was scolding Fulk. He really wanted to high-five him.

Deryn glanced back at him and smiled. "That was almost convincing." She winked. "Almost."

Ondrea waved her hand in front of Deryn's face. "Hello? Anyone home?"

"What's up?"

"What's up?" Ondrea asked, dropping down next to her. "Are you blind? Look at that symbol there." She pointed at a mark resembling a woman seated on her knees with some sort of ball shape above her head. "Does it look familiar?"

"Yes. Why?"

Ondrea snarled, the cat shifter within her obviously losing patience with the situation. Alejandro kept a close eye on the woman, hoping that she wouldn't turn on her own friend.

"Drop your pants. Better yet, just get naked."

"Excuse me?" Deryn's eyes widened.

All men present took a step forward. Alejandro couldn't help himself—he had to question what was going on. It was against his cock's wishes to stop Deryn from getting naked but it was the right thing to do. "I'm sorry but I'd like to know why someone is being ordered to disrobe before actually making them do it."

"You can't *make* me take anything off, Colonel," Deryn bit out, causing him to take a tiny step back. She was even more beautiful when she was upset. Thoughts of going out of his way to tick her off entered his mind. It was wrong and he knew it, but still. The idea of seeing her blue eyes blaze was almost too tempting.

She glanced at the marking on the wall again, this time running her finger over it as she went. "Oh."

"Oh?" Ondrea put her hand on her hip and laughed. "All you have to say is 'oh' when you find the exact marking that you have tattooed on your lower back on another world? Look at the one next to it."

She has a tattoo on her lower back?

Fulk glanced at him and Alejandro knew the man shared his thoughts—inner wild child. They both pursed their lips and glanced upwards to avoid commenting. The newest revelation did little in the way of diminishing Alejandro's interest in Deryn.

"It's not the exact one, Onnie."

"I think it is."

Sighing, Deryn did the unthinkable. She started unbuttoning her pants. Fulk and Issac took another big step forward. Alejandro glared at them. They backed up. "Doctor?"

She grinned. "Relax. I won't flash anything I shouldn't."

Damn, a man can dream.

In an instant, Deryn had her tee shirt off and her pants lowered about two inches. The tiny, cut off white tank top she had on just barely covered her breasts. For a split second, Alejandro was positive he'd died and gone to heaven. When Fulk opened his mouth, he realized that heaven wouldn't involve him.

"Nice abs, Doctor!" Fulk whistled. "How many sit-ups do you do a day? We've got some chicks who are serious about their bodies here but none have definition like that."

Deryn cast a very unimpressed look at Fulk. "Do you think you're funny? I don't need you making...."

Ondrea touched her friend lightly. "Deryn, hon, he's not making fun of you. In fact, he's going to turn around now and keep his mouth shut."

Fulk took another bite of his fruit. "Touchy. Geesh, I was just trying to tell you that you have a great body. What the hell is the matter with you? Can't you take a compliment?"

Alejandro entertained knocking Fulk's teeth in but Deryn's verbal assault beat him to the punch. She hugged her tee shirt to her, blocking his view of her body. "Guess not. And I also can't take the fact that Ondrea is allowing you to eat a

fruit I personally tested and know it has several ingredients in it that have been linked with impotence."

Fulk spit the fruit out and began to choke.

Ondrea's mouth opened wide. "Deryn, you never tested any fruit."

"I knew that. You knew that but Mr. Sit-Up didn't." She winked at Fulk and moved her tee shirt away from her stomach. "Crunches. Not sit-ups. How many I do depends on whether or not I can sleep that night."

Fulk stopped spitting and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "The fruit won't make my dick limp?"

Alejandro and Issac both shook their heads at Fulk's crassness.

Deryn smiled and Alejandro's chest tightened. "No. The fruit won't make your cock shrivel and fall off but that plant your hand is on will."

Shocked that Deryn said cock, Alejandro raised an eyebrow.

Fulk snorted. "Ha, ha, I'm not falling for that again."

Ondrea glanced back at the plant and gasped. "Holy shit, Deryn, is that a...?"

"A *mentula minuscula*? Yes."

Fulk moved his hand from the plant and eyed Deryn carefully. "Umm, I'll be right back."

The women waited until Fulk was clear of the area to start giggling. Ondrea turned Deryn to face the wall allowing Alejandro a view of the tattoo on her back. It was beautiful, black ink and covered the small of her back. "Ohmygod, Deryn, *mentula minuscula*? I can't believe you came up with

that on the spot. You're going straight to hell for screwing with him."

Deryn glanced over her shoulder in the direction Fulk had run off in. "Bet he's washing his hands and umm, well, you know."

"Deryn."

"What?" She shrugged. "You can't tell me that he hasn't stood around making snide ass comments about us since the moment we arrived."

She had a point. Fulk was notorious for that.

"Still, to toss the Latin phrase for little dick out as the name of the plant was just wrong. You need to tell him you were kidding. If he repeats that to other people he'll be the laughingstock of the base."

Little dick?

Alejandro tried and failed to hide his laughter. Issac seemed to have issues, too. A snort followed by a cough came from him. "Little dick."

Ondrea nudged Deryn. "See. They're already laughing at him."

Fulk came back through the tree line, wiping his obviously wet hands on his pant leg. Deryn thumped her head against the temple wall, laughing hysterically. Issac fell into a fit of laughs, too.

She got hold of herself and smiled sweetly. "Umm, Lt. Rodriguez?"

"Yeah?"

"I misinformed you. The plant is not called *mentula minuscule*."

Ondrea nodded. "That's better."

"It's called *mentula magnus*."

Alejandro couldn't help but laugh on that one. She gone from little dick to big dick.

Ondrea lifted the piles of Dr. Murray's hair and wrapped it in a twist of sorts. "Oh, queen of mean, could you hold your mane please?"

Lifting her hands to her head, Deryn winked at him and his heart thumped madly in his chest. The position left her cut off tank top riding up to just under her breasts. His cock throbbed painfully.

Ondrea ran her hand over another tattoo on the lower portion of the back of Deryn's neck. It was too hard to get a good look at it from his vantage point but it looked to be about two inches high and about an inch wide. It too was done in black ink.

"What does this one mean because this is repeated on the other wall—the one you're working by?" Ondrea asked.

"It means I'm the," Deryn took a deep breath, "queen of mean."

Ondrea smacked her lightly. "Deryn! I'm serious here."

"Mmmhmm, so serious that you had time to get some fruit throwing action in. Yep. Serious."

"All right, I'm sorry I tried to peg you in the head with the thing. It's not like you'd have let it hit you." Ondrea glanced back at him. "Hell, it's not like the colonel would have ever let it near you. Now, tell me what this means and why does that look like a big cat? What breed is that?"

"You're the cat shifter. You tell me. I'm just the lowly non-shifter."

"I'm so going to bite you in like two seconds," Ondrea said, snarling playfully.

Fulk groaned. "I would pay to see that, too."

"Me, too," Issac said.

Me, three.

Alejandro kept his opinion to himself and watched as Deryn began to shake her hips slightly again. Ondrea slapped her ass and a collective groan went throughout the men.

"Deryn, hold still."

"I am holding still."

"No, you're doing the ass thing again."

Deryn stilled. "Oh, sorry. I can't help it. Those drums and that thing making the snake charmer like music is hard not to move to."

Alejandro glanced at his men with the unspoken question on his face. Did they hear anything? They shook their heads. Ondrea looked at them and her brow furrowed. "Umm, Deryn, what music and how long have you been hearing it?"

Deryn snorted. "Cute, Ondrea. I know you hear it. How can you not? It's been steady and at a good volume all day, from the moment we got here."

"Oh, that. I was sounding it out. It sounds so much like..." Ondrea paused, touching Deryn's back. "Umm?"

Ondrea was lying, Alejandro could sense it.

"Remember the belly dancing classes we took?" Deryn asked.

"Yes."

Deryn laughed. "Doesn't it remind you of that? Like at any moment a snake is going to come out of a basket or some guy with a god complex is going to show up with a harem?"

"I want his job," Fulk said, under his breath.

"Deryn, are you feeling okay? I mean, you're not coming down with anything, are you?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine. Why?" A second after she said, she looked past Alejandro at the tree line and touched Ondrea's shoulder. "Do you feel that?"

"Spooky chick alert," Fulk said, laughing slightly.

Ondrea glared at him. "Feel what, Deryn?"

Deryn locked gazes with him. "Nothing." She instantly went to work sliding her tee shirt back on and tucking it into her pants.

Touching Deryn's shoulder, Ondrea went to her tiptoes to whisper to her. Lucky for Alejandro his hearing was excellent. "Deryn, what are you sensing? Is it a threat?"

It was odd to hear a shifter asking a human that.

Deryn swallowed hard. "Umm, it's nothing. You don't hear the music, do you?"

"No, honey, I don't, but I know better than to question your gut. You've saved my ass more times than I can count. Tell me the truth, what do you sense?"

"I don't want to talk about this here. These men won't understand me."

"Deryn, I won't let them hurt you. You know that. What do you sense?"

Sighing, she glanced high into the treetops. "That we're being watched—stalked would be a better word. But the

predator's toying with us, seeing how close it can get before being detected. Almost like a test. It seems to want to test the colonel most of all."

Something was stalking him? Alejandro zeroed his gifts on scanning his surroundings for danger but found none. Ondrea apparently did the same thing. She shook her head. "I'm not picking anything up and I don't think we can start spouting off about something hunting these guys without ending up sitting in a padded cell. Keep your guard up, and, Deryn?"

"Yes?"

"You're leaving some vital information out. I can see it in your face. What is it?"

Deryn ran her fingers over the symbols on the wall.

"Ondrea, I really don't think we should be here after dark."

"Honey, they've been working double shifts on this site for seven months. They haven't sensed.... Oh shit, they can't sense it. Can they?"

The shrug that followed was small, as if she wasn't sure how to answer that.

Ondrea ran her hand over Deryn's lower back. "Tell me why you're uneasy about the dark. You aren't one who is normally scared of it."

"The symbol you brought me over to see ... the one that is on my lower back, it means moon. This one here," she pointed at another, "means darkness. That one means warriors. All of this is a big fat warning about them being more powerful after dark."

"Them who?"

"I don't know that yet, but I intend to find out." She leaned in close to Ondrea. "I'll come back after everyone leaves and look around."

Alejandro had to bite back a 'hell no you won't.'

Ondrea shook her head. "No way. For one, this base is crawling with nothing but supernaturals. They've got vampires, Fae, shifters. A smorgasbord if you will. The last thing you need to be is alone in a jungle. I'm not saying any of them would hurt you but I've felt the call of the wild before. The thrill of the hunt. The knowledge that you're stalking something that can't see you. It's been seven months since most of the men have probably gotten to hunt enemies to satisfy their inborn need to kill."

Deryn clutched onto the wall. "You make them sound like animals. They're not. If they were animals, I wouldn't be so nervous about being here. I'd know that they wouldn't want me dead the second they...."

"Shh, Deryn, don't get worked up. They'll sense the change in your body chemistry. You know that. Kane's explained it to you at least a thousand times that I'm aware of."

The mention of Captain Kane Soto's name made Alejandro's ears perk. He couldn't comment or he'd let on he could hear them whispering.

Ondrea continued, "Remember the time those snakes got loose in your office?"

Deryn shuddered. "I still yell at Marvin every chance I get for forgetting to put the lid back on them when he was done feeding them. What made my lab more attractive than his?"

Why did they migrate to me?" She shuddered again. "I don't think I've ever screamed louder in my life. I screeched like a little girl. Kane's face when he came busting through the door was priceless in a 'scary guy whose eyes are flickering yellow' kind of way."

"Yeah, Deryn, that's my point. You need to remember that at certain times, you're more, well, you know, and during that time you send out signals we pick up on. Why do we keep having to go through this?"

Deryn smiled. "Because the second I make the 'I'm lost' face you and Kane launch into lecture mode. Ugg, like I don't understand pheromones and the fact you are sensitive to spikes in heart rates, breathing, any sort of adrenaline gland secretion. You can pick up on variances in the amount of...."

Ondrea put her hand up, stopping Deryn. "Kane's been 'trying' to get you to understand it for years. Something tells me you should be teaching him. Why do you let him think he's teaching you ... oh." She pointed and laughed. "Very smart, Deryn. Make him feel needed, manly, in control."

"He's so cute when he's getting spiders out of corners that I can't help myself. You have to admit that watching him climbing up, in his barely there underwear, on my bed to get them out of high points is worth it."

Underwear? Her bed?

Clearly, she knew Kane personally. Alejandro made a mental note to talk with his longtime friend about it and hoped it wasn't true. Kane had a way with women and the thought of the sexy young doctor wrapping her long legs

around one of his team members while she cried out in ecstasy didn't sit well with him at all.

Ondrea sighed. "Oh gods, I can just imagine what he must look like doing that. Tell me about his tattoo. I bet it ripples when he moves, doesn't it?"

Laughing, Deryn nodded. "It is nice."

"Nice? Just nice? I know for a fact that he walks around you naked without a second thought and all you have to say is, it's nice? Do not spoil a girl's fantasy. Tell me it's better than nice."

Alejandro wanted to shoot something, preferably his longtime friend, Kane.

Deryn's lip twitched. "The dragon tattoo on his back," she arched a brow, "goes all the way down and wraps around his leg. That's why he wears pants all year round."

"Is that why he's so picky about who does and who doesn't get to see him naked?"

Snickering, Deryn nodded. "He has issues with how close it comes to his, uhh, family jewels."

Ondrea gasped. Alejandro wanted to lob a grenade at his friend. Too bad he wasn't back from Earth yet. It wasn't like Alejandro had any reason to be jealous. Deryn didn't belong to him.

"How close does the tattoo come to his jewels?"

Deryn winked. "Let's just say that his is closer to certain areas than the one I have." She glanced down towards her crotch and Alejandro felt a light sheen of sweat break out on his brow.

The woman clearly had an array of tattoos, each one in a provocative position. He never thought himself a man to be overly turned on by a woman covered in them but seeing Deryn and seeing how tactful and fitting hers seemed to be, he was fast changing his mind.

Ondrea rolled her body in a quick motion that said just how horny the thought of Kane's tattoos made her and then pointed to the wall. "Okay, that means what again?"

"Moon," Deryn said, shaking her head slightly. "We need Kane here to say for sure what the rest of it means. My skills when it comes to ancient dialects are rusty at best. Besides this is more like the language used by the Avatars. So, Kane would be the expert here, not me. I'm just his shadow. His," she put her hands up and laughed, "underappreciated assistant."

"Kane?" Alejandro asked, needing to hear it from her mouth just how close they were.

Deryn smiled. "Yes, Captain Kane Soto. You know, adorable smile, dark eyes, dragon tattoo, nice ass. I could keep going but I'm guessing you'd rather not hear the rest."

She had no idea just how much he didn't want to hear her go on and on about Kane.

"The Avatars? What do you mean?" Issac asked, taking a sudden interest in the findings.

Deryn smiled. "You know, the first embodiments of power. The original gods, for lack of a better description." She skimmed the tips of her fingers over the markings and seemed to go off in a dream-like state for a moment. "I think the temple was created to honor them. It might even be a

burial ground." She drew in a sharp breath. "That would explain the ceremonial music I ... err, yeah."

Ondrea winked. "Stick to your field, Doctor, and leave this sort of stuff up to Kane and I."

Deryn didn't seem taken aback back by Ondrea's comment. In fact, she looked as though she found it rather amusing. That piqued Alejandro's interest. "So, what exactly is your specialty, Doctor?"

"I'm a Jill-of-all-trades, Colonel. Though, I'm currently working on ruling out radioactive concerns in this realm, carbon dating various artifacts your teams have found. I think I'm going to have to do potassium or uranium isotope testing because I can only go so far back on the carbon. Everything I've seen from the previous findings tells me that this stuff is older than that. Oh, and I'm trying to remember if I left my coffeepot on back at my place. I wish it was easy to check—pick up a phone and call. Somehow I don't think it works that way though."

Alejandro chuckled. "No. It doesn't quite work that way."

Ondrea huffed and wiped the light sheen of sweat from her brow. "Deryn is a good luck charm. It's genetic. She's versed in almost all aspects of what this program deals with but physics tends to be where she excels the most. Just don't ask her to cook something for you. She seems to do nothing but screw that up."

"Hey, I'll have you know that I'm doing much better," Deryn said, laughing softly. The sound was so divine that it left Alejandro feeling giddy.

Fuck, giddy? I might be in over my head here.

"Please don't start going all safe and gourmet on me, Deryn." Ondrea winked. "I love it when you catch your kitchen on fire and all those hunky men come rushing in to make it right again."

Deryn rolled her eyes and shook her head. "The fire department has only had to come twice."

"Yes and both times were wonderful, don't you think? If you left your coffeepot on they might show up a third time. Hey, what was that one firefighter's name? The one you dated for awhile? You know, tall, sexy, had the long hair?"

"I don't remember." She bit her lower lip and as her nose crinkled.

Alejandro watched silently as the women talked and worked. The last thing he wanted to hear about was Deryn's ex-boyfriends.

Ondrea laughed. "What do you remember about him?"

Grinning from ear to ear, Deryn winked, sending a stab of jealousy through Alejandro. He cleared his throat. "Ladies, how is the translation coming?"

"It's coming just about as slow and infrequently as Deryn has been lately." Ondrea bumped her hip into her friend and giggled. "Find anyone to cuddle with yet?"

Please say no.

"No, and if I do, you have my permission to behead him. I hate the ones who want to hang on me. I don't need another appendage. They never go with my shoes."

Ondrea burst into laughter. "Was that a knock on my shoe fetish? Huh? For a girl who hates men to hang on her, you sure don't push Kane away whenever he wants to hold you."

Alejandro tightened his grip on his M-16. *Wonderful, it's official. She's dating one of my closest friends and all I can think about is fucking her.*

"This means to rest," Deryn said, changing the subject and touching another portion of the wall. "It could be taken as sleeping or death. I'm not sure. Kane will know."

"Kane will know," Ondrea mocked. "Have you handed your individual thought processes over to him along with everything else?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. I walked to my Kane shrine, dropped to my knees and prayed that he would forever be there to tie my shoes, tell me when I need to sleep, eat, go sit down, stay out of trouble, stop talking about gamma waves, stop doing this, stop doing that, put more clothes on and don't wear makeup. The list goes on." She groaned. "I keep waiting for him to present me with adoption papers and tell me to call him daddy."

"Oh, that's just sick," Ondrea said, laughing. "But you do have a point. He does tend to be a little overprotective when it comes to you."

"He says it's because he loves me but sometimes I wonder if he's not really just trying to drive me insane." She traced the edges of another symbol.

Love?

Ondrea's brow furrowed. "Deryn, you give Kane more than enough reason to worry about you. I worry, too."

"Then you're both crazy." Shrugging, Deryn pointed at another spot on the wall. "This means watcher. Combine it with this area and you've got watchers of the moon or

watchers by the moon. The other portion is warriors of darkness. I think. Kane would need to sort that out. There is a big difference. Neither is exactly what you want to be unsealing but I could talk until I'm blue in the face. The government wants to know it all. But too much knowledge can prove fatal."

"Deryn, I know that you of all people have some expertise when it comes to this stuff but I don't see how it's possible for the Avatars to be here, too. This is another realm," Ondrea said, tracing the edges of another marking. "What makes you think it's Avatarian?"

"What made you point out my tattoos?" She stilled and glanced at the treetops again. Reaching up, she touched her right ear gingerly as if she were in pain. The thought of that set Alejandro on edge.

"Ladies, I don't mean to interrupt, but I think Dr. Murray should get out of the sun for a bit," Alejandro said, still caressing his weapon but wishing it was the good doctor that his fingers were running over. He knew it was wrong to want his friend's woman but he couldn't help himself.

Both women ignored him.

"Onnie, I'm telling you, it's a temple for the Avatars." She shook her head a bit, still appearing to be in slight pain. Deryn pointed at a stone, set deep within the wall. "Look, this is a stamp. It's a symbol of royalty."

"Yeah, right." Ondrea shook her head. "Even you can't possibly know everything."

"I can't make mac and cheese, so I do not know all that there is to know," Deryn said, grinning. "Does that help my credibility?"

"Want me to come over and show you? I have some very creative techniques that I doubt you'd ever forget," Fulk said, obviously making a move on the good doctor. "I can only promise you one night but with those abs and that wit, I'll think about an entire weekend."

Alejandro couldn't stop the low growl that slipped from him. The moment it came out, Fulk stopped and backed up slightly. Ondrea glanced at Alejandro and gave him a look that said she knew exactly what the growl meant—she's mine. Unsure if Ondrea would call him out on it in front of her friend, Alejandro prepared to be humiliated.

Reaching out, Ondrea ran her fingers over Deryn's arm. "Sweetie, I think the colonel is right. You need to get in the shade for a bit."

Alejandro exhaled deeply, happy that the need to see him blush and run the other way hadn't hit Dr. Harris. He made a mental note to thank her later. The shifter in her gave her firsthand knowledge of how things worked for their kind. According to her records, she was a were-panther. Alejandro was a were-jaguar, who had managed to get a bit of magik from his mother. Ondrea was keenly aware of the alpha warning he'd uttered announcing to all that he'd staked claim on Deryn. It was unintentional and had come out of nowhere. After he had a chance to explain that to Ondrea, he hoped it would clear everything up.

Thankfully, he hadn't shouted mine, shoved his cock in the good doctor and bit her or his claim would have been binding. The urge to do just that grew by the minute. If he didn't get away from the temptress soon he'd end up with a wife his family would hate. Not to mention one who apparently belonged to his friend. Not him.

"Deryn, shade, now." Ondrea looked like she meant business.

"Huh?" Deryn asked, sounding a bit dazed as she stared at the tree line again. "Onnie, I think this wall is a warning to leave or risk resurrecting what lies within."

"Here." Ondrea held her canteen out and ignored Deryn's warning. "Drink."

Deryn touched her stomach gingerly and curled her nose. "Ugg, no thanks."

"You have to."

Backing up, Deryn shook her head. "I just drank a ton. I'm sloshing. Really. I couldn't get even a little sip down. Sorry."

That was a lie. She hadn't touched her canteen once in the last several hours. Alejandro had kept a close eye on her all morning. She needed to eat and find shade. She was also scared of something she thought was lurking around them. He hated seeing her like that and would do all he could to fix it. "Let's break for lunch."

Fulk let out a low whistle. "Mmm, Colonel, that is the best thing I've heard all day. Well, that and how that fruit won't make my guy dry up and fall off." He eyed the plant Deryn had named and then renamed cautiously. It took all Alejandro

had not to laugh. Issac on the other hand began snickering and most likely wouldn't stop anytime soon.

His men began to file out, heading to the jeeps to get their lunches but the two doctors stayed in place. There wasn't a chance in hell he'd leave them alone so Alejandro decided to give them a moment before hurrying them along.

Ondrea touched Deryn's forearm and shook her head. "You didn't take your medicine did you? Could the sun be causing you to hallucinate? Not that I don't believe you but come on, Deryn."

Deryn took an abnormal interest in the wall before her, ignoring her friend and coworker. Alejandro moved in closer and stared down at Ondrea. At six feet five he towered over her tiny frame. "Do I need to get her back to base?"

The wide-eyed, innocent look that Deryn cast him made him feel bad for having asked in the first place. Still, he didn't want to see anything happen to her. The fierce need to protect her was off-putting. It only added to the sense that he knew her from somewhere but couldn't place her. "Dr. Murray, if you need medical attention I can have you back at the base within fifteen minutes."

"Thank you, Colonel, but I'm fine. Really."

"Deryn." Ondrea shook her head. "You didn't take it, did you? Damn it, this isn't something you can keep forgetting to take. It's not like you haven't had to have it every day for the last fifteen years. I swear, you'd forget your head if it wasn't attached." She snorted. "Thank the gods I made you an appointment for birth control shots before you came to a realm full of sexy men."

"Excuse me?" Alejandro asked, unable to hold his tongue.

Ondrea smiled. "Hey, I knew I was dragging Deryn to a place where the men outnumber the women twenty to one. I thought it best she be prepared. And stop giving me that look, as if sex isn't the first thing that popped up in topic when the news spread that two females were coming."

Alejandro watched Deryn carefully, hoping she would shed some insight into her friend's statement. Did she make sleeping with men a hobby? She stood, staring at the wall full of symbols.

"I think this says two earths." Tracing the edges of another marking, Deryn seemed engrossed in her work. She also appeared to be hearing the music again. That or she was just plain old crazy. Either would explain her swaying ever so slightly and glancing to the treetops again.

Ondrea covered her eyes and shook her head. "You forgot to get the shots, didn't you?"

"No," Deryn said, turning to face the wall.

"Good."

"I didn't forget. I canceled the appointment just like I cancel every other one you make for me."

Every ounce of Alejandro wanted to ask her why but it wasn't his place. Ondrea apparently shared his curiosity and she wasn't afraid to ask. "Deryn, what in the hell do you mean you canceled the appointments? I've been making them for you for like ten years."

"Twelve years and three months," Deryn said, moving her finger over two matching circles. "I've canceled them all."

"Then how in the hell do you not have an endless line of kids?"

Endless line?

Deryn chuckled. "Gee, since you put it that way, I almost feel compelled to explain my actions to you." She glanced over her shoulder and gave Ondrea a hard look. Sarcasm dripped for her every word. "Almost."

"Deryn, you cannot afford to have a baby right now."

Laughing, Deryn shrugged. "I wasn't aware that I was having financial troubles."

"That's not what I meant and you know it." Ondrea grabbed her arm. "Does Kane know about this?"

"He's the one who told me to cancel them, so I'd imagine so."

Wonderful, I have a hard-on for a woman who is not only with my friend, they're trying to have children.

"Damn it, Deryn." Ondrea tugged on Deryn's arm. "This is not a matter that is up for debate. Your body cannot handle the stress of a pregnancy and Kane knows that. It's enough for you to get through the day. Do you think I really want to see you fighting for your life because Kane decided you shouldn't bother with them? Do you?" Ondrea snapped so loud that Deryn actually jolted. "Why in the hell would he tell you to cancel the appointments?"

Stress of pregnancy? Fight for life?

"Do you really think this conversation is appropriate in front of him?" Deryn glanced back at Alejandro and he did his best to appear neutral. He was anything but.

"I can wait back at the jeeps," he said, not wanting to leave them alone but sensing their need for privacy.

The slow blink that Deryn did left Alejandro's cock digging painfully at his pants. "No, Colonel, you're fine. If you'd like to jump in and start discussing various forms of birth control and what you do and do not practice, you'll fit right in."

"I'll pass. Thanks though."

Ondrea sighed. "I'm sorry, Deryn. I just worry about you. I walk around convinced you forgot your medicine all the time. You're the smartest person I know and you're also the most forgetful. How is that?"

"Too many thoughts." Deryn grinned. "Well, that and the voices in my head keep interrupting all day." She cast a sideways glance at him.

Ondrea sighed. "Deryn, please."

"I did take it today, Onnie. It's just that this realm has two suns, both of which are a considerable amount closer to it than our sun is to Earth. I have to tweak the serum a bit to compensate for the difference. I thought I managed to get it right prior to arrival. I was wrong. I ran every test I could back home but without having the exact conditions to replicate, I couldn't be exact." She touched her friend's face lightly and smiled. "Now that I do know the exact conditions here, I can recreate them at home. I'll fix it the second we get to Earth. I'm scheduled to check back in within three days. I'll go to the lab there and fix it then. They have the supplies I require. The general saw to that. I promise. Until then I'll just have to remember to wear long sleeves and try to avoid the midday sun. That's all. The colonel was nice

enough to let me borrow his hat for the day and that's helped tremendously."

"Serum?" he asked, very curious as to what was going on.

Ondrea gave Deryn a questioning look that wasn't lost on Alejandro. "How much information about you was given to the team?"

Deryn glanced at him and bit her lower lip. "I'm not entirely sure."

"I just learned your first name if that tells you anything." He left out the bit about how he wanted to sink his dick into her and fuck her until he could fuck no more. Somehow, it just didn't seem to be the right time.

Deryn directed her blue gaze at him and looked puzzled. "You offered me your hat without even knowing anything about me? Without knowing I have a sensitivity to the sun?"

He nodded, unsure why she'd asked. A huge smile broke over her face and before he knew it, she was on him, slipping her arms around his waist and hugging him tight. Shocked, Alejandro just stood there, in full gear, letting her do it.

Hug her back.

Before he could respond to his inner voice, Deryn pulled back, her eyes glistened as if she were in the verge of tears. "Thank you."

"Anytime," he said, silently scolding himself for missing the opportunity to hold her in his arms. "Let's go eat."

Ondrea snickered. "Please tell me I saw what I think I saw." She tapped Deryn. "You cuddling."

* * * *

Alejandro watched Deryn closely as she set bits of her sandwich out for a tiny monkey-like creature. Its brownish-red fur was matted in spots, giving it an almost sheepdog like appearance. This one in particular had taken an interest in her from the start. The second she sat down to eat, it had come running up to her. It had taken everything in him not to shoot it the moment it did. Had Deryn not seemed fine with the thing approaching her, he'd have had target practice for the day done.

The pouty-lipped look she'd cast him melted his heart, leaving him powerless to do much more than watch in awe as she interacted with the thing. He'd been stationed in this realm for seven months and had never seen the creatures do much more than swing from vine to vine and throw half-eaten native fruits on the jungle floor. They only seemed to inhabit the areas of the planet that were thick with growth. The desert portions played home to a variety of species, which they were hoping the addition of the doctors would help to identify.

The monkey-like creature moved towards the food Deryn had laid out, quickly picking up the pieces and eating them. It made a screeching noise before moving towards her again. Alejandro stiffened, not sure he wanted the thing any closer to her.

"Doctor?"

"It's okay." Deryn winked and then stood. When her blue gaze fell on him, he stilled, waiting to see what she'd do.

"Colonel?" she asked, her voice low. It was a voice he could easily imagine whispering his name as he gave her pleasures she'd never forget.

Thoughts of entering her body, soaking her with his seed while he tasted her lips struck him. His cock throbbed, hardening to a painful state. Vaguely, Alejandro remembered Deryn saying something. Thoughts of fucking her senseless still plagued him and he was fairly sure she could tell what was on his mind. "Yes?"

Deryn glanced around nervously. "How much longer do we have until lunch break is over?"

He checked his watch, doing his best to wish his erection away. When it was at half mast, he nodded. "I think we can squeeze about a half hour more out if we need to." It wasn't something he ever thought he'd hear himself say. Yet, he could sense that she was desperate for more time. Since she hadn't eaten a bite of her lunch, he wondered if she felt all right. "Would you like me to take you back to the base, Doctor?"

"No."

A sense of relief washed over him and Alejandro realized he didn't want to have to take her back and leave her there. No. He wanted her close to him. "Want to come and sit down next to me? I promise not to bite and you look like you're tired."

She hesitated, eyeing him cautiously. "Thank you but I'm going to take a little walk. I'll be back before lunch break is over. I promise."

Before he could object, Deryn headed off in the other direction. Grabbing his M-16 but leaving the rest, Alejandro took off after her. He moved through the jungle quietly, just as the beast he held in him would if it were in control. There was no way he'd let her wander about on her own. She was his and if something happened to her, he'd never forgive himself.

Mine? Where the hell did that come from?

The very fact that he couldn't lock onto her right away shocked him. She was human. She shouldn't have been able to slip away from him that easily. When he caught Deryn's scent, he stopped. Peeking around a large, braided tree, Alejandro watched as she stared up at the tree line.

He did his best to sense something in the area with them but got nothing. Still, Deryn looked very convinced something was there. When she touched her ear and rubbed it tenderly, he wanted to run to her. He held back.

"I hear it, okay?" she whispered towards the treetops. "That's what you're trying to figure out, isn't it? You don't have to keep turning it up. I heard it fine at the first level."

Great, she's crazy. Hot, but crazy.

A slow smile came over her as she turned in a tiny circle, still staring at the treetops. "Oh, you're pissed they can't hear you. You want them to know you've been watching, waiting for the right moment." She snorted. "And I get accused of toying with men. Please."

Yep. A certifiable nut. Damn sexy one, though.

Tipping her head, she seemed to be listening to something. "Oh, I didn't hear you there," she said, smiling and nodding her head.

At first, Alejandro thought she was talking to him but when he realized she was talking to something he couldn't see he considered scooping her up in his arms and taking her to the infirmary. He didn't. Instead, he watched Deryn carefully to try to understand what was happening to her. He couldn't believe that the government would actually send him a certifiable nut. Perhaps, the suns here were too taxing on her.

She averted her gaze from whatever it was she saw, giving it the exact look she'd been giving him all day—the shy, but curious look. At first, he was infuriated she'd give it to more than one person. When he thought about the fact nothing was there, he calmed down.

I'm even jealous of nonexistent men.

"Why do you want to know more about that?"

Huh?

Deryn shook her head. "I'd rather not 'disrobe' as you referred to it earlier this far out with just ... umm ... we should get back, right?"

Disrobe? He'd told her that. Was she hallucinating about him?

He licked his lips. *This could be interesting.*

"Sir, or umm, whatever I'm supposed to call you. This really isn't appropriate. If you have any questions you can ask...."

Deryn's head snapped back and she grabbed her cheek. Alejandro saw nothing with her. Whatever was happening, her

hallucination had taken a violent turn. He went to move only to find something pressing against him, holding him in place. His first instinct was to struggle. It hit him then that he was obviously letting his imagination get the better of him.

Shaking his head, he relaxed and felt fine. No more pressing sensation. Glancing up, he found Deryn holding her face, her eyes full of unshed tears. He went to go to her again but the second she started talking, he made a split-second decision to hear what she had to say first. He had to try to make sense of what was going on.

"Fine. I'll show you." She yanked her tee shirt over her head, not taking the time to assure the tank top underneath didn't ride up too far. Alejandro's cock hardened the second he caught a glimpse the underside of one creamy, perfect breast.

Deryn turned to face him and for a second he thought for sure she saw him—the real him. "That one means, moon. I said that already."

He stared at her closer and realized that she had a very red and very perfect hand print on her cheek. It was way too big to be her own. Lifting his hand, he eyed it and her face. If it wasn't a match, it was at the very least, damn close.

Confused, Alejandro shook his head. As far as he could tell, nothing was there.

What the hell is going on?

She arched a well defined brow. "Really? You got all of that from that?" She smiled mischievously. "Remember that time, our freshman year that Professor Bologna was convinced the

Avatars could not only shape shift into various animals but also various people?"

Professor Bologna?

She laughed. "I'm so happy," Deryn took a deep breath in, "you remember events that didn't happen. You should probably take a message back to your boys waiting in the wings."

Alejandro tried to make sense of what was going on but couldn't.

Deryn dropped down on all fours and kicked out and up. If he wasn't positive nothing was there with her, he'd have sworn he heard a male grunt. She slammed into the ground face first and then threw her head back. There was a thud and then Deryn rolled onto her back. For a second she appeared to be pinned to the ground. Her chest heaved as she glared at the nothingness above her. "You are not him. Get off me now or I'm done holding back."

Huh?

Alejandro blinked, positive he'd seen Deryn's pants start to unbuckle themselves. The monkey-like thing she'd been feeding picked then to come charging out of the trees. It leapt, at first at Deryn, he thought. When it landed a good foot above her and appeared to be suspended in thin air, Alejandro gave up trying to make sense of it and went to charge in. Turns out, he wasn't needed.

It clawed at something that wasn't there. Deryn laughed and punched out. The monkey leapt into the air as Deryn rolled to her feet. She crouched into a fighting stance and smiled. "Oh, what? Now you don't want me naked? Come on,

you ancient piece of shit, stop hiding behind the façade of one man and act like one yourself."

Her eyes widened.

"Oh sure, change into a big animal. That's fair. Chicken shit."

She snatched out at something and dropped to the ground, rolling to the side as she did. The monkey ran to her and she nodded. "I'm fine. Sore but good. Sick of that thing but good." She held up a pair of tags and sighed. "No. It's gone for now. I think it's pissed I figured out it wasn't," she glanced at the tag, "one, Alejandro Vargas."

What?

Reaching up, he dug in his shirt collar to assure himself that his tags were on him. When he found them, his brow furrowed. The woman was insane and it was catchy. She talked to monkeys and fought with herself.

She put the tags in her pocket and he decided he'd move in for a better look. There was no way they could have his name on them. She'd probably found a set somewhere on base from an absentminded soldier and decided to put on a good show for him.

I'm killing whoever left theirs lying around. They know better than that.

Deryn put her tee shirt back on slowly, as if she were in pain. Leaning against a tree, she undid a tiny brown leather pack on her waist. She pulled a syringe from it and uncapped it. Unfastening her pants, she lowered them enough that he got a view of her hip and a tiny portion of her right ass cheek. The tattoo she and Ondrea had been discussing was visible as

well. Ondrea was right—the symbols on it were almost identical to those on the temple walls. His cock responded instantly, springing to attention, demanding to be free, to be in her.

Damn, I just got it settled down. She's going to be the death of me.

Deryn pulled a section of skin on her hip taut and injected the needle. Letting go of the skin, she pushed the plunger in and began to hiss. The sound of her in pain tore at his gut. It took everything in him not to run to her, wrap his arms around her and swear to always protect her.

She clawed with her free hand at the oddly colored purplish tree she was facing. The way her entire body tightened told him exactly how much pain she was in. Unable to stop himself, he went to her. "Doctor."

Glancing back at him, her eyes widened.

"It's me."

Why did I clarify that? Nothing else was here with us.

That being said, he put his hands out to indicate he was harmless. Deryn eyed him cautiously. "How long have you known how to read Avatarian?"

He shook his head. "I don't read it. I have a degree in Political Science and...."

A huge smile broke over her face. "It's you."

She went to pull her pants back up but it was easy to see that she was in too much pain to do it. Setting his M-16 down, Alejandro took hold of her pants, gently, savoring the feel of his fingers brushing her bare skin and eased them up.

Slipping his hand into her pocket, he slid the tags out and into his own pocket quickly.

"I take it the serum hurts when it's injected." He pressed his mouth to her ear, savoring her sweet scent as his fingers continued to skate over her smooth skin. It was too much. The urge to lay claim to her was too great. His mouth burned with the need to change. His incisors fought to be free, to be permitted to sink into her tender flesh and taste of her blood. "Doctor."

Her breathing was ragged as she nodded and turned her body around to face him. The small act saved her from his primal urge to bite her, claim her for his own. "Please ... ah ... don't make me go back, Colonel." She reached down to button her pants and her hands shook horribly. He slid his over hers, helping to steady them as she did her pants. "I just need a few minutes. I swear. Please don't make me leave you."

Don't make me leave you? Had he heard that right? No. She couldn't have confessed to wanting to stay with the group on account of him. Could she?

"I won't make you go back. But you need to tell me how I can make this better for you."

Deryn clung to him and he prayed she'd never let go. "You could forget you ever saw this," she said, with a tiny chuckle.

The urge to pull her into his arms and hold her tight was great. This time, he was prepared and did it. She felt even better in his arms than he first thought she would. "I've got you, *amorzão*. It's okay."

Hon? Did I really just amorzão her?

A soft laugh came from her as her body began to relax a bit. "Thanks but what's *amorzão* mean?"

Yep. I did amorzão her.

Alejandro did his best to appear as if it were not a big deal that he'd just used a Brazilian pet name for a lover, for a woman he hardly knew. "Can I help ease the pain?"

She slid her arms up and around his neck, fitting him perfectly. "You're doing that right now."

Taking a deep breath in, Alejandro caught the scent of her arousal and was unable to stop himself as he pressed his lips to the top of her head. Caressing her back as he kissed her forehead, he had none of his usual feelings of wanting to get away when he found himself cuddling a woman. No. He didn't want to run. He didn't want to go anywhere unless Deryn planned on coming with him.

What? I've lost my damn mind. No more kissing or hugging her. And definitely no more pet names.

Sensing someone approaching, Alejandro steadied Deryn and pressed his lips to her forehead. Deryn glanced up and he couldn't help himself. The second he saw the angry bruise that wanted to form on her cheek and realized his hand did indeed fit it, his chest tightened.

I should have stepped in. It doesn't matter if she somehow hallucinated it all. I should have held her through it.

Deryn's gaze flickered over him slowly. "I didn't know you saw that."

Saw what? He hadn't said anything out loud. Had he?

"You're a good man, Colonel." She touched his cheek tenderly. "They didn't count on that."

Unable to resist the draw of her lips, he gave into the need running through him. Bending down, he captured her lips with his own. Although the kiss itself was chaste, the feelings that raged through him were anything but. In his thirty-eight years he had never experienced anything like it.

A moan escaped him as he tipped his head ever-so-slightly. The beast within him stretched, trying to break free, lay claim and mark the woman in his arms as his own. Stunned by his own reaction, his jaw dropped. "Uhh?"

She tugged on his vest, bringing him back down to her level. It was Deryn who initiated the next kiss. It was far from chaste. No. She thrust her tongue into his mouth and fire shot through him. As the coppery sweet taste of her blood-tinged saliva filled his mouth, he growled.

Never had a woman tasted better to him. Grinding against her, Alejandro envisioned how glorious it would be to take her to the jungle floor and sink into her. Her scent consumed him, leaving the man and the beast within teetering on the brink of losing control.

She drew back quickly, leaving him groaning out in frustration. Deryn righted herself and winked at him, not appearing shocked in the least. Did she often kiss men she'd just met deep within foreign jungles? "Thank you, Colonel. I shouldn't have wandered off. You were right. I was wrong. Tripping over a raised root taught me a lesson. Thanks for helping me up."

"Huh?" Another thought occurred to him. "How did you get blood in your...?"

"Hey, Colonel, the mean little doctor you left under my watch is insisting she be allowed to get working again. I'm a little scared of her. She's sexy and a real-life hellcat. Help me out here. Tell me I can let her," Fulk said, appearing next to him. "Part of me is hoping she gets mad enough to take me over her knee. Is that wrong?"

Deryn snickered. "Ondrea would enjoy that too much. Inflicting pain is a hobby of hers."

Alejandro stared down at Deryn as the edges of his mouth raised slightly. She'd seen Fulk and covered for his random show of affection to keep him from being teased or questioned about it later. If Deryn didn't stop being so perfectly irresistible, he'd end up not only fucking her but keeping her as well.

Keep her? No way. She's too white. My mother would have a fit. Besides, she's not mine to take.

"You sure you're okay to walk, Doctor?" Even in his state of shock mixed with pleasure, Alejandro hadn't forgotten how much pain she'd been in. He didn't think he'd ever forget that. Seeing her in pain wasn't something he could tolerate. Seeing her battle with something that wasn't there wouldn't be fading from his memory anytime soon either.

Deryn patted his chest, letting her hand skim over him longer than need be but he wasn't about to point that out. No. He hoped she never stopped touching him. "I'm fine. Thanks again for your help."

Deryn followed Fulk's lead and Alejandro fell in line behind her. The very sight of her ass swaying only served to remind him that his cock had been hard the majority of the day. The

Warriors of the Darkness
by Mandy M. Roth

worst part of it all was Alejandro knew he'd end up laying in his tent tonight, thinking of her as he stroked himself to culmination, not sinking into the real thing. As much of a ladies man as he prided himself on being, he'd never try to get her to accept him knowing she was in that much pain. Not only that, she belonged to Kane.

Chapter Two

Alejandro returned from another sweep of the outer perimeter to find Deryn cleaning up her area, dancing along and humming softly. He was suddenly extra pleased he'd decided to come on the mission. Being the commanding officer in the realm, he rarely had an opportunity to leave base camp. When he'd learned of the doctors coming, something had urged him to rework his schedule so he could tag along. As he watched Deryn, he couldn't have been more pleased with his decision if he tried.

Leaning against the edge of the temple, he watched her with a smile on his face. The song she was humming sounded oddly like *I'm a Little Teapot*. To his surprise, he realized she most likely had a great voice from what he could tell from her humming. Laughing wasn't an option. No. All Alejandro could do was smile as he crossed his arms over his chest and watched the scene unfold. She even tipped to the side at the right spot, leaving him smiling wider. She'd make a great mother.

*Mother? Why the hell am I picturing her with children?
Worse yet, why are they my kids?*

Deryn stilled. He could almost feel her concern. Something had spooked her but he couldn't sense a thing. Bending down, she set the book aside. "It's okay, you can come out."

Huh?

Alejandro watched as the monkey-like creature she'd been feeding earlier raced out from behind a tree towards her. She

tipped her head, sending long waves of blonde cascading to the ground. Deryn swept it back and tied it in a loose knot at the nape of her neck.

She stared at the creature and giggled. "No. The colonel didn't hurt me. He helped make me forget about the pain, *Che*."

Great, she's crazy. A regular Dr. Doolittle.

The creature stood on its hind legs and made an odd noise.

"You know as well as I do that whatever that thing was, it was not the colonel. I seem to recall a certain somebody," she stared down at it, "coming to my rescue. Thank you for that."

The thing made all kinds of bizarre noises.

Deryn laughed. "Just because the real colonel was close to me when I started to hurt doesn't mean he caused it. It's a side effect of taking too much serum. You were there too, watching from the trees, and you didn't cause it. See. Same thing." She puckered her lips. "I think you're looking for reasons not to like him."

The creature turned in a circle continuing to make noises.

Shaking her head, she sighed. "*Che*, the colonel is most certainly not my keeper." She bent down further. "They call it being mated, not keeping, but it's basically the same thing. And I'm not going to argue with a monkey about this. Don't you have something you should be doing?"

Mates? His heart slammed in his chest as her words filled his head. Was she crazy or really talking to that damn thing?

"Oh, watching me is your job, huh?" She put her hand out and the creature moved closer to her. "Why do the others think I need to be guarded?"

That's it. She's nuts.

"*Che*, if they come to steal me away in the middle of the night they'll alert the entire camp. These men are strong. These things have to know that by now or they would have shown themselves to the soldiers already. They'd have attacked them the moment they sensed them. Besides, they'd be getting more than they bargained for if they plucked me out of thin air. I think they figured that out earlier when their attempt at pretending to be the colonel didn't work out for them."

Steal her away?

The creature screeched. Deryn cringed. "I know what its intentions were. I was the one it was trying to undress. You don't need to remind me. I was there."

Alejandro remembered when he'd thought his imagination had been playing tricks on him. Now that he heard her talking, maybe he really did see her pants undoing themselves.

The monkey yanked at its fur and made a hiss-like snarl.

Deryn shook her head. "No. Even *they* can't get past the powerful shape shifters here. The men may not sense them at first but they will if they get close enough to attack them personally. It's part of their genetic makeup, *Che*."

Alejandro couldn't help but pay closer attention. For a crazy woman, she was starting to make sense.

She seemed displeased with what the monkey was telling her. "Then it may be possible for them to be hurt. I didn't think of that. I'm not sure the men here can heal a wound from something that powerful. Since they've not made an

attempt to harm any of the soldiers yet, that I know of, can you ask the other *Checata* to stay within a twenty foot radius of any teams that wander from base camp just to be on the safe side?"

What?

The creature apparently echoed his concern. Deryn laughed. "Think of a twenty foot radius as two of your purple trees out from them." The monkey smacked its chest. "Yes, that's right. I noticed they are spaced out evenly. The men here who are very powerful can sense things that are dangerous four, even five purple trees from them. The others, they can only go up to about two when we're talking about who we're talking about. That's why I need you to help me help them. If the powerful men aren't with the others to tell them something is coming then I need you to make lots of noise, anything that will get their attention."

She laughed.

"Ohmygods, you throw fruit at them when the enemy is near? That stuff is covered in spikes. You could hurt them!" She snorted. "Well then, which *Checata* is in the lead with most direct hits?"

Alejandro wanted to go to her and demand to know what the hell she was going on about but he refrained, opting instead to observe her insanity from a distance.

She gasped and pointed at the creature. "No, *Che*. You are not to let the other *Checata* show their true form to the men here in that situation. They will kill first and ask questions later. It's their nature. Trust me on this. They don't tend to take kindly to finding out they aren't the only badasses on the

block. They would feel bad later but that won't help the *Checata* you'll lose because of it. You should have shown yourselves to them when they first arrived. They came expecting to find life here. They would have been willing to listen to you at first. Too much time has passed. They'd assume the worst."

Laughing, she shook her head. "You're wrong. Kane can understand you, too. I'm not the only one." The creature made another weird noise. Deryn nodded. "Yes, Kane is the one with the beast that breathes fire on his back. It's called a tattoo and it's of a dragon. He was born with it, just like I was born with mine. He can breathe fire, too. Just a warning about showing your true self without warning him. He's fun at bomb fires but not one to surprise."

Born with her tattoos?

Alejandro sniffed the air for any signs that she might be a supernatural and found none. Still, it wasn't normal for a human to be born with markings such as hers. He made a mental note to talk to Kane about her when he arrived.

The monkey ran up her arm and sat on her shoulder. Touching her cheek, it made soft little cooing noises. Deryn looked down at the ground and sighed. "I know to be more careful from now on. I didn't expect anything to show up looking like him. I should have known. I should have sensed it wasn't him. The real one doesn't look at me like he wants to ravish me."

Like hell I don't.

She scratched the monkey's stomach and offered up a soft smile. "At least I know they can't use my likeness to attack

him." She nodded. "Yes, when it hit me, it cut the inside of my mouth open." The monkey actually looked as though it were trying to get her to open her mouth. "*Che*, it wasn't that bad. It bled a little. Enough that I was able to assure the colonel tasted my blood. He knows my scent now. He won't be fooled if they try it with him."

Alejandro drew in a sharp breath. She'd actually given him her blood willingly? That wasn't something taken lightly in the supernatural community. It was a sign of trust, protection, loyalty. For a female to offer a male her blood meant even more. It meant she was giving herself to him unconditionally, unless stated otherwise. Every ounce of him wanted to read more into it than he should but he knew Deryn was human. She couldn't possibly understand all of their ways. She didn't recognize the growl he'd made, staking his claim on her. Perhaps she didn't understand the significance of offering her blood to him willingly.

The monkey went nuts.

Deryn patted its head. "Stop worrying. I do trust him. That's why I wanted him safe, too. He's a good man, *Che*. The idea of them using me to hurt him was all I could think about when he appeared and I realized it was really him. He wouldn't see me as a threat. He'd have let it get close enough to him that it could rip his heart out before he knew what hit him. Hell, had it not smacked me across the face for telling it no I'd have probably handed myself over to it willingly—never knowing it wasn't him."

Alejandro's eyes widened. Hearing that Deryn would have let him, the real him not the imagined one, touch her was not

only shocking, it was confusing. She had Kane in her life. He'd never do that to his friend even though touching her was all he could think about.

The creature touched her forearm and she gritted her teeth. "I know it's bad. But they aren't done here yet today and I'm with them. I figure I'll either blister to the point I pop or burst into flames at some point soon. Either ends the same way so I'm not holding out much hope of a pain free evening."

Someone tapped his shoulder and he jerked to attention. Turning a bit, Alejandro found Ondrea with her hands on her hips, giving him a rather pointed stare. "Do you like what you see?" she asked, barely above a whisper.

"Yeah. I do."

"Do yourself and Deryn a favor. Don't act on the way you feel. In the end, it will only leave her in tears or dead. Neither are things I want to see."

"I would never harm her." Alejandro didn't bother to hide his disgust with Ondrea's assumption that he would.

"You aren't the first man to claim that and you won't be the last. Unless," Ondrea stared at him, "you succeed where the others failed—then she'll be dead and it won't matter. I should tell you that Kane and I will hunt you down if that happens. Though, I'll warn you, Deryn shouldn't be underestimated."

A fire in the pit of his stomach began to burn as he thought about anyone harming Deryn. He clenched his fists as his breathing grew shallow. "Who dared to hurt her?"

Ondrea looked a bit surprised by his question. "Don't you want to know why they tried?"

"No. There is no reason to ever harm her. Ever." He wanted to hit something, anything to get his built up aggression out. The frustration from doing nothing during her hallucination still ate at him. He should have stepped in. Done something. Anything to help her. To stop it.

"Hmm, interesting," she mused. "Ignorance causes many people to lose their minds and forget whispered promises made between the sheets, Colonel. Deryn knows that better than anyone else I know. Kane is the only man in her life that hasn't ever questioned her loyalty. The only man who has never tried to harm her. Many have claimed they never would but in the end, they do. They either harbor hatred or succumb to peer pressure. Regardless, they *try* to harm her."

Just hearing Kane's name mentioned with Deryn's made him see red. "Is she fucking Kane?"

"I couldn't answer that even if I wanted to. Deryn and Kane have been through hell together. I'm not exactly sure what, if any boundaries, they have with each other but I can tell you that she will never cut him out her life. They are beyond friends. If anyone were to try to make something work with her, they'd need to understand that. They also need to know Kane is extremely overprotective of Deryn. To the point he has attacked men over her in the past. He ended up in the doghouse with her for weeks but he did it all the same."

"Why are you being so open with me about this?" he asked, fighting the urge to rush to Deryn and lay claim to her

before Kane arrived. Kane was on a four day trip on Earth side, gathering supplies needed and was due back the following day. Alejandro remembered how upset Kane seemed to be when he learned he wouldn't be back in time to greet the doctors that were coming to join the project. It made perfect sense now. He knew them well and he was scared for Deryn's safety.

"I'm telling you this because I want to believe Deryn can find happiness. She's earned it. She's lived through hell more times than I can count. One of those was a betrayal she will never be able to forget or forgive. I hate knowing that. I hate knowing someone I love was treated that way." She locked gazes with him. "I also get a vibe from you that I'm questioning. It's telling me to trust you. I never get those types of vibes off the men that pursue Deryn." She laughed softly. "You'll either end up being another asshole wanting to sink his cock into her for all the wrong reasons or you'll be different. Let me just say that so far, only one man has been different, Colonel."

Needing to get off the topic of Kane, Alejandro stared at Deryn's reddening arms. "She looks as though she might be starting to blister. What's wrong with her?"

"If Deryn spends too long in direct sunlight it, at best, will leave her sick and in bed for several days."

"And at its worst?" Alejandro asked, unsure he wanted to hear the answer.

Ondrea forced a smile to her face, drawing attention to her cocoa-colored skin and tiny features. "She'll not recover."

"What?" His heart beat fast as the idea of something happening to Deryn hit him hard. He went to march to her and demand she return to base when Ondrea seized hold of his arm. Being a cat shifter afforded her the strength needed to call his attention but if he wanted free, he could easily make it happen.

She shook her head. "I know what you're thinking but she won't stay back at camp. Not without us. Deryn's been having weird dreams about this mission for months before the general contacted her and requested she join on."

"Weird dreams? What does that have to do with her dying from too much direct sunlight?"

Ondrea grinned, clearing knowing more than she was letting on to. "Nothing at all and everything."

"Okay, no cryptic talk. Save that for Kane when he arrives tomorrow. His job is to decipher shit like that."

"I just mean that Deryn puts the lives of everyone else ahead of hers. She always has. There is no way she will go and stay gone so long as she believes we're all in danger."

Alejandro laughed. "We've been out here all day and we haven't seen anything above two birds and several of those monkey-like things she's been having a one-sided conversation with for the last twenty minutes. They don't look deadly. Ugly, yes. Deadly, no. In addition to that, the base has been set up here for close to seven months. Nothing has happened. I think it's safe to say that we aren't in any danger." Even as he said it, he knew it was a lie. He'd been trained to expect the unexpected. The work he did with the government had taught him long ago that nothing was

predictable but he didn't want to scare Ondrea. He didn't even want to touch upon what had occurred over lunch with Deryn and the mysterious nothing.

"Please don't bother to lie to me, Colonel Vargas. Besides, even if I did believe we were safe as could be out here I've known Deryn long enough to trust her gut. If she says be on guard, I do it. If she refuses to leave someone's side, I don't force her to." Ondrea looked him over slowly. "It doesn't help that she explained you to a tee before she even agreed to come on the mission, Alex-V. She was right. You are hot."

Only his team members called him Alex-V and even that was rare. Kane tended to call him Alex more than anything. "Wait? What do you mean she explained me to a tee? Do I know her?" The vague feeling of familiarity surfaced again.

Ondrea shrugged. "That you'll have to ask her about but I can tell you this much, she won't leave *your* side if she believes her dreams are true."

"Listen, lady," Alejandro said, his patience wearing thin. "I'm responsible for your lives while you're out with me. I don't have time to play guess why games and I sure the hell don't want to report back to the general that one of the two civilians I was charged with is dead. Somehow I don't think he'll give a rat's ass about her dreams. She's human. That in itself should have kept her off this mission."

Ondrea gave him a smile that screamed she knew more than she was letting on. The feeling of being watched came over him, preventing him from calling her on it. Instead, Alejandro stilled and listened closely for signs of company.

"If you're done talking about me like I'm not here, I could use a hand cleaning up my equipment," Deryn said, looking up from her spot with the monkey. She locked her blue gaze on him and smiled slightly, bringing attention to her now chapped lips. It was clear that the sunlight was hurting her at an alarming rate. She moved her attention to Ondrea and hardened her gaze.

How in the hell did she hear us?

"Don't give me that look, Deryn. The man has a right to know more about you than he does," Ondrea said, not seeming to care Deryn had heard their entire conversation. "Maybe, if he did, you could tell him about the other stuff. He might listen and believe you."

Deryn turned her attention back to the creature. "*Che*, go now. I'm fine. I promise." She nodded. "I sense it, too. I know to be careful and I can warn the ones I'm with. And I might be changing my mind about letting you hurt their leader." She stared directly at Alejandro. "It's none of his business who I do and do not share my bed with. He is not my keeper. As much as I appreciated his assistance earlier it doesn't mean he has a right to be that way."

"Deryn, don't be...."

Putting her hand up, Deryn pointed at Ondrea. "No. You have no right to discuss my personal life with a stranger. I'm assuming if the general thought the colonel could handle all of the details of my life, he would have presented him with them. Since the colonel didn't even know my first name this morning, I can guess that wasn't the case."

She stared down at the monkey-like thing and removed Alejandro's hat from her head. "*Che*, please return this to their leader. Maybe if something is sitting on his head it will help keep his mind from racing with notions of me being crazy or that I'm a little too white to take home to mommy. Though, he had no problem envisioning me with his children, did he? You know what? Aim for his head next time you throw fruit to warn him of danger."

Shocked by her statement, Alejandro took a step back. "How the hell do you know what I've been thinking about today?"

Ondrea gasped. "Deryn?" She looked up at him. "Colonel, you thought about her having your babies?"

Deciding avoidance was the best policy, Alejandro directed the conversation back to Deryn. "How did you know?"

"I don't know. Can you guess what I'm thinking right this minute?" she asked, glaring at him like she wanted to personally oversee his castration.

He gulped. "I have a funny feeling it isn't good."

The creature ran towards him with his hat in hand. It tossed it at his feet and snapped its jaws in warning. His eyes widened and he chanced a glance at Ondrea. "Holy shit, she really can understand and communicate with it?"

"Deryn, I'm starting to think all men are morons and should wear labels telling the degree to which they are so women know who to pass on." Ondrea rolled her eyes. "I really think they should have given you a report on her, Colonel. I'd tell you to ask her about herself but I'm thinking you'll end up missing vital pieces when she's done with you."

"Hey, Doc, you gonna finish rubbing this wall?" Fulk called out. "You can rub me when you're done."

Ondrea laughed. "Oh, look, a moron who would get a consistent ten rating." She turned and headed towards Fulk leaving Alejandro and Deryn alone.

There was an awkward pause. He thought of trying to fill it with conversation but there wasn't anything he could say to make it better.

Say you're sorry.

Ignoring his inner voice, Alejandro glanced up to find Deryn staring at him. She winked. "Apology accepted."

Alejandro sensed something watching them again. Something that wasn't friendly. He also sensed it had death on its mind. The memory of seeing Deryn fight with nothing hit him. What if something had been there? What if it wasn't done with her?

Deryn!

The need to see to Dr. Deryn Murray's safety left him rushing towards her. He put his body in front of hers and backed her into the thick line of large foliage. Something akin to ribbon-like fern leaves cascaded over them, providing them some form of camouflage, not that it mattered. Whatever was out there was good enough to sneak up on them almost undetected.

Taking a step back, he reached behind him to make sure Deryn was blocked by his body. As his hand ran over her arm, heat flared from her body straight into his. It was enough to cause serious burns and he knew that but he also knew it

wasn't hurting him. She gasped and tried to break his hold on her but Alejandro held tight.

"Colonel, stop," she whispered. "Please. I don't want to hurt you."

Something deep within Alejandro told him not to let go and he went with it. The heat continued to move from her body to his. Every ounce of him wanted to turn and check on her but the threat was still out there, still watching them.

"Colonel."

"Shh."

Instantly, Deryn pressed her body against his. The heat decreased leaving the need to wrap his arms around her in its wake. If they'd have been alone, he would have done just that. The feel of something coming straight at him left him staring ahead at the nothingness before them.

"*Àfau*," something whispered through the dense jungle greenery. It didn't sound even remotely human or friendly.

Alejandro brought his M-16 up fast and watched with his preternatural eyes for signs of the enemy. He saw nothing but the jungle. The second Deryn laid her hand on his shoulder, he calmed.

"Tell it that we're not thieves." She caressed him gently.

"What? How do you know what it said?"

"Colonel," she whispered, sliding her arms around his midriff and holding him tight. She fit him perfectly. "It's trying to trick you into a challenge. Don't let it. Trust me like I trusted you earlier. Please."

Alejandro did as she requested, unable to tell her no and hurt her feelings. "We aren't thieves," he called out.

The pending sense of danger lessened to a degree. Instantly, his gut told him he was no longer the main target, Deryn was. A low growl emanated from deep within him. It was on the lines of the one he'd used in front of Ondrea earlier.

"*Taimar?*" the thing asked.

Deryn gasped and tried to move out from behind him.

"No."

"No, what?" Alejandro pinned her in place.

"It thinks you're my," she swallowed loud enough for him to pick up on it, "my husband."

"*Taimar?*" it asked, again, this time with an urgency that was easy to note.

Deryn ducked down fast and moved around him before he could stop her. She stood tall and took on an almost regal pose. "He is my head warrior. My head guard. Question me no further on this."

"Your head guard?" Alejandro asked, lost as to what was going on.

Turning her head slowly, Deryn locked gazes with him and gave him a hard look. "If," she whispered, "you are my husband then it will challenge you to the death because it has taken an interest in me. If you are my head warrior then it will most likely leave you to fight another day since I one upped it earlier."

"It?"

"A spirit tomb guard, Colonel. And before you go off shouting about how very impossible that is, please keep in mind we're currently working from a base not on Earth as we

know it. If that doesn't do it for you, take a moment to do a partial shift. I'm sure were-jaguars aren't considered the norm by everyone."

How does she know I'm a were-jaguar?

Alejandro blinked several times and didn't attempt to argue with Deryn about the spirit tomb guard even though he highly doubted some form of ghost existed. Sure, he felt something but a ghost? No.

"Áricus?"

Deryn stiffened and appeared to hesitate. Alejandro growled, unable to hold it in. Deryn smacked him. "Would you shut-up? Whatever you're doing is pissing it off more."

"Taimar?" it asked again, sounding agitated.

"What the hell is it asking now? I get the one about me being your husband and in about two seconds I'm telling it I am. This is bullshit. If it thinks I'm gong to stand here and let it attack you again its dead fucking wrong!" Another growl came from him. Deryn was his and he'd be damned if anything, even a figment of his imagination tried to take her from him.

"Taimar?" The feel of imminent danger increased tenfold.

Deryn put her hands out and shook her head. "No. No, he's not my *taimar*. Yes." She nodded. *"Áricus. Yes."*

"What did you just tell it I am?"

"Not you, Colonel. Me. I told it I'm an *Áricus*."

"Áricus?" it asked, not sounding very convinced.

Deryn leaned back and put her hands out. "You dare to question me?"

It said something Alejandro couldn't make out and Deryn laughed, sounding deadly. It shocked him to the point he just stood there watching her. She put her arms out wide. "Then by all means, test me. We'll see who walks away from this. Do you need more proof? That's what you were after earlier when you hid behind another's guise."

"Dr. Murray?"

Deryn yanked her tee shirt off and went to work taking her boots off. "I'm going to rip this thing in two the minute I get my hands on it. It wants proof. Fine. Can I get the colonel to stop growling? No. Now I have to get naked to prove a point," she mumbled under her breath.

Naked?

He reached for her to stop her but she knocked his hand away and glared at him. "Not a word or you'll end up getting us both killed. They'll rush us. Right now, I've got one trying to prove he's big shit to his buddies. Open your mouth and they'll step in and take care of the alpha threat."

"But...."

Deryn yanked his knife free of its sheath and put the blade to his throat. He wasn't afraid of her. He was terrified *for* her. If she thought for one second that he'd allow whatever the hell was out there to harm her or force her to get naked to prove a point, she was wrong. He was about to growl again but held it in when he watched a lone tear slide down her cheek.

"Please," she mouthed.

He nodded, his jaw tight and his body full of tension. The need to kill something was great. The need to fuck her was

greater. It only intensified when she slid her pants off, revealing a set of long, toned, legs, an ass so perfect he wanted to sink his dick in it and the tiniest of swells on her lower abdomen.

She threw his knife about six feet in front of her. It stuck in the ground, upright. Deryn took a step forward and for a moment, Alejandro thought he heard the sounds of drums beating. Could that be what Deryn had been hearing all day?

Putting her hands up, she took a deep breath in. "Here I am. The writing is clearly on the ... umm ... body." She let out a nervous laugh. "Come and see."

The voice said something else Alejandro couldn't make out but knew he didn't like by the way Deryn flinched. She nodded and glanced over her shoulder at him. "I-I'll meet you ... meet you back at the jeeps. Go."

Fear coursed through her veins to the point it filled the air around him. There was no way in hell he was going to leave her. He went to take a step only to have a piece of monkey-nut fruit hit him in the back of the head. Turning, he found the ugly little monkey-thing Deryn called *Che* sitting in the tree. He blinked, unable to believe what he'd just seen. The thing actually shook its head 'no' at him.

He tried to ignore it and go to Deryn. It pegged him in the back of the head with another piece of fruit. Obviously, it thought going to her was a bad idea. Since it had intervened earlier and she lived to tell about it, he decided to listen to its warning—at least for the minute.

"Go," Deryn repeated, her bottom lip trembling. "I don't want you to see this. Please."

"See what?" he asked, not bothering to hide the anger in his voice. "I'm not moving."

"Then give me your word you will not intervene."

The voice spoke again, this time sounding close enough to be standing right next to Alejandro. Deryn gasped. "No! No, I don't need a lesson in disciplining my warriors. They," she glared at Alejandro, "will not question my authority again. Now, are you going to verify what you came to see or are you going to stand there admiring my head warrior? I should warn you he's not into that sort of thing. I didn't realize you were."

The minute it left her mouth, a gush of wind went past Alejandro. Deryn went airborne and hit the tree behind her. He went to run to her and got pelted with more fruit. It went against his very nature to stand there allowing whatever was happening to occur.

Deryn hit the ground and was seemingly pulled up by strings. The second her thong began to move downward all on its own, she slammed her head forward. "I said you could look, asshole, not touch. Drop your magik. I'm sick of you running around looking like him."

She pointed at her lower abdomen. "The other marks you're looking for are there. See, *áricus*. Happy now? Want to keep trying my patience?"

It murmured something.

Deryn threw her head back and laughed. "Do you honestly think I'm going to allow you to 'sense' all of my power? I may be young but I'm not stupid. No. I think I'll keep that trump card to myself right now. Besides, I don't need anything

special to kick your ass. I did it once today already. Shall we go another round?"

She shook her head. "I'm not taking orders from anything not man enough to show himself. Stop hiding behind the colonel's image."

Arching a brow, she appeared to be eyeing something up and down. "Umm, I didn't realize you were literally a copy of him the other way. The loincloth was much more impressive on his body. Go ahead and go back. He's a hell of a lot better to look at than...." Deryn's words were cut off when she was launched backwards. It was obvious something had struck her in the stomach. What, he couldn't tell. The second he went to go to her, he watched in awe as she twisted and landed on her feet. He sensed it then, the presence directly in front of her.

The sound of tribal-like music thumped in his head and for a split second, he could have sworn he saw a shadow standing before Deryn. Alejandro let his claws erect from his fingertips and rushed in between Deryn and what he was sensing.

Screaming out, Deryn pushed up in front of him and pressed her nearly nude body to him. She ran her hands up his arms and took hold of his wrists. He went to retract his claws, afraid of cutting her but she did something unexpected. She jerked his arm and he felt his claws strike something but still, he saw nothing. Well, nothing except blood dripping from the end of his claws.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, in a panic he'd cut Deryn.

She began to move her body against his seductively. His cock hardened instantly. She glared at something Alejandro couldn't see. "No, go ahead. Call the others and tell them to come and kill him because you assume he's my husband—then you'll forever be known as the warrior who got taken by his," she ran her hand up Alejandro's arm and put it behind his head, leaving her breasts thrusting forward, "bitch. Is that what you really want? Do you want him dead bad enough to risk eternal ridicule or do you want to go back to the boys and confirm you found an *áricus*?"

Something snarled and Alejandro drew Deryn closer to his body with his free hand. He let out another low growl, warning whatever was there that she was his and his alone.

Deryn stiffened as the beating of the drums grew louder. As quickly as she started to panic, she stopped and began to sway against him again. She let out a sultry laugh. "I don't know how things work for you boys but here," she turned her head back towards him and nipped playfully at his jaw, "my favorites earn certain rewards for their loyalty. If you're done here, I'd like to see to it he's taken care of now."

The threat around them slowly diminished, leaving him holding Deryn to him, his cock hard and his clawed hand bloody. "Are you hurt?"

A piece of fruit rolled past his foot and he took that for the sign it was—they were not alone yet. Pressing his mouth to Deryn's ear, he whispered to her, "They're watching us, aren't they?"

She turned in his arms and faced him. Her blue eyes caught the light just right and he realized then that all the

signs of damage from the sun she'd had earlier were gone. Deryn looked nervous as she ran her hands up his body slowly, seductively. She mouthed, 'I'm sorry.'

Sorry? She was apologizing for acting out his fantasy? Oh, she was entirely too perfect.

She tugged on the back of his head and he bent down a bit. "Can you make this look real?"

"Sex? With you?" It came out sounding all wrong, as if he didn't want it.

"Don't fear, Colonel. I'd never force that on you," she whispered, her lips to his ear. "Can you make it look like I'm punishing you? They aren't stupid enough to think I'd reward you for interfering. That's why they pulled back, not allowing you to sense them anymore. They want to see what happens."

"Yes," he said, desperately wanting to clarify how she misunderstood him. He did want her more than she could possibly know.

Deryn took a step back and winked at him. She turned quickly, swiping his feet out from under him and knocking him to the ground. He was stunned. Too stunned to do anything other than lay there while she yanked his knife free from the ground. In an instant, she was straddling him and thrusting the knife up and under his vest.

The smell of blood filled the air, but no pain followed. Sniffing, he realized why. It wasn't his blood. It was Deryn's. She'd cut herself instead of him.

"Dr. Murray...."

She captured his mouth with hers, rendering him speechless. He could feel the tension in her kiss. She was in pain and he knew she'd done it to protect him.

Deryn pulled back and stared around. The monkey rushed out and Deryn nodded. "I know. Thanks." She glanced down at him. "They're gone."

He went to sit up but she shook her head. "Hold on." She pulled the knife out and handed it to him.

Alejandro's gaze went to her other hand. She had it down by her side, partially behind her. He seized hold of it and had to fight down bile when he saw what she'd done in order to keep him safe. She'd slit her own wrist, long ways. He gasped.

"I-I didn't mean to cut so deep. Your vest was tighter than I expected and," she bit back tears, "my wrist got pinched between the blade and it. I should wrap it up and ... uhh ... I don't feel so well."

Alejandro let his magik ride out and over her. The same strange heated sensation occurred between them that happened when he'd touched her before—taking her burns away. Now, he watched as her arm healed under his touch.

It was Deryn's turn to gasp. "How?"

He didn't have an answer for her. Normally, he could heal only himself. No one else. This was new territory for him and he wasn't exactly sure he liked what it implied.

She's my mate.

He shook his head and with it any thoughts of Deryn being his potential wife. That was absurd. Wasn't it?

Warriors of the Darkness
by Mandy M. Roth

"Let's get you dressed and then get to the jeeps. The others will be looking for us soon if we don't get back."

Her eyes widened. "Are you going to tell all of them I stripped down in front of you and...?"

The need to calm her, assure her that he wouldn't embarrass her in any way overwhelmed him. He did something he shouldn't have. He agreed. "No."

"Thank you."

Chapter Three

Deryn stared at her reflection still in awe that the colonel had managed to heal her with no more than a touch. Normally, that much sun exposure with that amount of ultraviolet light would leave her blistered and sick for days and days. She hadn't always been that way. There was a time in her life when she'd been able to frolic about in the sun with no concerns. Those days were long gone.

She ran a finger over the spot where she'd accidentally cut too deeply. It was smooth, unharmed. How had he managed to do that? He'd healed her better than any healer she'd ever seen and in record time, too.

"You coming?" Ondrea asked, entering Deryn's tent and scaring the hell out of her.

She drew in a sharp breath and shook her head. "Don't ever do that to me again."

"Sorry." Ondrea adjusted her tight black leather mini skirt and winked. "Is that what you're wearing tonight?"

Deryn arched a sandy blonde brow and glanced in the mirror. The faded vintage wash pocket jeans she had on were one of her favorite pairs. They hugged her hips just right and were made of a stretchy jean material that allowed for full movement and a slim butt and thigh fit. It was hard to find jeans for her height that hung down to the ground with a flare bottom. When she'd come across these, she'd made sure to buy several pairs.

The black, mid-calf leather combat boots she had on were staples as far as she was concerned. They went with just about anything. Ondrea was a shoe diva who never seemed to wear the same pair twice. The very idea that Deryn not only owned combat boots but actually wore them had always made her an easy target on Ondrea's fashion no-no list.

"Well, at least the shirt is cute," Ondrea said, sneering at Deryn's outfit.

Deryn glanced at the turquoise fitted tee shirt with an emerald green dragon on the front and smiled. It came up above her belly button, leaving several inches of exposed flesh between it and the start of her low rise jeans. "Uhh, thanks. Kane gave it to me."

"I know. I was with him when he picked it out."

Deryn snickered before moving to follow her friend as they headed out to explore the base further. It was quite extensive considering it had only been in existence less than a year. They walked down the narrow lane, ducking and weaving to avoid the different types of alien plant life. All of it looked like variations of plants found in rainforests on Earth but none were identical. They came to a stop several tents down from hers.

"Is there a reason we're stopping?" Ondrea touched her arm. "Care to tell me how it is you aren't burnt at all?"

Glancing around, Deryn tried to pinpoint exactly what had prompted her to stop where she did but couldn't. She eyed the tent they were outside of and listened for signs of life. Hearing nothing out of the ordinary, Deryn decided it was

safe to speak freely with Ondrea. "The strangest thing happened today."

"Aside from you insisting tomb guards are real and these guys have stumbled across an Avatarian temple? Oh, and that you can hear music no one else does? Or you fighting with something no one else could see?"

"Bite me." Deryn shook her head. "I'm being serious here, Onnie."

"Then by all means, enlighten me. What happened?"

Deryn swallowed hard, still confused by the events of the day. "When the tomb guard decided to make its presence known to the colonel, he pushed me behind him."

Ondrea laughed. "Deryn, he's in the military and he, like most of the men around here, radiates alpha maleness. Of course he'd want to protect you. It's not only his job, it's part of who he is."

"Gee golly wow, Onnie," Deryn bit out sarcastically. "Thank the gods I wasn't operating under the illusion he picked me and only me to protect in his life. Have no fear, I don't suffer from any delusions. I know I'm the farthest thing from his type of woman there is. Okay?"

"I didn't mean that the way it came out." The warm look Ondrea gave her helped to soften Deryn's mood a bit.

"Yes you did and give me a break."

"Deryn, you have the worst self-image known to mankind. I didn't mean he couldn't possibly find you attractive. Hello, I've seen men fall off barstools, straining to watch you walk away. Trust me, you're doing just fine in the attractive female category."

Deryn rolled her eyes. "Stop it! I'm serious. I'm not fishing for compliments and I don't want to hear lies, Onnie. I came to terms with what I am by the time I was twelve. Listen, I'm trying to tell you...."

Ondrea glared at her. "No, you didn't come to terms with anything. You let a bunch of jealous girls and guys, who were pissed you monopolized their buddy's time, fill your head with lies. You let them tear you down and you continue to surround yourself with men who do the very same thing the minute they find out about you! That's what you did, Deryn."

"Onnie, I...."

Ondrea pointed at her. "Do not even try to tell me different. I'm the one who had to get you to stop crying because no matter how many times you wished upon those shooting stars, you didn't wake up with my skin tone. They did that to you, Deryn. They set you up to feel like a misfit. Destiny didn't help you fit in with the crowd but I can tell you this—you are a beautiful, smart and, if I do say myself, a damn sexy woman. Now, you were going to tell me about how you hid behind the colonel?" The smile on her face told Deryn she was kidding about the last bit.

She wrinkled her nose. "I don't cower behind men's legs expecting them to protect me."

Putting her hands up, Ondrea rocked back and forth. "Ain't that the truth. You're right, something strange did happen today. You didn't club the colonel in the back of the head for doing his job."

"No, I just clung to him, terrified *for* him." Silence greeted her. She tipped her head. "Just say it. You know you want to."

"Don't you dare fall for him, Deryn."

"Considering the circumstances of my being here, I have every right to be concerned when it comes to him and his safety," Deryn said, dangerously close to losing her temper. "The tomb guard wasn't alone. I could feel others waiting in the wings, listening to what the colonel said. They wanted him dead and were looking for an excuse to kill him. First the guard accused the colonel of being a thief. Then it moved on to saying he was my husband."

"Husband?" Ondrea asked, giving her an odd look. "Why would a supposed tomb guard assume a man was your husband? Did the colonel do or say anything?" She rubbed her temple. "Did he start growling weird again?"

"How did you know?"

"Lucky guess," she sighed, "now finish telling me what else strange happened."

An odd sensation moved over Deryn. Turning her head, she found herself staring at the tent closest to them again. "I think I'm losing my mind."

"I'm positive you are." Ondrea winked.

"Yeah, well I can almost feel the colonel around me. Right now. Like he's close. Very close." The sensation Alejandro was near consumed her.

"I don't sense anyone around us and I'm the shifter here."

It wasn't as though Deryn didn't already know that but still, the feeling of Alejandro being close stayed with her. She

shrugged. "I don't know. I can say this is a new feeling for me. He's confusing my senses. I don't know how I feel about that. He's like walking sensory overload in amazing packaging."

"Do not fall for him, Deryn. He's Kane's friend and boss. Things will end badly. If you're not willing to do it for yourself, do it for Kane. Don't leave him in a position to have to hurt his friend to protect you."

Ondrea was right. It would be too awkward for all involved. Still, something about the colonel called to her on levels she didn't understand. "I can't let anything happen to him, Onnie."

"No one said you had to. All I said was don't fall for him."

Deryn went to deny she was falling for him but Ondrea beat her to the punch. Shaking her head, Ondrea placed a well manicured hand on her hip. "Do not even try to tell me you aren't the least bit interested in him. I saw you watching him when you thought he wasn't looking. He's the reason you didn't move further into the shade, isn't he?"

"No."

"Deryn," she scolded.

Feeling like a child, Deryn shrugged. "Fine. He was part of the reason I didn't move into the shade. Now, don't worry about me. I know better than to fall for a man like him."

"Mmmhmm." Ondrea licked her lower lip. "All I'm going to say is this one has the potential to be like the biggest mistake of your dating life, Deryn. I think he could do what *you know who did*. I think he could mess your mind to the point you are blinded to the idea he could turn on you."

The very mention of 'you know who' left Deryn wringing her hands. She didn't want to think about Dean. He was the one man in her life, aside from Kane, she'd allowed to not only get close to her but let her guard down around and he'd betrayed her in the worst way possible. "Please don't lump the colonel in with Dean."

"Why? Don't you like hearing the truth, Deryn?"

She stiffened. "I refuse to believe two men like that could exist. What makes you think he's anything like Dean?"

"All I'm saying is I know you and I'm picking up something in you when you're around the colonel that tells me you already trust him and you don't even really know him. If he turned on you, Deryn, you'd be blindsided."

Thoughts of the tomb guard approaching her disguised as Alejandro came back to her. She'd already been blindsided. "I don't trust him already," she said, lying through her teeth.

Ondrea snorted. "Right and I don't want to stay forever in a testosterone-filled male paradise. Try a new one, Deryn. I'm not buying this one. You stuck to him like glue after you two came back to the jeeps. I thought I was going to need a crowbar to get you away from him. I'm not the only one who noticed. I saw the other men raising a brow or two at how freakishly overprotective he seemed of you." She tossed her hand in the air. "The man fucking buckled you in."

"No, he didn't." She thought back to when they'd rushed to the jeeps. It had been a blur. Her eyes widened. "Oh, shit, he did. Onnie, I let myself be buckled in like a baby."

"No, like a kept woman. Big difference in the world of shifters, honey. Trust me on this." Ondrea snorted. "What?"

Do you need him to piss on your leg so you can see what every other shifter there did?"

"Apparently, because I don't have a clue what you're talking about. He's a nice guy. He didn't want me to fall out of the jeep. It's not like the terrain is level or we had smooth turnpikes to drive on." Deryn ran a hand through her hair. "No. We were off-roading it and, for your information, I was still pretty shaken up about what we'd run into. Onnie, those things are scary. I don't say that often."

Ondrea thumped her upside the head lightly. "Hello, anyone up there? I swear, Deryn. You have no clue when a man is totally into you. Or are you aware but doing your best to tell yourself he's not because you're afraid of a Dean repeat? Huh? Are you afraid if you dare acknowledge the colonel might be into you too then you'll have to admit you trust a man you hardly know? A man who I don't doubt is even stronger, deadlier than Dean was?"

Refusing to answer that, Deryn gritted her teeth. "So, you're telling me I'll never be able to fully trust anyone in my life? Is that it? If it's male it must be bad? Huh? I just want to know, seeing as how I am completely moronic when it comes to the opposite sex and all. Are they all inherently evil, Ondrea?"

"No, sweetie." Ondrea took Deryn's hands in hers. "I'm telling you that you cannot afford to blindly trust a *supernatural* male. He didn't grow up with you. He wasn't there playing dolls ... err ... bad example but you get my drift. Find a nice human guy. Trust him with everything you have. Avoid the supernaturals like the plague."

There was something Ondrea was holding back. Deryn knew her friend well enough to spot when there was more to the story. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing."

"Ondrea."

She bit her lower lip. "Okay, I might trust him a little too and that scares me. I don't want a repeat Dean performance."

"You never once trusted Dean. Ever." Deryn slammed her fist into her other hand. "You even went so far as to try to sabotage our relationship. And do not even try to tell me it wasn't you who told Dean I was fucking Kane on the side. You know damn well I wasn't."

Ondrea bit her lower lip, looking very guilty. "Maybe I did. So what? I was right! He was a creep! Worse than a creep. A nut job. The man tried to kill you. I think I should be getting a thank-you here, not yelled at."

"Stop lumping nice, honest men in with Dean and I won't yell at you. You admitted you trust the colonel, too."

Ondrea growled. "I know but I still don't want you hurt. I'm trying not to trust the colonel. He's making it hard to do."

Pointing at her friend, Deryn narrowed her gaze. "You're the one lecturing me about trusting him."

"Yeah, well it's not my life he'll try to take if he turns out to be an asshole."

"Hey, I'm not trying to snag a husband here, Ondrea." She stared down at her friend. "It would be nice to not be on guard every moment of my time here. I'm sorry for having this nagging feeling, deep within me, that keeps encouraging

me to trust him. I can't help it. It in no way means I want anything to happen above a working relationship. It's pretty presumptuous to assume he has any interest in me whatsoever. You're a cat shifter. If he'd be into anyone it would be you. Now, shut up about it. It's wearing on my last nerve."

"You must be pissed. You never call me by name." She offered a small smile. "Can we call a truce on the subject of the colonel? Let's go have a nice time. Issac thinks we'll enjoy ourselves. He's Fae, he should know. He's got that magik thing going for him."

"You're going to yell at me but I really wish the colonel would have changed his mind about coming out with us tonight."

"Deryn."

She put her hands in the air signally defeat. "I know, Onnie. I just like being around him. Is that so wrong? I don't mean it in the way you'll take it. I just mean he ... umm ... makes me feel safe."

"I suggest we drop this."

Nodding, Deryn turned and headed towards the main portion of the base.

"Why do you think they stuck us out here in tents instead of putting us in the guest rooms near the infirmary?" Ondrea asked, clicking her heel against the hard worn dirt path.

"Probably because I asked them to treat us the same as the men stationed here. If they selected tents then that's what I asked them to put us in. Besides, we're closer to Kane this way. That makes me feel better."

"You asked to be on an extended camping trip?" Ondrea's eyes widened. "Say it ain't so, Deryn. I'm convinced something is going to come bursting through the tent fabric and eat me at any minute."

"You could shift and eat them first. Works out nice. Don't you think?" Deryn asked in a teasing voice. The very idea of Ondrea being scared by anything was amusing. She was tough as nails and could handle anything thrown at her.

"Sounds like they know how to party around here." Ondrea nodded towards the large tent that had men stumbling in and out of it. Music pumped from it and it was easy to guess it was one of the three bars Fulk had mentioned they had at base camp.

Deryn couldn't help but laugh as Ondrea began to shake her hips and move to the beat. The girl could dance anywhere. Hell, so could Deryn. It was one of the things they shared in their friendship. A love of music, good times and dancing set them apart from other scientists they were normally around. "Watch shaking that ass tonight. I've only seen a handful of women here and two of them were a couple—I think."

Ondrea glanced over her shoulder and licked her lower lip. "Mmm, the odds are in our favor then, honey. Feel like getting laid?"

"That all depends."

"On what?"

Glancing over her shoulder, Deryn couldn't shake the feeling Alejandro was close, watching her. "Are there any

humans in there? You've banned me from screwing any supernaturals."

Ondrea laughed. "Okay, I'm willing to lift my ban if you promise to pick one you can't begin to imagine yourself going on a second date with."

Deryn cringed. "So, you're saying I get to fuck Rodriguez?"
"Yep. Wait, could you see yourself going on a second date with that Issac guy?"

Shrugging, Deryn stopped looking behind her. "He seems like a nice guy. Then again, so does Rodriguez. He's just wear on my last nerve."

Ondrea clapped. "Goodie. Rodriguez it is. He's hot. They all are."

They both sighed.

"Yeah, I noticed that, too." Putting her arm around her friend, Deryn hugged her tight. "We have such *hard* jobs."

"Did I thank you yet for getting me on board for this assignment?" Ondrea asked, laying her head on Deryn's upper arm.

"Yes, about thirty times the first morning I told you I accepted it with the condition you be brought on to advise. Please don't start talking about this being a penis paradise again. I'm horny enough as it is. I really don't need you to dangle the fact I'm surrounded by gorgeous men I can't touch in my face."

"Hey, I gave in on Rodriguez and he is friggin' hot."

Sighing, Deryn rocked Ondrea slightly. "Honey, I'm not going to sleep with him. So, please don't try to make that happen. Kane would have a fit and I'd end up feeling bad

enough to tell the guy I was screwing with him about the plant. Let me have my moment of fun."

"Yeah, but he's hot and I can guarantee he'd do you."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment? I think he'd fuck anything with breasts and two legs." She laughed and Ondrea joined in.

"I don't know about that. He seemed kind of picky about his women and their bodies." Ondrea patted Deryn's abs.

"Those will do."

Deryn smiled as she followed Ondrea to the front entrance. An MP stood, almost rooted in his spot and nodded. "Evening, ladies." He pulled the flap back exposing the interior of the bar to them.

The place was packed. An especially large group was gathered at the bar area where it looked like a redhead with a pixie-like haircut was being lifted up and down in a seated position. As they neared her, Deryn realized she was sitting on Fulk's back as he did push-ups on the bar.

"Ohmygod, look at the abs on him. No wonder he was obsessed with yours. He's a fitness freak," Ondrea said, not bothering to lower her voice as she practically drooled at the sight of Fulk.

The redhead turned her head and locked gazes with Deryn, instantly making Deryn stop dead in her tracks. There was something about the woman that wasn't right. Not necessarily bad but not normal either. She was one that definitely warranted keeping an eye on. She also looked extremely agitated by Deryn's presence. In truth, she looked as though she wanted to rip Deryn limb from limb.

Warriors of the Darkness
by Mandy M. Roth

Ondrea leaned back a bit and whispered, "Gee, what did you do to piss off the redhead?"

The woman sat there, going up and down as Issac and a bunch of men Deryn didn't know continued to count off the number of push-ups Fulk was doing. As he approached the two hundred mark the woman hopped off his back and landed on her feet. At five seven she was three inches shorter than Deryn but puffed her chest out like she was the biggest, baddest chick in the world.

"These must be the civvies," she said, as though it were a dirty word.

Fulk sat up and the men shoved shots in his face. He wagged his brows and smiled from ear to ear. "Either one of you care to ride me?"

Ondrea let out a sultry laugh. "Honey, you wouldn't know what to do if I was behind the wheel."

"Wanna bet?"

Issac closed the distance between him and Deryn quickly with two glasses in his hand. "Drinks? They were Fulk's idea. I swear. I think he's hoping if he gets the two of you drunk enough, you'll forget he's an ass and hop in the sack with him."

Putting out her hand, Deryn accepted it while Ondrea took the other. "Not likely but I appreciate the drink. Thank you."

"Not a problem." He glanced over at the redhead. "Vonni, this is Dr. Deryn Murray and Dr. Ondrea Harris. They're stationed here to help with the project."

"So I was right—civvies."

Deryn took a sip of the drink Issac had given her and coughed. It burned all the way down and felt like it was straight. Beyond straight. Liquid fire. "Wow, there's no watering down here, I see."

"Shit," he said, running his hand through his blond hair. "I forgot you're human. None of the rest of us are, so the drinks are stiffer."

"Mmm, I hope everything else is stiffer, too," Ondrea added, making Issac turn red and move closer to Deryn. "Oh, she can't save you, buddy."

Issac jerked slightly and pressed himself to Deryn. "Tell me you can control her."

"Right." Deryn snickered. "She tells me you're Fae. Maybe you should keep your magik charged. Fighting her off you is a very real threat. She has a thing for blonds."

Issac slid behind her and Ondrea snapped her jaws at him and winked. He grabbed Deryn's shoulders, playfully using her as a shield. "You wouldn't want to hurt Dr. Murray to get to me, would you?"

"Deryn," Ondrea asked, lifting a brow. "You wanna hold him down for me?"

Fulk moved up next to Ondrea and bit his lower lip. "Baby, I'll go down willingly for you."

Issac exhaled, apparently thinking he was off the hook. Deryn laughed. She knew better. Ondrea glanced at Issac. "I prefer it when they play hard to get."

Instantly, Issac was next to Deryn putting his hands up. "I'm easy. Take me. I'm yours."

A chorus of laughs followed. Deryn took another sip of her drink as she continued to laugh softly. Vonni continued to stare at Deryn as though she were the lowest life form in the universe. Never one to lie down and take it, Deryn tipped her head slightly and stared down at Vonni. "I'm sorry but have we met before?"

"No," she bit out.

"That's what I thought." Deryn took another sip of her drink, this time not coughing. "Care to tell me what the hell crawled up your ass then? It's obvious you have issues with me. What are they? I've had a really long day and I'm not in the mood to put up with shit from you."

The entire bar fell silent as Vonni's face dropped. She looked stunned. For a moment she just stood there as Ondrea snickered under her breath and Deryn awaited a rude comeback. The minute Vonni narrowed her gray gaze Deryn knew it was coming. She just didn't know it would be in the form of a mystical attack. The slight buzzing, followed quickly by a sharp push left Deryn taking a tiny step backwards.

Vonni had thrown enough power at her to knock her on her ass. The fact that Deryn merely took a tiny step back had to piss her off. She narrowed her gaze and glared at Deryn. "What the...?"

Ondrea moved towards Vonni fast. "Try that stunt again and they'll be searching the corners of this joint trying to find your head."

Issac put his hand on Ondrea's slender shoulder and the crowd seemed to swell in on them. "Hey, take it easy. We won't let anything happen to Dr. Murray. From the looks of it,

she has the majority of the base ready and willing to step in to protect her—you too. Look around. I can't even count the number of 'protectors' that just jumped forward."

Ondrea laughed. "Will you protect us from one of your own?"

"One of our own?" Issac looked confused. "Meaning?"

Fulk wiped the sweat from his forehead with a towel from the bar. He stared at Deryn and then glanced at Vonni. "Was that your power I felt zapping past me towards her? She's human. You don't throw shit like that at her. Understood?"

Deryn glanced at him. "I'm sorry about the plant thing."

He looked lost.

Ondrea and Issac snickered.

Vonni's jaw tightened as she sneered at Deryn. "Does anyone know exactly who or should I say what is now bunking among us?"

Here it comes.

Deryn waited for Vonni to voice what she had clearly figured out—Deryn was a slayer and they were not welcome among supernaturals.

Issac shook his head. "I think Vonni needs some leave. She's not making any damn sense."

"Oh, I make perfect sense." Vonni took a small step forward to find Ondrea blocking her path to Deryn.

"Going somewhere?" Ondrea asked with a lethal note in her voice.

Not wanting to make a scene, Deryn took hold of her friend's shoulders and tugged gently. "Come on, we'll go hang at another place tonight. No biggie."

Fulk's expression changed, leaving him looking like he was up to no good. He pushed his chin-length brown hair behind his ears and winked. "Jones, put Vonni's music on. Let her show her stuff. We'll let the other two shine when she's done."

Let us shine, my ass, Deryn thought as she turned to leave.

"*Ompf.*" She hit the equivalent of a brick wall and was left struggling not to dump her drink down herself.

"Back at you," a familiar voice said in her ear.

Smiling, Deryn shook her head to the beat and snickered as her childhood friend, Kane Soto, flashed his notorious playboy smile. He'd grown on her like a fungus over the last thirty-three years. A fungus she loved dearly. He swept a handful of shoulder-length black hair from his face, exposing his gorgeous almond-shaped brown eyes. "What, no hello kiss?"

Deryn rolled her eyes playfully. "No. I was just leaving."
"Why?"

"I'm not sure but I think Fulk is trying to start a dance off. As thrilling as that sounds, I'm going to have to pass. The eighties are over. I'd like to leave it that way."

Kane laughed so hard he bent forward. "You're joking, right?"

Fulk cleared his throat. "Hey, I'm a were-coyote. It's been pointed out to me once today that I've got excellent hearing."

"Great, then care to explain the dance off suggestion?" Kane asked, grinning from ear to ear.

"Uh," Fulk ran his hand through his hair again, "no. I should have picked mud wrestling. The other just popped into my head."

The music in the bar changed to something airy, light, almost Celtic chantish. That caught Deryn's attention. She watched out of the corner of her eye as Vonni made her way to the makeshift stage and set her army jacket on the back of a chair near the edge of it.

In a flash Vonni went from wearing her fatigues to wearing a long white dress. As she began to move along with the music, Deryn realized what she was—a Fae. If she was a pure fairy she'd have knocked Deryn on her ass so that ruled that out. But Vonni was certainly something in addition to just a bitch. She moved with a seductive grace and then launched into some sort of lord of the dance routine, leaving Deryn biting her lip to keep from laughing.

Kane touched her shoulder. "Hold it in. I know it's hard. Just think, you can break dance and show her how it's really done."

"Ha, ha, as funny as ever I see."

He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her near him. Swaying back and forth, Kane began to dance slowly with her. "Are you saying you're not into the dance off?"

"How did you guess?"

"Hmm," he whispered, pressing his mouth to her ear. "Well, you could always kick her ass and show her who she's messing with."

Deryn laughed. "Yeah, that would go over well here. They'd shoot me in a heartbeat if they caught wind of my little secrets. Shifters and vamps hate me."

"Hey, don't lump us all together, Deryn." Kane turned her to face him and lifted her chin, using caution not to send her drink tumbling all down her. "We are not all alike. These men and women are good people, Deryn. They won't judge you or assume that you're out to...."

"Colonel, you changed your mind and came out after all," Fulk said, interrupting Kane. "I'd say I'm shocked but I've seen Dr. Murray take her tee shirt off. I wouldn't miss getting her drunk either."

Cringing, Deryn narrowed her gaze on Fulk. "You did wash your hands really well after handing the *mentula minuscule*, didn't you?"

"I thought you said it was a *mentula magnus*?"

Arching a brow, she looked him over carefully. "Yep. A big one all right," she said sarcastically.

Kane chuckled in her ear. "Do I even want to know how Rodriguez saw you without a shirt on and why you're talking about dicks with him?"

"Probably not."

"Hi, Colonel," Issac said.

Deryn peeked over Kane's shoulder to find Alejandro standing there. She was so shocked to see him out of uniform that she couldn't help but stare. The black shirt he'd chosen helped to accent his long-on-top, short-on-the-sides black hair and make his emerald green eyes glimmer like jewels. He was so tan, so bronzed that she desperately wanted to know

if every portion of his body was that way or if the sun had kissed him just so.

Kane pushed her chin up. "Control yourself, Deryn. You look like you're about to pass out."

The urge to kick her longtime friend in the shin was great. Somehow she managed to hold back. Instead, Deryn plastered a friendly smile on her face. "Hi, Colonel. I'm glad you decided to come. Issac told us you wouldn't show." She winked. "I was telling Onnie how much I wished you'd reconsider coming out with us earlier."

"Call me Alejandro and I wouldn't have missed this for the world," he said, eyeing Kane like he wanted to say something but was holding back. "Feeling better, Dr. Murray?"

"It's Deryn and I am feeling better. Thank you for healing me. I'd ask for a bottle of you next time I visit my doctor but I don't think they've started mass marketing cures as sexy as you yet."

Holy shit! Did I really say that?

A slow, sexy smile graced his squared face. "I could give you my number. For you, I'd make house calls."

I did say that.

Mortified, Deryn did her best to keep her composure. She took hold of Kane's hand for support and clutched it for dear life. When he chuckled she stomped on his foot. He winced. She smiled wider.

Pulling back, Kane glanced down at her. "Wait a minute. What happened and how did Alex heal you? And didn't I get you that shirt?"

"Yes, you got me the shirt. You got me ninety percent of the clothing I own with dragons on it. Before you ask, no, I'm not wearing the matching panties." Deryn let out a soft laugh.

Kane touched her cheek gently and gave her a questioning look. "What's funny about you being hurt?"

"Oh, it was nothing. It was just too much sun. I was laughing at you calling him Alex-V. It pisses him off so he calls you Samurai Soto to get ... err ... umm, no he doesn't. I mean, he...."

Alejandro moved in close. "You told her I call you Samurai Soto?"

"No," Kane bit out, staring at her with hard brown eyes. "Want to tell me what's going on? I thought it was fishy they yanked you in at the last minute, knowing you'd be with nothing but supernaturals. When I first recommended you for the program, almost a year ago when it was in its infant stages, I thought they'd bring on non-supernaturals as well. They didn't. Something is up. Now, spill it, Deryn."

Deryn drew in her lower lip and glanced around the bar, noting Vonni had almost all the men's attention. Well, all but Alejandro and Kane. She swallowed hard. "I was just babbling. I think its nerves. Yeah, that's it. Nerves."

"Since when did you become shy?" Kane asked, lifting a dark eyebrow. "The Deryn I've known since I was seven and she was four would stand on a rooftop and shout what's on her mind. What's with the newfound...?" He stopped and glanced over his shoulder at Alejandro. "Never mind."

"Kane," she said, touching his face. "Don't take it there. I just don't want to get into it all right now. We can talk in private later. I promise."

Kane's expression didn't change. "He's *exactly* your type, Deryn."

"Huh?"

"Nothing." He rubbed his chin. "I should have known you'd take an interest in him. He's a ladies man. I can't ever remember him having a steady girlfriend. An endless line of women who look like they work in the porn industry, yes. Steady ones? No. You love those types of men. No commitments. No pressure for you to have anything real with them. Heaven forbid the wild Deryn find herself caught."

Mortified Kane was discussing this in front of Alejandro, who looked shocked and slightly pissed, Deryn gave Kane a dirty look. "Are you just about done?"

"No." He averted his gaze. "You're going to be all reserved and not yourself around him, aren't you?"

"Some embarrassing things passed between us. Only mortifying on my end. Excuse me for feeling like an ass in front of him. It could have been anybody. Not just him. Way to be a dick to your friend. I'm used to you doing it to me."

Kane stiffened. "I am not being a dick to you, Deryn. And I hardly think Alex cares what I call the women he takes up with. He's called them worse."

Forcing a smile to her face, Deryn stared at Kane. "Well, that makes it okay then. Sorry I said anything. Wait, I think I remember overhearing what you had to say about me while

surrounded by your buddies. You know what they say about people who live in glass houses, Kane."

Tipping his head back, Kane sighed. "Shit. I didn't ... damnit, Deryn. I told you guys do that around other guys to shut them up. We don't like going in depth about the women in our lives."

Putting her hand up, she stopped Kane. "I'm sorry. I'd like to take a moment to introduce you, the pot, to the kettle." She pointed towards Alejandro. "I can see why you're friends."

"You are impossible to argue with, woman. You're a master of twisting things."

Deryn clutched her breasts and gave them a good squeeze. "I am woman. That's mistress of twisting to you, ass."

"Wonderful, good to know you didn't leave the bitch behind. You were sure to bring that side with you when you came," he bit out, his face hard, his body tense. He advanced on her and she noticed Alejandro coming at Kane out of the corner of her eye.

Putting her hand up, she stopped him and glared at Kane. "I will drag you by your pretty boy hair outside and kick your dragon-shifting ass up and down this base, boy. Then you'll know just how big of a bitch I can be."

"Deryn...."

She jabbed him in the chest. "Don't you try to sweet talk your way out of being you. You, Kane, will apologize to your colonel and then you will apologize to me."

"Deryn, don't make...."

"Shhh," she pressed her finger to his lips and smiled, "that did not sound like a 'Colonel, I'm sorry for saying all the women in your life are whores' or a 'Deryn, I love you more than life itself and cannot possibly live with myself if I know you're mad.'" Taking another sip of her drink, she wagged her brows.

Kane groaned and lifted her free hand up. He pulled her pinky finger up and began inspecting it closely. She gave him a questioning look. A shit-ass grin came over him. "I'm just trying to figure out how it is I fit so easy around such little finger. Any idea when it was I got wrapped around it?"

She nodded. "I sure do."

"Really?" he asked, leaning down.

"Yep, when I was four and you shifted for the first time in front of me, trying to scare me."

Kane covered his face and flinched. "Aww, that's horrible. I changed back thinking I got you good. I mean, you curled up in a little ball and were shaking. And those tears. They were huge. It took me five minutes to get you to stop long enough to look at me again. Then you cried harder. The minute you told me why I almost cried, too."

Deryn licked her lower lip. "I really did think Jimmy's big iguana got loose and ate you."

Kane grabbed her shoulder and laughed. "Ohmygods, and when you confessed your first thought was how you didn't want to tell Jimmy his pet ate me because you didn't want him to cut its belly open and that you'd really miss me though, I didn't know what to say." He sighed. "Yep. That's

when you wrapped me around your little finger." He stuck his bottom lip out.

"Oh, now you're pouting like a big baby." Deryn pushed his rock hard chest and snorted. "Enough. Don't make me play pin the tail on the dragon again."

Kane cringed and grabbed his left ass cheek. "Just thinking about that makes it hurt again."

She beamed and took a sip of her too strong drink. At the rate she was going one drink would have her under the table if she wasn't careful. "Hey, I just wanted to make you whole. It was done purely out of love."

"Yes. Often I express my love for another by stapling a homemade tail to their ass while they're sleeping and only ten years old."

Alejandro laughed from the gut. "Tell me you're kidding. She didn't really do that, did she?"

Deryn blushed and nodded. "Unfortunately, it's true. In my defense, I only wanted to give him the best birthday present ever. He said his favorite part about being shifted was having a tail. I only wanted to give it to him for all times."

"It's a present I never forgot," Kane said, running the back of his hand over her cheek tenderly. "I remember asking for a kiss from you that year. Instead, you made my ass bleed."

"A kiss?" Alejandro's smile faded fast and he took a tiny step back.

Sensing something was wrong, Deryn went to him, stopping just short of actually touching him. "Are you okay?"

"I'm great." The clipped words and harsh tone told her otherwise. "I take it you two are *really* good friends."

She nodded. "Kane and Onnie are my best friends. Like Kane said, we've known one another a long time. Almost all of our lives. Why?"

"No reason." Alejandro's rather cold response left Deryn slightly hurt. She wasn't about to tell him that though.

Turning, she found Vonni climbing down from the stage just as the bar erupted in whistles and applause. "Damn, I missed my competitor's performance."

"Competitor?" Alejandro asked.

Kane snickered. "It would seem that Vonni and Deryn had a difference of opinion and Fulk thought he'd solve it with a dance off."

The half-choke, half-laugh that came from Alejandro told Deryn that he didn't believe Kane's explanation. If she wasn't living it, she wouldn't either. "Do you all play rock, scissors, paper when you have issues or is this just a girl thing on this base?"

"What?" Kane nudged her. "You aren't scared of a half-pixie, are you? Come on, she's a medic, you can take her. Go shake your *thang*, Deryn. Show her how it's done. Maybe, if you're in an extra good mood you could break out into song and sing a nursery rhyme for her."

Deryn rolled her eyes. "I do not walk around singing nursery rhymes and children's songs when I'm happy, Kane. Stop saying that." It was a favorite thing of his to tease her about.

"Uh-huh," he said, laughing softly.

She gave him a hard look. "Then you must be the only person I've ever been happy around because no one else has ever said that to me."

Alejandro cleared his throat and tried to hide a smile. Her eyes widened. "Oh gods, please tell me I didn't do that in front of you."

"It was adorable, Doctor."

Her chest tightened at the sound of him calling her adorable. Kane snorted. "Adorable? Please tell me you didn't just say that, Alex."

Deryn rolled her eyes and tapped Kane's arm. "Great. Somebody got out of the dragon's den with a scale out of order. Are you planning on being an ass all night? Tell me now so I know to ignore you. It'll save me a headache and you my wrath."

"Deryn."

She glared at him. "What, Kane? How about an 'I missed you,' huh? Why do I get grumpy you? You said you wanted me here with you. If that wasn't true then why push to get me to come?"

"I do want you here." Kane sighed. "Damn it, Deryn, I haven't gotten to spend any time with you in months. It's killing me. I go from being with you every day of my life to seeing you for brief Earth layovers. I don't want to fight with you, sugar."

Tapping her foot, she crossed her arms over her chest. "And?"

Kane smiled. "And I'm sorry for being an ass."

"That's better." He was right. They didn't get to see each other at all anymore. Giving in to the urge to comfort him, Deryn smiled and wrapped her arms around Kane, hugging him tight. "I missed you too. And now you have me on the verge of tears. Wonderful. I'm sure the insane redhead will love this. I'm still not sure what the hell her problem with me is."

"Let me guess," Kane drew in a sharp breath, "you asked her what it was, didn't you?"

Releasing him, Deryn shrugged. "Well, it was clear she had an issue with me. The minute we walked in she started looking like she wanted to shoot daggers out of her eyes and pin me to a wall. Onnie noticed, too. I just inquired about it."

"What *exactly* did you say?"

"I asked what crawled up her ass and died?"

The look on his face was priceless. Deryn just grinned as she watched Kane glance back at Alejandro again. He shook his head slightly and cleared his throat. "Way to start a cat fight, Alex."

"Hey," Alejandro said, putting his hands in the air. "I'm innocent. I got here after you, pal."

"You can't be that dense, Alex."

Unsure where this was headed, Deryn stood silently as the men had at it. Alejandro shrugged. "I have no clue what you're getting at so I must be."

"I'm lost too so don't feel bad," she added.

Kane pushed a stray strand of hair away from Deryn's face. "You said Alex healed you. Does anyone else know that?"

Deryn thought about a moment. "Yes. I'm fairly sure everyone who was out with us knows. He also, umm," she entertained lying to Kane but knew better, "he helped me ride out the pain from the injections. Fulk sort of happened upon us at the end. It may have looked a bit compromising, if you know what I mean. It was innocent. He was just helping me. Why do you ask?"

"Fulk was running his mouth again." Kane gave her a soft smile, making her feel at home again. "I think Vonni is jealous, sugar."

"Of what?" she asked, taking a large sip of her drink.

"Of you, Deryn."

Opening her mouth to object, she found Kane's finger pressed to it, silencing her. "Please don't launch into the 'I'm too tall, too skinny, too blonde, too white, too nerdy' speech because I will take you over my knee. I know how your mind works when it comes to this sort of thing. Trust me, she's jealous. You have something she wants and she knows she can't compete with you and win."

Deryn couldn't help but laugh as she checked herself over carefully. "Umm, if it's the allergy to the sun she's wanting I'd happily hand that over. I'll even gift wrap it for her."

Kane grew quiet as he stared down at her. He touched her cheek and then tipped his head down to meet hers. "Tell me that you weren't out in the midday suns here, Deryn. Tell me that you listened to me when I warned you to stay in during that time. I can't see you like that again. Do you understand? I can't see you go through that again. None of us thought you'd survive. Tell me you listened."

As Deryn stood there, her head touching Kane's she knew better than to lie. He could read her easy enough and know if she was telling the truth. "I can't tell you because I didn't listen. I thought if I took two doses of the serum before I went out I'd be all right. I was wrong. I even tweaked it before I came, hoping it would be strong enough."

"What the hell is this serum for that everyone keeps talking about and what do you mean you warned her?" Alejandro asked, suddenly close enough that he touched both she and Kane.

"He doesn't know?" Kane gave her a hard look. "He should know. It's a safety risk and had he had you out in the middle of the desert, too far from base, you'd have died. Alex would have had to stand there and watch it happen. Trust me when I say holding your lifeless body is the last thing he'll want to do. It's something you never forget."

"She looked like she was in excruciating pain when I found her at lunch time giving herself another injection. What's going on?" Alejandro asked.

Kane gasped. "You took three of them, Deryn?"

Reluctantly, she nodded. "I'm fine. I can still move," she lifted her hand and wiggled her fingers, "see. Fine now. It didn't cause paralysis or seizures. We thought it might, we were wrong. That's good, right?"

"What? Paralysis?" Alejandro asked, sounding shocked.

Kane's eyes narrowed on her. "You are damn fucking lucky he was there when you did it. You could have overdosed, Deryn. Is that what you want? Do you want to die from the one thing that keeps you alive?"

"Keeps her alive? What the hell is going on here?"

Kane gave her a hard look and ignored Alejandro's questions, making her feel like a child being scolded. "He needs to know. What if you were attacked and he had to stand there and worry about what was happening with you in the full sun instead of the enemy, Deryn? He could die because you kept things from him."

Sensing defeat, she put her hands up. "I surrender. It wasn't my decision to withhold information from everyone here. The general did it. Not me. He had his reasons and now the colonel ... err ... Alejandro is aware I have issues with too much sun. He also healed me within seconds, Kane. Granted, I'll never let him do it again but still. I'm fine." She spun in a small circle to prove her point.

Kane gave her a 'nice try' look. Not wanting to argue, Deryn put her hands up and smiled wide. Everyone needed to lighten up. "Don't force me to make you my dance partner again, Kane. I think I feel the samba coming on. One and two and three and four...." She moved to a beat only she heard and grinned as Kane's eyes widened. "Oh, don't look so shocked. I know how much you loved it every time my grandmother forced me to learn something new. Though," she stepped in towards him and moved her hips, "this was one of the fun ones."

"Your grandmother taught you to do the samba?" Alejandro asked, his eyes as wide as Kane's.

Deryn shook her head and laughed. The combination of that and the super drink Issac had hooked her up with left her a bit dizzy. Gathering her wits about her, she focused on

Alejandro. "Hell no, but she was the one who put me in classes to learn it. She was obsessed with me expanding my horizons."

"No," Kane huffed, "she was beyond obsessed when it came to this in particular. Remember the time she told you that your future mother-in-law had been some famous samba and Carnival dancer in Brazil and we ran to my house convinced it was my mother?"

Deryn didn't bother to hide her laughter. "Ohmygod, that was great."

"Yeah, we stood there towering over this little Japanese woman who threatened to turn me into a toad if I ever suggested it again. I kept at her for weeks convinced she was lying to hide the surprise that you were my mate."

"You're up, kiddo," Fulk said, appearing next to her and taking hold of her upper arm.

"Next?"

Fulk smiled. "Yep, Vonni did her thing. You do yours."

Looking at Kane, Deryn bit her lower lip. "Is there a way to make him disappear or turn into a toad? Do you have a mirror? I bet I could set him in front of it and he'd spend the rest of the night flexing."

Kane lost it. Fulk pretended to be hurt by her comment but ended up laughing all the same. Alejandro was the only one who simply stood there watching her closely. The feeling of being graded was strong but she kept that to herself. Deryn took a tiny step back and shook her head. "I'll pass on this one. I think the drink you encouraged Issac to give me was beyond straight."

Fulk lifted the hand with a beer it, sloshing some out in the process. "Looks like the civvie is a wimp and a lightweight."

Deryn stood there doing her best not to laugh. "Wait, is this the part where I say mine is bigger than yours?"

"That or I could just whip mine out and end the debate," Fulk said with a wicked grin spread over his face.

Alejandro growled, making the same noise he'd made earlier. Fulk took a step back and cleared his throat. "Right then, we'll say yours is bigger."

"Huh?" Deryn looked to Kane for help and found him staring at Alejandro with a not so friendly look. "Kane?"

He didn't take his eyes off Alejandro. "What do you need, sugar?"

"You to stop calling me that and then for you to break down these guys' personalities a bit for me so I know how the hell to take them." She winked at Fulk. "Oh, and if you could also explain the whole growling thing Alejandro keeps doing that would be great, too. I need a kitty decoder."

Fulk snorted.

"Keeps doing?" Kane asked, rounding on her.

"Yes. Could you explain it because I'm lost? I can take the truth. So long as the man doesn't make an attempt to piss on my leg or use my sofa as a scratching post I'm a happy gal." Deryn reached out and took hold of Kane's upper arm to keep from falling as another wave of dizziness swept over her.

Fulk burst into laughter and pointed at Alejandro. "Do your best to use the litter box, Colonel."

"What exactly did you guys give her, Fulk?" Kane steadied her carefully.

"A Double Hitter, why?"

Kane's eyes widened. "Deryn, how are you feeling?"

"Peachy." She giggled. "Why?"

"Because they gave you a drink made for a shifter's metabolism."

Alejandro went at Fulk. "And a double at that. It's the equivalent of about eight regular drinks."

Kane reached out fast and seized hold of Alejandro. "Hey, don't. Even Fulk wouldn't have given her that much on purpose. How she's even upright is a mystery to me. She's also on medication she already knows she shouldn't mix alcohol with but she never listens. Hell, she even added another dose of the meds today." He pulled Alejandro close to her. "Here, make sure she doesn't fall on her ass. I need to go find Ondrea and get the scoop on what was found at the temple today."

Deryn snickered as Alejandro took over steadying her. "I can't believe you didn't recognize the writing on the temple walls, Kane."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it's the language the Avatars used. We even ran into a spirit tomb guard in broad daylight. He spent most of the morning watching us and other stuff before Alejandro sensed him. He was convinced we were thieves. I had no idea he was that powerful."

Kane stiffened. "Did he hurt you, Deryn?"

Alejandro pulled her closer to him, sending little shockwaves of pleasure radiating throughout her. "I would never hurt her."

"No," Kane looked so serious, "not you, Alex. The spirit tomb guard."

"Nothing was there, Kane." Alejandro began to caress Deryn's low back softly. It felt too good to point out, so she let him run with it. "I think the sun may have gotten to me, too."

"Did you sense danger?" Kane asked.

"Yes."

Kane closed his eyes slowly and exhaled. "Were you alone with Deryn when you sensed it?"

"No."

Deryn watched as Kane relaxed a bit. "Good. Maybe it was nothing then."

"Alejandro forgot to tell you the tomb guard waited until it was just he and I before it spoke to us."

Kane instantly went rigid. "Did you hear it too, Alex?"

"Nothing was there, Kane. I swear. From everything I was sensing there should have been something huge right in front of us. There wasn't."

Deryn couldn't suppress her giggles any longer. "Do you often hear voices then, Colonel Sexy? Do you often find your claws bloodied from thin air?"

Alejandro stared down at her with wide green eyes and a semi-shocked-satisfied look on his handsome face. "Uh, no."

"She called you Colonel Sexy. Can I run get a tape recorder so we can play it for her tomorrow?" Fulk asked, reminding Deryn he was still there.

It was Kane's turn to make a threatening, growl-like sound. "She will not be here in the morning. Come on, Deryn. You are making a trip back to Earth, now."

Alejandro pulled her tight to him in a protective manner. "She's not going anywhere, Captain. Explain yourself."

Deryn drew in a deep breath, savoring the scents of jungle on Alejandro. He was so raw, so powerful that he oozed it making Deryn's entire body desire his dominance. She wanted him above her, orchestrating their nocturnal movements as they each sought pleasure. Unable to help herself, Deryn ran her hands up his steely chest, wishing there wasn't a tee shirt between her and him.

Alejandro's stomach tightened under the weight of her touch. "Doctor, umm, I think we should get you back to your tent to sleep this off."

He doesn't want me.

Kane touched her shoulder, drawing her away from the edge of tears. "Deryn, are you armed?"

"Nope."

"What? You traveled off world into a supernatural hot spot without arming yourself?" Kane asked, sounding shocked. "I taught you better than that."

Still hurt by Alejandro's rejection, Deryn pulled back from his embrace, refusing to meet his gaze. "I didn't want to give them a reason to fear me, Kane. I thought if I came unarmed it would help. I thought they knew already all about me."

She took another sip of her drink.

Fulk laughed. "Sweetheart, you don't come across as the least bit threatening. From the minute you arrived we've all

been worried you'd fall and hurt yourself or walk into a tree while reading a book. You're human and that makes us worry like hell about you. Just ask the colonel. He'll tell you."

She snorted. "Pfft, he damn near got himself killed today with that growl of his. I don't think I'll be taking his word on anything anytime soon."

Kane's eyes widened. "Explain, Deryn. What do you mean Alex almost got himself killed with that growl of his?"

"Every time he did it, the tomb guard insisted the colonel ... err ... Alejandro was my husband."

"Your *taimar*?" Kane asked, sounding sickened.

"Hey, how do you know what it said?" Alejandro tried to pull her back into his embrace.

She giggled. "See, there was something there and you know it."

"Deryn," Kane leveled his gaze on her, "did you acknowledge Alex's claim on you?"

"Did I who and what? No! What claim? I handled the situation. All is better now. I think."

"Tell me how Alex is still alive. What did you do?" He closed his eyes a bit and shook his head. "Please tell me that you didn't do what I think you did."

"Now, don't go getting your non-underwear wearing self in a bunch," she pointed at him, "the tomb guard and I had some history by the time he showed up around Alejandro. See, umm. Well."

"Deryn, spit it out."

Doing her best to keep a happy look on her face, Deryn stared at Kane. "Fine. It approached me earlier in the day."

Kane paled. "Did it hurt you? Did it try to...?"

She motioned for him to relax. He didn't. She went on, "Don't freak out, Kane. Please."

"I think it's safe to say I'm going to freak out. Go on."

"I wouldn't have let it that close to me but it looked like Alejandro. Exactly like him. It had on his uniform, vest, same weapons, even his tags were the same. I grabbed them to give to you to show you but I lost them somewhere." She tried to think about where she could have dropped them.

Kane looked like he was going to shift and light the entire place on fire. "Wait, they really can assume the form of others?"

"No. I think Alejandro has an evil twin who lurks in the jungle waiting to slap unsuspecting women before trying to rape them. Yes. Obviously they can."

"Get your shit packed, now!" he shouted. "No. Just leave it. I'll buy new. You're going home."

"Kane."

His eyes bulged. "You can't possibly think you can argue your way out of this. It tried to rape you using one of my closest friend's identities. I think that should say it all. Wait? I'm thankful as hell it didn't rape you but how did you get away?"

"Well, it showed up as someone it assumed I'd listen to without question."

Kane let out a soft laugh. "Is there a person you'll listen to without arguing?"

"No," she said, not missing a beat. "So, me being me, I was like 'no, I'd rather not take my clothes off and show you my tattoos out here alone".

"It wanted to see your markings?" Kane looked like he was going to be sick.

"Yeah. I think I shocked it by arguing with who I thought was Alejandro. To tell you the truth, that was hardly arguing when you're taking me into consideration. Anyway, he, or it, I still thought it was the colonel then, it slapped me hard enough to make my ears ring. I listened to him then because I didn't want to kick the shit out of your friend."

Kane grabbed her shoulders. "Deryn, if any man, Alex or not, slaps you and tries to rape you, feel free to kick the living shit out of him. Hell, kill him. I know I will when I get my hands on him."

"Well, I did fight back but I made sure it wasn't really him first," she said, wrinkling her nose. Deryn put her hands up cutting Kane off before he could argue. "I won't make the same mistake of not sensing if it is Alejandro or not again. I put up more of a fight than it was willing to deal with at the moment. I think it sensed there were a lot of others close."

Blowing a puff of hot air out slowly, Kane looked as though he might shape shift at any moment. "Okay, now. So, you meet up with it again, later. When you're with Alex. And it thought Alex was your husband. What did you tell it? How is he still standing and not strung up on a pole, skinned and disemboweled?"

Deryn didn't have a chance to answer. Alejandro did it for her. "She told it I was her personal head warrior."

Kane's jaw tightened and his eyes swirled with flecks of yellow. "You put him under your protection?"

"She did what?" Alejandro asked, clearly stunned.

"She fucking put you and in turn, all the 'warriors' beneath you under her protection, Alex. Basically, she is now protecting the entire base. That means if a battle were to occur, they would want her head on a platter as a sign of victory instead of yours."

Alejandro lifted Deryn's chin and shook his head. "Why in the hell did you do that? If the thing comes back when you're alone I won't know until it's too late. I couldn't even sense it until it was almost on us. That's what you were talking to the monkey thing about, wasn't it?"

"Hold up." Kane tipped his head. "You saw Deryn talking to animals?"

"Wait, she does that often?"

"Yes, but never in front of a stranger. Never." Kane stared at Deryn with a look that told her exactly what he was thinking—don't fall for Alex, Deryn.

Alejandro drew in a deep breath. "She didn't just talk to it, Kane. She seemed to be holding a conversation about those tomb guards."

"No," Deryn interjected, not wanting them to confuse it all, "not about the tomb guards. About the evil that lurks in the shadows here on this planet. It and its warriors are every bit as powerful as the tomb guards and to be honest, the lines tend to blur on who is the good guy and who is the bad guy. *Che* told me the evil ones have been watching you all closely for months, just waiting for the right moment to strike."

"Che?" Kane asked.

"The little monkey thing. He said his kind are called *Checatas*. So I call him *Che*."

Alejandro touched her cheek, making her body burn with need for him. "What does *áricus* mean?"

Kane let out a loud snarl-like noise. "Deryn Nava Murray, tell me you denied it! Tell me you did not acknowledge it."

Alejandro cupped her face fast. "Deryn, what in the hell does that mean? And why is Kane looking like his head might explode?"

She bit back tears as she stared into his green eyes. "I couldn't let it hurt you, Alejandro. I couldn't."

"I can take care of myself and you. I don't need you doing something stupid."

Kane snorted. "Oh, trust me, Alex. We can't fully protect ourselves against these things. Did Deryn deny it when the tomb guard asked if she was an *áricus*?"

"No. She told it she was one. She even dared it to come and test her. It's how she got it to go away. She stripped down to next to nothing, showed her markings and basically got in its face. I tried to protect her but I couldn't see it. I could kind of sense it and the faint drums but I didn't know where to aim."

Kane looked like he wanted to kill something. Deryn bit her lower lip and turned completely around to face him, keeping her body pressed to Alejandro's. "Kane, it kept insisting Alejandro was my husband. It would have killed him. I know it would have. Don't ask me how I know. I just do. I couldn't let that happen."

"Damn it, Deryn."

Alejandro shook his head. "Will someone tell me what *áricus* means?"

Kane stared at her while he answered Alejandro. "It's Avatarian for guardian or watcher. It's big stuff among them."

"Big like how big?"

"Big enough for them to challenge Deryn if they think she's lying or if they fear her and, Alex," he rubbed his forehead, "they fight to the death. If legend holds true, they're more powerful than almost any of us here."

Alejandro cupped her tighter. "Deryn!"

"Every time you growled it insisted you were my husband," she said, doing her best to make him understand. "Tell me what the growl means because it took it as a sign of ownership—as a sign I belonged to you and that you weren't willing to share."

"Deryn," Kane touched her arm lightly, "how do you know it would have killed Alex? Did it say as much or did your gut instincts tell you he was in danger?"

She shrugged. "It was my gut and something else. Something I don't want to talk about. I could sense it watching me at various points of the day. It," she glanced at the ground, "brushed past me several times, doing its version of a feel up as it went, prior to the whole I'm here to have you, bitch."

Kane snarled. "Deryn, you had something that powerful stalking you all morning and you didn't tell anyone about it?"

"At first I thought I was imagining it. I didn't want to believe what I was telling Onnie—that it was Avatars. But it

kept whispering in Avatarian as its presence neared. I couldn't actually see anything at first so then I was sure I was losing my mind."

Alejandro was suddenly there, staring down at her. "What did it whisper to you?"

"Nothing," she said, not wanting to discuss this with him.

"Deryn." Kane eyed her close.

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. It was talking to the other ones. I don't think it knew I could hear it. In fact, Alejandro was leaning against the temple watching me talk with *Che* and he didn't seem to hear it whispering so I think it felt fairly secure with itself."

"You're leaving out what it said and I know you know how to speak Avatarian. We learned together," Kane said, touching her arm lightly.

"What do you think males who have existed in a realm without females for centuries would say when they first saw one near their temple? One who put up a decent fight with one of its better warriors?"

Kane stiffened. "Oh gods, that's how you knew it would kill Alejandro if it thought he was your husband. It wanted you for itself."

"No," she swallowed hard, "not just for itself. I think it wanted to share amongst its own kind. Trust me, Kane, I didn't have a choice. It refused to acknowledge Alejandro as my head warrior. It was accept its claim that I was an *áricus* or let it kill Alejandro because it was positive he was my husband. I'm the last person they'll let be mated for more

reasons than them being horny. You know that. You know they'd have killed him without a second thought."

Pointing at Alejandro, Kane's gaze hardened. "I hope you're happy. If the evil ones Deryn was told about overheard that, they will come at her full force. It's already bad enough that if we somehow piss off the supposed good guys, they'll demand her death as retribution. Now, we've got the bad guys possibly clued in that they should come after her first. Kill our strongest warrior to cut our legs out from under us."

Fulk laughed. "Uhh, Soto, don't you think they'll realize that she is not our most powerful warrior? She's not even a warrior at all. She's a sexy bookworm. I mean, come on, between the sheets she's probably a killer but a warrior? No. I'm not seeing it."

Kane punched Fulk in the face without warning. Clutching his jaw, Fulk glared at him. "I'll let that one go, Soto."

"You're lucky it wasn't me hitting you, jackass," Alejandro bit out.

Deryn caressed the back of Alejandro's neck absently. "He doesn't bother me. Don't fight with your friend for being who he is. Fulk was just being funny. He's trying to lighten the mood here."

"Doctor," Fulk said softly. "These two look like they're about to go at it. Come on out of the way so you don't get hurt."

"No. I'm taking Deryn back to Earth now!" Kane shouted.

"Like hell you are," Alejandro said, pulling her towards him. "She's not going anywhere until we figure out what's

going on and make sure it can't follow her through the portal. I can't protect her if she's there."

Kane pointed his finger at Alejandro. "You can't protect her from them here either. No one can. Not even me."

Deryn moved and stood between them. "Kane, don't worry. If they come wanting a fight, it's a fight they'll get."

Fulk snickered. "Gotta love her spirit. She may be insane but she does it with courage. Come on now, Bookworm, before one of them starts swinging at the other one. I don't want you caught in the cross-stupidity."

She made a move to go to Fulk and a wave of dizziness swept over her. It was then that she realized she no longer held her own drink. Puzzled, Deryn looked down to find Alejandro holding it. "How?"

A slow smile moved over his handsome face. "I think we should get you to your bed."

"Don't you mean, get her *in* bed, Alex?" Kane bit out, giving Alejandro a hard stare. "That's what this is about. You don't want her to leave because you haven't gotten a chance to fuck her. If you want another notch on your bedpost, take leave and go back to Earth. Have at one of your other women. Deryn isn't up for grabs."

Unable to help herself, Deryn laughed at the absurdity of Kane's statement. Ondrea picked that moment to show back up. "What's so funny and how did you manage to get drunk so fast?"

"Kane is on another one of his 'all you want is to get in her pants kicks' again. It's ridiculous. Hey, you did it to Alejandro,

too—earlier." She pointed at Kane and Ondrea. "People, the colonel is a nice guy. He has no desire to screw me."

Kane stared at Ondrea and then laughed, sounding less than pleased. "See what I deal with? She can be so naïve when it comes to our ways."

"I know. I've been there dealing with it, too. Don't worry. I already had the talk with him. Deryn doesn't understand what's going on because she's not a shifter, Kane. Don't blame her. She should have no knowledge of anything personal about any of us, yet she does. She loves you and me like we are her family. That is a major taboo for her. It pits them against her just as much as they are against us. Don't forget that and don't be so quick to get mad at her for not understanding our ways."

Kane nodded. "I know that. And I know that she has paid dearly because of her concern and allegiance to us, Ondrea. I thought," he looked away, "she'd be safe here. I thought that if I could get her here, she'd have a chance at living a normal life, free from violence. That was before I knew it was only supernaturals on this mission. How the fuck could I miss Avatarian symbols, Ondrea? How?"

"I didn't want to believe her, Kane. I told her to stick to her area of expertise."

Kane snorted. "Who the fuck is more of an expert on them, Ondrea? The girl is a..." He stopped fast and stared at Deryn. "The general knew. He knew what was here and what we'd no doubt end up having to fight to keep control of the planet and its natural resources. That's why he changed his mind and

yanked you in. He knew we'd need you here. That fucking son of a bitch is willing to sacrifice his own niece."

"Niece?" Alejandro asked. "You're the general's niece? He's a werewolf. And what the fuck does Kane mean by sacrifice you?"

"Don't sound hopeful, Alex." Kane rolled his eyes. "Deryn is his niece by marriage. Not blood. She's not a shifter."

"Oh, can we please shut-up about her?" Vonni asked, pushing past Fulk and glaring at Deryn. "Tell them what you really are. Tell them what they'll be sleeping by. Tell them what could creep into their tents and kill them in a fraction of a second. What they're trusting to walk among them. What they're being tempted to fuck."

Ondrea rounded on her and Deryn jumped in front of her friend. "Whoa. No killing the annoying redhead. At least not without my help." Glancing behind her, she stared at Vonni, making her take a step back. "Boo."

Vonni took another step back, her eyes wide. "You-you can't hurt me here," she said, stammering over the words. "People will see. They'll stop you. You can't touch me."

"Are you sure I even need to touch you, Vonni?" Deryn asked, biting back a smile as Vonni's eyes widened.

"No ... no, you wouldn't dare. You can't ... no."

"Wow, what happened to the big bad pixie?" Ondrea asked, laughing softly. "Bitch, you even give Deryn a sideways glance and I will gut you. And if you dare think you can spread mass pandemonium and get them to turn on her, I'll eat you for breakfast and gladly take the bullet for it later."

Ondrea wasn't bluffing and Deryn knew it. Kane moved forward fast. "I'll help her, Vonni. I will kill anyone who causes Deryn pain. She would die to protect you and you're letting yourself be blinded by jealousy. Don't you think if the colonel was the least bit interested in you, he'd have acted on it in the seven months you've both been here?"

"It's against her nature to protect us," Vonni said, practically spitting as she did.

Fulk laughed. "Uhh, no offense but I'd rather not have Doc in the way even if she is trying to protect me. I want her safely tucked behind me. She can throw books or some of that geeky equipment shit she always has with her at the enemy if she really wants to."

Vonni snorted. "Fulk, she can kill you in a heartbeat. She can kill all of you. Don't be fooled by what you see. She's not sweet and she is far from innocent."

Glancing at Vonni, Fulk bit back a laugh. "Yeah, she's really spooky." He put his arm out to Deryn. "Come on, killer, let me escort you back to your tent and let Dumb and Ass duke it out. I promise to be a gentleman."

"No," Deryn said, shaking her head. "I don't want to go back to my tent."

"Doc." Fulk took another step towards her. "Come on. I'll walk you back."

Vonni's nostrils flared as power lit around her. "Tell them what you are, bitch."

Ignoring Vonni, Deryn grabbed Fulk's hand. "You wanted me to dance, let's dance."

"Oh, no, I...."

"Yippee, she's going to screw him. I was so hoping she'd listen to me." Ondrea clapped her hands and ran off.

The second the music changed to something with a rhythmic thump—Deryn knew Ondrea had something to do with it. Moving towards Fulk, Deryn shook her hips and followed the beat. He hesitated at first but soon began to move along with her. "You're not so bad, Doc."

"Neither are you. Want me to ride you now?" she asked, winking at her reference to sitting on his back while he did push ups.

Fulk laughed. "How many times do you think I can get you to go up and down?"

Alejandro's growl was loud enough for everyone in the bar tent to hear. Fulk paled considerably and Deryn's brow furrowed. "Fulk, what's wrong?"

He pointed towards Alejandro and took a giant step back from her. "I think he'd rather we not joke about you riding me."

"I think Mr. Fuddy-Duddy should get his sexy ass over here and dance with me then."

Grinning, Fulk tipped his head and put his arm out in a sweeping motion. "Colonel Fuddy-Duddy, I believe your presence has been requested."

"Ondrea," Kane said. "I'd like to talk to you a minute."

Alejandro approached slowly. "Dr. Murray, I think you should go sleep this off. You don't want to dance with me."

Moving her hips seductively, Deryn rolled her upper body and stared up at Alejandro with a slight smile on her face. "You have no idea what I want to do with you, Colonel."

He drew in a sharp breath and closed the distance between them. Placing one hand on her hip and the other a bit higher on her side, Alejandro began to dance with her. He not only kept pace with her but actually took the lead over. It felt so good to move seductively with him that Deryn found herself daydreaming about having his cock between her legs, sliding in and out of her.

"Mmm, you're really good at this," she said, locking gazes with him.

"I think it's genetic. My mother was a dancer."

"She was?" Deryn gasped as Alejandro pulled her so close that their lower halves rubbed against one another.

"Yes," he dropped his head down a bit, leaving their lips close to touching, "she was and she was very good. Samba was her thing."

"Really?" she asked, surprised to hear that. She wrinkled her nose. "Don't let my grandmother know or she'll try to marry us off faster than that tomb guard did."

"What's your grandmother's number? I'll call and tell her myself," he said with a wink. "I'd love to ask her more about this mate of yours. The one who's mother used to be a famous samba dancer."

Glancing to the side, Deryn found that they were drawing a crowd. "Alejandro, do I have something all over my face or is something wrong with me?"

He moved their bodies in time with the music. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with you. Why?"

Leaning in to him, she went to her tiptoes and pressed her mouth to his ear. "Then why is everyone staring at us?"

The manly chuckle that came from him left her inner thighs quivering in delight. "I rarely come in here and I've never danced in front of them so I'm guessing that has a little something to do with it."

"I'm sorry I asked you to dance with me. I didn't even think about the fact you're their commanding officer."

Working his upper thigh between her legs, Alejandro managed to get them into a pose that left their bodies rubbing fully and her heart racing. His gaze was so intense that she almost looked away. "If you're trying to get me to stop, it's not going to work."

"But," she did her best to control her erratic breathing, "you have to maintain your image—you're their...."

Alejandro began to sing along with the beat. She knew enough to know he was singing in Portuguese and that he had an amazing voice but that was it. Several of the men around them gasped as Alejandro repeated a phrase several times. "*Eu quero fazer amor com voce.*"

Several of them began to whistle. "All right, Colonel!"

Placing one hand on his steely chest and the other on his hip, Deryn gave into the sound of the beat, his voice and the urge to feel more of him. She tipped her head back and began grinding her pelvis against his upper thigh, simulating the act of riding him. She brushed past his erection and they both drew in a sharp breath.

If what she felt was accurate, the man was doing more than fine in the dick size department. Always a plus. She wagged her brows as she moistened her lips.

Alejandro made a noise that sounded as if he were in pain and then continued singing to her. He shifted his movement up just enough that his upper thigh began to rub against her clit. Deryn countered each thrust. Her nipples hardened and moisture pooled between her legs. If she wasn't careful she'd end up soaking his pant leg. Dying of embarrassment was not the way Deryn wanted to go.

Fighting her own need to touch him, run her hands through his hair and see his body pumping into hers, Deryn broke his hold on her and took a step back. Alejandro caught her by the hand and spun her around. She kept moving with the beat as he moved in behind her and pressed his engorged cock against her ass. Her breathing grew short as she rocked against him.

Alejandro pressed his mouth against her ear and continued to sing. This time in a hushed tone. Her entire body lit with desire. "*Amorção.*"

Tipping her head back, Deryn locked gazes with Alejandro and came just shy of kissing him. Coming to her senses, she stepped away from him just as the song ended. "Well now, it's a good thing you guys don't get him up here to hang out more often. He'd cut in on your action," she said with a wink towards the group gathered around them.

Laughter sounded through the club followed closely by a round of applause. Fulk pushed through carrying another round of drinks. He handed one to Alejandro and went to hand one to her.

Ondrea appeared out of nowhere, shaking her head. "No. Deryn doesn't need anymore to drink tonight."

"Yes, Deryn does." Deryn snatched the drink from Fulk's hand and slammed it. As she brought the empty glass down she found them all staring at her with matching shocked expressions. She offered a slight smile. "Umm, thanks, Fulk."

"Uh, no problem but if you drink me under the table I'll never live it down."

"There's no fear of that happening," she said, handing the empty glass to Ondrea. "I just needed something to calm my...."

Ondrea nodded. "Your nerves. Yeah, I know."

"No. My libido."

Fulk spit a mouthful of beer into the air and choked. Alejandro hit him in the back and Fulk coughed. "Thanks, Colonel. Way to get her horny."

Alejandro hit him again, this time in the back of the head. He glanced at Deryn. "Sorry, he tends to say the first thing that comes to his mind."

"He was right," she said, shrugging.

Ondrea caught her by the arm and tugged on her. "Deryn, are you feeling okay? You're flushed and saying things you wouldn't dream of saying in front of *Kane's friends*."

The emphasis she put on who the men where she was talking in front of was not lost on Deryn. "Where is Kane?"

"He'll be back in a minute. Are you ready to go back to your tent now?"

Deryn hiccupped, and covered her mouth as she giggled. "No. Don't you understand what this is?"

Ondrea gave her a confused look.

"Kane knows. It's why he's off trying to work out the logistics of transporting me through the portal to our realm as we speak. He's going behind Alejandro's back because he knows Alejandro will stop it."

"Deryn, how in the hell do you know what Kane is doing?" Ondrea asked, clearly shocked.

"Because," she swayed, the alcohol hit her full force, "you two went off to talk. You no doubt told him about Vonni and about what she's saying. Then he no doubt launched into the danger everyone here is in now that he knows I'm right—it's Avatars."

"Bookworm, you're drunk." Fulk moved up next to her. "I'll help you back to your tent. You can rest."

"No." She patted his stubble-covered cheek. "You will all die if I leave. All of you."

He bit back a laugh. "Bookworm, no offense but I don't think you'll be much of a help if a battle broke out."

"Don't make me leave him, Fulk. Please."

Arching a brow, he touched her arm. "You mean, don't make you leave here, right?"

"I said what I meant."

"Kane's headed back in now. He'll be with you. It will be okay," Fulk said, doing his best to calm her down.

A part of Deryn warned her to shut her mouth. She ignored it. "No, not Kane—Alejandro. Don't make me leave him. Please. I can't let anything happen to him. I made a promise."

"Colonel, she's not making any sense."

The alcohol picked then to fully assault her senses. Something added to it, intensifying the feeling of falling. Kane was suddenly in front of her. "Deryn?"

"I can feel magik," Fulk said, his voice sounding far away. "Who is using magik?"

Deryn's vision blurred. For a moment she saw two Kane's standing before her. "Kane? Something's wrong. Don't make me go, please. Call my uncle back and tell him you lied. Tell him the suns are not too taxing on me."

He gripped her arms tight. "How in the hell do you know I just called your uncle and told him about the suns."

She couldn't give him an answer even if she wanted to because she had no clue how she knew. She just did. Pulling on him, Deryn tried to steady herself. It didn't work. Kane sniffed the air around her. "Damn it, Fulk's right. Someone is using magik on Deryn. Who is it?"

"My money is on the redheaded bitch," Ondrea said, not bothering to hide her disgust. "I vote we kill her."

"My gods, don't you people get it?" Vonni pushed in next to Kane. "She's a slayer."

Fulk snorted. "Right. Yeah, okay, Vonni."

"You'll see," she said, sounding a little too sure of herself.

"What the fuck did you do, Vonni?" Kane asked, his voice masked with a partial growl. "Pull your magik back from Deryn now!"

"I did what had to be done to get the truth to come out."

"What the fuck did you do to her?" Ondrea asked, charging at Vonni.

Fulk caught her around the waist and lifted her high into the air. "Hold on there. Let's figure out what's wrong with Bookworm before we go killing Vonni. Now, Vonni, what did you do to her?"

"I cast a truth spell on her."

"She's drunk!" Issac said, appearing next to Fulk. "And she's human!" He batted at the air. "You used a ton of power on her. That's a deadly combination!"

"Will she be okay?" Alejandro's voice pushed through Deryn's fuzzy mind. Reaching out, she tried to find him but couldn't.

"Colonel ... err ... Alejandro?"

Something touched her cheek and then wrapped around her waist. "I'm here, Deryn." He glanced around at the others. "Kane, Dr. Harris, let's get her to the infirmary."

"Issac, Rodriquez, escort Vonni to the MPs. Tell them she's to be held until further notice."

"But, Colonel," Vonni said, her voice whiny. "You're not listening to me. She'll kill you all. Just ask her. Ask her anything and she'll tell you the truth ... at least until the spell wears off."

"Come on, Vonni." Fulk grabbed hold of Vonni's upper arm and Deryn fought hard to maintain her focus. "Bookworm, go sleep it off. I'll see you in the morning."

"Bookworm?" Deryn couldn't help but to giggle. The combination of the spell and the alcohol left her with little self-control. "Why am I not offended hearing you call me that?"

"Because you like me. You know I'm a nice guy, don't you?"

"You're a great guy, Fulk Rodriguez. A great guy."

He winked. "Yep, she's under a truth spell all right. You're not hiding state secrets, are you?" He laughed.

Deryn didn't. Everything came to a head and the realization made her sick to her stomach. "Ohmygods, Kane, think about it. You said it yourself. My uncle brought me in knowing what you'd all run into. And you said this mission originally was to be a mix of supernaturals and humans but that it changed shortly after you all got here."

Kane nodded. "That's right, Deryn. We covered all of that already. That's hardly a state secret."

"No but suppose something went horrifically wrong here—for the sake of the argument, say the entire base was wiped out."

Vonni gasped. "See, she'll kill us all."

Sick of hearing the woman talk, Deryn spun around and glared at her. "Utter another word and you will regret it."

"Deryn." Kane twisted her around to face him. "Tell me what you were getting at with something going wrong here because I think you and I both know something big is about to happen here."

"Right. The government wants this realm. They want this version of Earth to mine for resources, establish bases and basically treat as shitty as they do ours."

Kane nodded. "Yeah, no one has denied that, though they've put it in better terms. Do you have a point? None of this is state secret."

"My point is the government is keeping your existence here a secret. All of you."

Sighing, Kane tried to hug her but she held him at bay. "Deryn, this isn't an operation they're announcing to the world."

"They aren't in the database, Kane." She pointed at Fulk. "There is no record of a Fulk Rodriguez in the NHD anymore. None. There isn't a record of an Alejandro Vargas either. Same goes for Issac and...."

Fulk whistled. "Bookworm, you're cute when you're drunk but, honey, unless you've got the entire database memorized then you should probably go sleep this off."

Ondrea and Kane exchanged nervous glances. Fulk snickered. "What? Are you telling me Bookworm did memorize the database?"

Kane stroked her cheek. "Deryn, think hard. Are you sure none of the men and women you've met here so far are listed in the NHD now?"

Issac smiled. "If she's right, we should write the President or whoever did it a thank you letter. I hate being listed in the thing."

Alejandro cleared his throat. "If she's right about that and the threat we might be facing here then that would mean...."

Deryn nodded. "They systematically removed any trace of you from existence on Earth in the event that you ran into trouble that you weren't able to contain. They'll close the portal to here before risking Earth's safety."

"You can't seriously think Bookworm can memorize a world wide database. Do you?"

"Men." Ondrea snorted. "Deryn, honey, give me the last details you can recall for a Fulk Rodriquez. Go back to the previous dates you'd read it all."

Closing her eyes, Deryn did her best to concentrate. "I couldn't sleep so I've been reading through it again over the last few weeks. It was about a year and half before then that I last read through it. At that time, there was a Fulk Rodriquez listed as a resident of New York. Prior to that he was living in Ohio, Florida and Virginia. His address in Virginia matched that of a Ms. Terri Baker—werewolf by attack not birth. Ms. Baker applied for a marriage certificate but there was no record of Fulk applying as well. He was arrested for stealing a vehicle when he was seventeen but that disappeared from his record once he turned eighteen. He then...."

Kane shook her softly. "That's enough, sugar. They get the idea."

"She's always been good but not that good," Ondrea said, smiling.

"Vonni's truth spell combined with the alcohol and her meds are most likely stimulating the area of her brain that stores the information."

"Damn, Bookworm, I don't know if I should be creeped out or ask you to be my partner for cards."

A sickening thought occurred to Deryn. "Ohmygods, Kane, I'm their last resort. I'm the government's fail safe. That's why they sent me to visit with the option of staying or returning in monthly increments or sooner if need be. They want me to...."

"Learn the lay of the land, observe us and fight should the Avatars decide they aren't willing to give this place up," Kane said, his voice low. "Someone high up is expecting us to fail. They're cleaning up their mess just in case it happens."

She grabbed his cheeks and held tight. "Don't make me go back, Kane. Don't make me. Let me help. I can take as much time as I need off from the university. I'll quit. I don't care. Don't make me go, not now that we've had an altercation with a tomb guard. If they attack and I'm not here, the government will shut you down and leave you here."

"Deryn," Kane held her by her wrists, "there's no stopping them from doing that with you here."

"Yes, there is."

He let out a soft laugh. "Your uncle. He won't let them seal it with you here. Your grandmother would literally kill him."

"Let me stay." She spun around and staggered. Strong arms wrapped around her. She turned to find Alejandro holding her. "Please don't make me leave you. You outrank Kane. Tell him to notify Earth that all is going well here and we'll report in when we have more to tell and let me stay."

"Shh," Alejandro whispered as he lifted her into his arms and held her close. "It'll all be okay. You have my word, Deryn."

"I'm not feeling so well."

"I've got you. I'm going to take you over to the infirmary. We'll get you back on your feet before you know it. We need you out there to help us carbon date things and all that other stuff you were going on about earlier."

Joy surged through Deryn. "You'll let me stay?"

"Yes."

"No, Colonel," Vonni stared at Deryn with hard eyes, "ask her if she's a slayer. You'll kill them all, won't you?"

Deryn shook her head before giving in and laying it against Alejandro's chest. "No. I would rather die than see them be harmed in any way."

"Happy now?" Kane ushered Alejandro towards the exit. "Come on, Alex."

"Kane? Kane, I want you to carry me, not him."

"Sure, sugar but can I ask why? Alex won't hurt you." Kane caressed her arm. "It's actually better if he carries you while Ondrea and I watch for more temple guards, Deryn. She and I have at least studied how to deal with them and how to spot them. Now that we know we should be looking, we've got a leg up on the others."

No part of her wanted to admit why she didn't want Alejandro carrying her but the compulsion to spit the truth out was too great. "I don't want him to carry me because he confuses me. One minute he acts like he's interested in me and the next he's cold as ice. It's annoying. He's annoying in a cute way. He is so sexy and he's built to perfection. He's funny too and he has the best voice. Don't you think, Onnie?"

Ondrea laughed. "Oh, sweetheart, you are not talking like yourself. That bitch did a number on you. No more drinks around crazy Fae chicks. And no more going out in the midday suns."

Ondrea's voice faded away. Deryn put her head against Alejandro's chest and closed her eyes. "I changed my mind. Don't let go of me and don't die."

He huffed. "Okay, I'll do my best not to. You do the same, all right?"

Losing her inhibitions, Deryn stroked his jaw line and stared into his green eyes. She couldn't help but stare. He was breathtaking. The perfect example of the male species. She traced the edges of his full lips as her inner thighs tightened. "I think it was you who cast a spell over me," she whispered. "Did you do that, Colonel?"

"Deryn," Ondrea said. "Sweetie, you're drunk and under the influence of some heavy magik. How's about you just stop talking before you say anything else to embarrass yourself later?"

Alejandro continued to walk with her and she kept her gaze trained on him. "But I think he did do something to me. He can wield magik too, just like his mother."

He stalled. "How do you know that?"

"I know because...." His green eyes swirled just a tiny bit and their color intensified. Unable to help herself, Deryn gave into the urge to be closer to him. She leaned up and planted a tiny kiss on his neck. He froze and she chuckled. "Tell me what the growl means."

"I'll tell you later. When we're alone, *amorzão*."

"Mmm, promise?"

He nodded as a low purr came from the back of his throat. Ondrea gasped and then coughed loudly—sounding as though it were forced and she was covering something up.

Looking around, Deryn had to concentrate to be able to focus on Ondrea. When she spotted her friend she smiled. "I love you, Onnie. You're like a sister to me."

Ondrea nodded. "I love you too, sweetie." She glanced past Deryn to Alejandro. "Set her on the table. I think Kane wants to have a look at her and if you're smart, you'll stop making that noise. The last thing we have time for is two grown men getting into a brawl."

Alejandro did as Ondrea instructed but Deryn held tight to him as he went to pull away. He stilled and locked gazes with her. "I didn't mean what I said to *Che*. I would never change my mind and let them hurt you."

"Hey, Colonel," Issac said, moving up next to Alejandro. "Vonni is tucked away for a lovely evening with the MPs. How's the patient doing?" Putting his hand out, he swept it through the air and drew back with a hiss. "Damn, she's still got a hell of a rain cloud of power over her."

"Can you do anything for her?" Kane asked.

Alejandro touched her leg and heat flared through Deryn's body. "My gut says let this ride out."

"Yeah, well, no offense, Colonel," Kane bit out. "But your gut isn't the one who put the entire fucking base under its protection and if these things pick now to attack, Deryn is as good as dead."

Issac snickered. "*No offense*, Kane but I'm not seeing the difference between leaving her buzzing or sobering her up. If something attacks, she's only human. She won't be doing anything beyond getting thrust into a corner by one of us."

Ondrea glanced at Deryn and offered a soft smile. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel great. I don't know what the fuss is about."

"How many fingers am I holding up?" Ondrea lifted her hand and for a second, the room seemed to spin. "Deryn? How many fingers?"

"I don't know. I can't seem to remember how to count. Why can't I remember how to count? I can count, right?"

Ondrea let out a soft laugh. "Umm, yes, Deryn, you can count. In fact, you're my walking calculator normally."

Music drifted in from a distance and Deryn stiffened as she heard a song that always reminded her of a horrible night. The worst night of her life to be exact. "Onnie, do you hear that?"

"Here what, Deryn?"

"That music." She sat up on the exam table and glanced around the infirmary. It faded in and out, one minute looking like an infirmary and the next looking like a nightclub she used to hang out when she was younger. It was owned by Ondrea's uncle and he always let them in regardless of their age. The minute Deryn realized what she was seeing she gasped.

"Deryn what's wrong? What music? Not the snake charmer one again, I hope."

"No. That stupid song." Deryn tipped her head. "The one Kane's friends used to sing when they wanted to make fun of me for being a goodie two shoes."

"Look at me I'm Sandra Dee?" Ondrea asked, her eyes wide. Deryn nodded. "I don't hear anything."

Issac touched her forehead. "I think she's hallucinating."

"What makes you say that?" Kane asked.

Issac shrugged. "For one she's hearing music that isn't playing and for two, I can see what she sees while I'm touching her and the girl isn't sitting in the infirmary anymore. She's standing in the corner of what looks like a bar or club of some sort. I see Kane playing pool with a group of guys. His hair is short, like how he wore it when we first met him, and he's wearing a tux. That's odd." Issac laughed. "Playing pool in a tux. The guys he's with are pretending to sing the song that Deryn said she heard. It looks like they're making fun of you Kane."

Kane drew in a sharp breath. "Use your power, Issac. Break Vonni's spell!"

Ondrea touched Deryn's cheek. "Sweetie, focus on me. Do it, Issac. It's the night of her attack. The one that almost killed her."

"Okay, I'll try."

A slight buzz moved around Deryn and she instantly felt as though she were falling. The harder Deryn tried to do just that, the more she seemed to slip away from reality and into what seemed to be a living memory. She too saw Kane standing with his buddies playing pool.

"Where's Sandra Dee?" one of his friends asked. "I thought you said you were taking her to her prom even though we said it would be lame."

"Not to mention it'll take up your time with us. It's not like the service lets you out on a weekly basis. We miss you, man."

"Nice tux," another one of his friends said, poking him with a stick. "Have a change of heart or did you get stood up?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Kane said, between gritted teeth.

"Holy shit, Soto got stood up by a high school girl."

"Fuck you, Doyle." Kane bent down to line up his shot.
"For your information, I dumped her."

Doyle snorted. "Funny, for years you kept telling us the two of you weren't an item. When did that change? Did you finally realize she doesn't belong around here, around us? Sandra Dee just doesn't blend. Ondrea's fine. She's cool but the other one bothers us."

Kane laughed and Deryn took a step back not wanting to believe he would partake in their teasing. Glancing down, she found herself wearing a long floor-length white gown. It had a low cut bodice but not so much so that it was obscene. It struck a nice balance and was not only flattering but age appropriate. Instantly, Deryn's hand went to the locket she wore around her neck. It was something she did often when she was nervous or upset.

"So, did you leave her at the dance or what?" Doyle asked.
"I want the details. That bitch has done nothing but drag you down for years and we can't stand her."

Another of his buddies leaned forward. "Tell us you at least fucked her before you split. She may be a pain in the ass but she's hot. You don't make it home so much anymore now that you're in the service. Mind if I have a go at her?"

"I don't give a shit what you do. I don't want her. She's dead to me." He put his hands up. "Wait, I meant to say, Sandra Dee is dead to me. She's a tease. You're right, she's a pain in the ass that I've wasted my life on."

She backed up quickly and accidentally bumped into a waitress carrying a tray of empty bottles. They crashed to the floor bringing with them the attention of the patrons. Glancing up, Deryn found Kane staring at her with a look of shock on his face. "Deryn, what are you doing here?"

Her bottom lip trembled as she searched for the words to answer him. "I made you a promise and I have never let you down."

Kane set his pool stick on the table. "But your uncle said you were gone—that you decided to go out of town with your grandmother. He said you didn't want to go anywhere with me, that you ran like hell at the first chance to get out of it." He bit his lower lip. "He said you'd never be caught dead at something like your prom with me."

"I thought you said you dumped her," Doyle said, laughing. "Looks like Soto is whipped. She shows up and he folds like a little bitch."

Kane glanced over his shoulder at Doyle and Deryn did her best to hold in the tears that wanted to flow freely. "My uncle never listens fully to anything my grandmother says. She told him we'd be back in time for me to meet you." She glanced down too hurt to meet his gaze. "She took me to get a dress not out of town. I didn't own one. You knew that. You know I don't like wearing them. I told you on the phone when you said you wanted to take me—that I should tell Robbie no and go with you instead."

"Deryn, I didn't mean what I said. I was angry. I talked all the guys on my Ops team into taking leave, too. I want them to meet you. I called them and told them to meet me here

instead of after your prom because I thought you took off on me. They should be here any minute. I want...."

She exhaled slowly. "You what? Wanted to show off the thing you've wasted your life on? The tease? Did I miss anything?"

"Oh, look, Sandra Dee opted for virgin white," Doyle said, laughing as he took a shot. "Who would have guessed it? Oh, I bet this means Soto is going to go running out of here with her with his tail between his legs. It's not like she'll let him stick it anywhere else."

Anger took hold of Deryn and she stood tall. "You know what, I'll save him the embarrassment. Don't bother, Kane. I thought you actually wanted to go to this thing with me. I didn't realize I was such a burden."

"Deryn." Kane made a move to come to her but Doyle grabbed him by his shoulder.

"Let the bitch go. You're better off without her. You said it yourself."

Infuriated, Deryn eased Kane's class ring off her thumb and threw it at him. He caught it with ease. She knew he would. It was part of his shifter abilities—quick reflexes.

"Deryn, don't do this."

"Do what? Give you what you want? Freedom? I can't give what I didn't take, Kane. Correct me if I'm wrong but I'm not the one who asked me to wear that. Am I?" Lifting her dress off the ground, Deryn ran towards the door, no longer bothering to hide her tears.

"Deryn, wait!" Kane shouted.

Doyle laughed. "Let her go, man."

She ran out of the club and straight into what felt like a brick wall. She staggered backwards. Strong arms shot out and around her.

"You okay?" a deep voice asked.

Nodding, Deryn refused to look up. A hiccupped sob tore free from her as she lost her battle with her tears. "I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine."

Wiping her eyes, Deryn glanced up briefly, catching only a glimpse of emerald green eyes. They were familiar to her but she couldn't place them. Her mind was too fogged. Too caught between two realities to allow her to think clearly. "I'm fine. Really. Thanks."

"I'm not trying to overstep my bounds here but it's dark and they're calling for a storm tonight. Should you be walking around this time of night by yourself?"

"I'm not by myself," Deryn said, lying but not caring. She wanted to walk and clear her head.

"Hey, listen, I'm not going to lecture you on being in a bar at your age but I am going to suggest you come in and let me call a ride for you."

"Captain," another voice called out, "you coming or you planning on robbing the cradle. Not that I've got anything against that."

Deryn clenched her fist. "I'm eighteen, asshole."

"Hey, little lady, I'll take you over my knee and teach you to respect your elders."

"Rodriguez, would you please shut up?" The man touched Deryn's chin but she refused to meet his gaze again. "I'm

sorry. You're right, he's an asshole. Ignore him. We all do. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"You didn't. I just want to go now. Thank you." Grasping her locket, Deryn stared at the ground and shifted awkwardly, not liking how tall heels made her. Thankfully, the man before her was even taller than her.

"Is that a good luck charm?" he asked.

"Is what a good luck charm?"

He chuckled. "Your locket."

"No. Umm, I don't think so. It's something my grandmother gave me. It was hers, then my mother's, now mine. Why do you ask?"

"I was hoping to strike up a conversation and get you to at least look at me."

Another man moved up next to the first. "Captain, let the girl be on her way. It's past her bedtime."

The man sighed. "Rodriquez, do me a favor and go inside before I'm forced to kick your drunk ass."

Deryn used the opening to walk away from the man. She wanted to be alone, not psychoanalyzed by some guy who had trouble keeping a leash on his buddies. She sensed him watching her as she walked away. Her entire being told her to trust him but she ignored her inner voice. She turned down the corner and headed towards her house.

Increasing her pace, Deryn found herself jogging as best she could in heels. A dark shadow moved past her and the air around her chilled considerably. She stilled.

Turn around and run back to the bar. Run to the man with the green eyes and Kane.

Paralyzed by fear, Deryn couldn't respond to her inner voice. Instead, she glanced around as her breathing came in the form of shallow pants. She knew what would happen because she'd already lived it once yet she couldn't get her mind and body to fall into sync. She knew that vampires surrounded her, watching her from the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike.

At the time, she was unaware of her destiny. Unaware she held the power within her to fight them off or at least fight most of them off. Deryn also knew the next three hours of her life were spent at the hands of a gang of vampires that were anything but merciful. No. They toyed with her. They beat her and did things she didn't even want to think about let alone relive. In the end, they left her long enough to go live it up—party and brag about their latest conquest. It was their need to boast and Kane's insistence to find her and apologize for what he'd done that kept her alive.

"Wake up, Deryn!" she yelled at herself. "Wake up! Now!"

Something shot past her again, this time ripping her locket from her neck with a sinister laugh. Deryn spun around, trying to find the source of the laugh but found nothing. Her body shook. That was different. She couldn't remember her body shaking on its own the first time around. It did it again, seemingly of its own free will.

"D-e-r-y-n," a long drawn out voice said from afar.

That hadn't happened in the original version of events either. Evil felt as though it were pressing in on her from every angle. Deryn's body shook again, this time it felt as

thought hands were on her shoulders. She blinked and for a split second she found herself staring at Issac.

"Issac?"

A partial laugh came from him. It sounded anything but jovial. "Yes." He nodded. "Yes, Deryn, it's me. Concentrate on my voice and I'll take you to Kane."

"To Kane?" Her mind fogged once more and she fought to stay in control. "But I'm mad at Kane right now."

"No," Issac held tight to her shoulders, appearing with her on the dark street, "you were mad at him then, Deryn. Not now. You were hurt more than anything. Hurt he'd say such awful things about you. Anyone would be. Those buddies of his were asses. Plain and simple."

"How do you know?"

He smiled. "I've been sharing this memory with you. I've also got a sneaky suspicion something really bad is about to happen and I don't want to see you have to relive that. Can you focus on me and my voice? Can you do that?"

Issac glanced around and stiffened. "Deryn, Kane is here, he's talking to me now. He wants you to snap out of this more than you want you to snap out of it. Rodriguez is here now too. He and Ondrea are pinning Kane down to keep him from touching you. I don't know what will happen if someone from your past ... someone who was there that night, touches you."

"Kane is the one who found me the next morning," she whispered. "I don't know how he managed to find me but he did."

"Kane," Issac said, turning his head and looking in a direction that Deryn saw nothing but darkness in. "How bad was she when you found her? Is it a point I can take her to safely?" He shook his head and his eyes widened. "No! She'll relive it as it were real. Look at her neck! She wasn't wearing a necklace here, in our time but she was then and look—see the red lines from where a vampire just ripped it from her. What happens in this vision will happen to Deryn's body now, too."

"Issac." Deryn pushed him to the side as she spotted a dark figure rushing at her. "Get out of the way!"

It slammed into her and her body lifted into the air. When she hit the hard, cold ground, pain radiated through first her head and then her entire body. Blood pooled in her mouth and she knew she'd split her lip open.

Another shadow appeared. This one took the shape of a man. The very sight of the pale man from that night so many years ago sent Deryn's heart into overdrive as she watched him hover over her.

"I can smell your innocence, your youth," he said, his voice cold. "You are beautiful." He put his out. "Come look at what I found! It might be one worth keeping."

"No, not again. Not again." She tried to get off the ground but something pinned her down. "Kane!"

Another shadow swooped down. This one struck out and kicked her in the gut and clawed at her face. She blocked the majority of it with her arm while she stifled a scream.

"Deryn, focus on me!" Issac shouted, suddenly lying on the ground next to her. He touched her cheek lightly and a

tear came to his eye. "I can't break this spell alone, Deryn, and it's killing me to watch you go through this. I can feel your terror. The hopelessness you feel and your pain."

"You can feel my pain?"

He nodded. "Get Kane out of here. If he breaks your hold and touches her she'll relive hell."

A spark that hadn't been with her the first time lit deep within her. The idea of someone else suffering because she wasn't strong enough in the present time to separate herself from it all sickened her. Reaching out, Deryn touched Issac's arm. "I won't let you hurt, too."

"That's the spirit. Now, focus on me and I'm going to have the colonel hold you down, okay?"

"Why?"

His brows drew in. "Because your body just lifted about four feet off the ground before slamming back into it with the force of train, Deryn. Not to mention you've got some vicious claw marks appearing on you. I don't want you to get hurt here, too." He glanced at something behind her. "Besides, I don't think the colonel is going to give me a say in the matter. He wants to hold you, Deryn. I vote we let him. Answer something for me first."

She nodded.

"The man you ran into when you were leaving the bar, do you know who he was?"

Deryn's eyelids fluttered and she felt her mind beginning to fog once more. "No."

"Are you sure? I think you do know. You just aren't putting it all together, Deryn. He was just a Captain then but I think

you know. Who did Kane say was coming to the bar? Think hard."

"His Ops team." It sunk in and her eyes widened. "Green eyes. Alejandro?"

Issac smiled. "Yes, Deryn, he was there that night. I felt you instantly trust him. I also felt his fierce need to protect you. He didn't understand then what kind of danger you were in but his instincts told him to try to keep you with him just like they're demanding he comfort you now. We don't have enough people here to control Kane and the colonel. I really do not want to find one breathing fire down my neck while the other takes my head clean off. Help me out. Let's let the colonel hold you."

Deryn was speechless. Thankfully, Issac wasn't. He pushed a stray strand of hair out of her face. "Colonel, when is the next time you met Deryn?"

Issac continued to stare at something behind Deryn. "Then I think it's safe for you to touch her. In theory, she'll end up in the moment she next saw you. From there I can draw her out of it all. I can't do that when she's terrified."

Deryn wasn't fast enough with her protest. The second she felt warm arms wrap around her she felt as though she were falling again. When her mind cleared again, she found herself standing in a dense jungle.

"Where are we, Deryn?" Issac asked.

"We're here, in this realm, I think. I'm not entirely sure but the purple trees are a good indicator I'm right."

"But we met you Earth side early this morning. Why aren't we there?" Issac stood next to her and looked around the jungle. "I thought it would work, Deryn."

"It did," she whispered, taking Issac's hand in hers. "This is the next time I saw Alejandro."

"But...."

Shaking her head, Deryn sighed. "Before I came I dreamt of him here. Only Ondrea knows that. Well, now you do, too. I had to tell someone about what was going on so I told her."

"Wait, you're telling me you've been dreaming about the colonel being here?" Issac arched a brow. "Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Hell, I thought his name was Marido right up until I met him this morning."

The laugh that came from Issac took Deryn by surprise. She gave him a questioning look and he bit his lower lip. "Umm, sorry. I'm not going to get stuck watching you and the colonel have sex, am I? Aww, man. I was able to feel your pain. I refuse to feel what's it like to be with the colonel. That's just not right."

Ignoring Issac, Deryn turned and watched a scene she'd seen unfold in her dreams countless times. A large black jaguar appeared in the center of the brush. It moved slowly and was clearly injured. Without thought, she ran to its side. "Issac, make this stop, please. I can't watch him die again. I can't."

"What do you mean, watch him die?"

"What you can't see is that there is blood oozing from his chest," she pointed at the black jaguar, "in a second, he'll lie down and morph into a man—the colonel. Then something I

can't see will rush out from the tree lines and attack him. He's too weak to fight back. It's almost like he doesn't even want to try to defend himself. Like he's given up. The dream will change then and it will show him, lying there dead and alone. He's always alone. I hate seeing him alone. Please. Take me back to the vampires. I'll do that instead. I don't want to see him like this."

"Shh, Deryn," Issac touched her cheek, "if you're here, then he's not alone and he's fine. He's holding you right now."

She snorted. "He held me earlier. I was in pain and he held me and helped to ease it. Why can't I ease his pain? Why can't I ever help him? I can never stop it. In the dreams he dies each and every time. Why can't I stop it?"

"How do you know you aren't helping him?" Issac asked, his voice low. "We're alone now, Deryn. Ondrea and Rodriquez took Kane away from here because he was too upset and would have touched you. Speak freely. I've shared your feelings long enough to know you fully understand that Kane's behavior around the colonel isn't just based out of a need to see you safe. He's jealous. He sees the colonel as a viable threat for your attention. I also know you wouldn't do or say anything in front of him to hurt his feelings. You can talk now."

"There is nothing to talk about." It was a lie and she knew it. Problem was, so did Issac.

He shook his head. "I feel what you feel right now, Deryn. I know these dreams bothered you, more than you admitted to Ondrea. Why didn't you tell Kane about them?"

"Every ounce of me is screaming to keep this to myself, Issac. Why do I feel compelled to tell you?"

He snickered. "Side effect of a truth spell. So, why haven't you told Kane about it?"

"Because he would have worried himself sick about Alejandro and me."

"You?" he asked, watching as the jaguar lay down on its side, just as Deryn said it would.

She went to it and dropped to her knees. "It's okay, I'm here." She stroked it gently. Putting her hand in the air, she willed a sheet to appear and it did, just as it always did in her dreams. She watched as the jaguar morphed into a man.

Issac gasped. "Shit, Deryn, you weren't kidding. It's the colonel and it looks like something tried to rip his heart out of his chest."

Deryn covered Alejandro with the sheet, leaving his upper body uncovered. Running her hand through his hair, she leaned down and kissed his forehead. "Don't give up. Please fight back. Get up. Please."

"Deryn," Issac said, softly. "Alejandro isn't dead or dying. In reality, he's fine. This is your dream, remember?"

She glared at him. "That doesn't make it feel any less real to me! That doesn't make it hurt any less. It was horrible to go through nightly when I didn't know him. Now that I've met him and like him—I mean, really like him, I can't go through it again. I can't, Issac." She touched her stomach lightly and tried to push the horrible events in the dream from her mind.

"I understand, Deryn. I'm sorry."

"Do you know anything about dreams, Issac?"

"A little. Why?"

"Is it possible to just know something in a dream?" She put one hand on her lower stomach and one on Alejandro's forehead. His eyes were closed and she knew what was coming next. She knew something was going to burst through the tree line and finish him off.

Issac crouched down next to her and touched her back. "You'll see when we get you out of this that he's fine. Your warning may be all he needs to keep this from happening, Deryn." He gave her a funny look. "Deryn? Are you ... umm ... I don't know how to ask this without wanting to give you a lecture on drinking while in your first trimester but do you know you're pregnant?"

She let out a soft laugh. "No. I'm not."

"I can sense it in you."

Shaking her head, she kissed Alejandro's forehead again. "I'm not pregnant in real life, just the dreams."

"Wait, you're telling me you're pregnant whenever you dream?"

Deryn arched a brow. "No. Just when I dream about Alejandro. I can't explain it and I stopped trying to figure it out but it's part of the reason I don't tell Kane."

"Wouldn't Kane be happy you're having a baby with him?"

She didn't want to discuss this with him but whatever Vonni had done left Deryn with the compulsion to spill it all. "Kane knows I can't have children. He also knows he and I are not true mates so even if I could conceive, the chances of doing so with someone other than my true mate are considerably low."

Issac put his hand over her lower abdomen. "May I?"

"Sure."

The second he touched her, his eyes widened. "Are you positive I'm not going to have to watch you and the colonel having sex."

"I'm positive. Why?"

"No reason."

Deryn smiled. "It makes it easier having you here. Normally, whatever comes out of the jungle has attacked by now and Alejandro never rests this peacefully."

"It's not so much he's resting peacefully, Deryn, it's your mind thinking there might be a way to stop this. Is this the reason you came here? I sensed you didn't want to come that something forced you. Is this it? Did the dreams make you want to come to him?"

"Part of it." She settled down next to Alejandro and wrapped her arm around him. "When my uncle asked me to come here I knew Kane wanted me to be closer to him. I knew Onnie was dying for the opportunity to do something as exciting as this and I knew the colonel would be here. I think I can help him." She hugged him tight. "Now that I'm here, I'm scared to leave Alejandro alone."

"Because you think something bad is going to happen to him?"

Nodding, Deryn bit back tears. "That and I don't want him to be alone. I hate seeing him that way. I also made someone a promise I intend to keep."

"Who?"

Darkness pressed in around Deryn. It wasn't intimidating. No. It was welcoming. "I'm tired, Issac."

"That means the alcohol is wearing off. It was mixing with the spell Vonni cast and causing the hallucinations or memories to feel real. I've never seen her behave that way before. She really thinks you'll kill us all. I'm sorry about that and I'm sorry she did this to you. The colonel will get you back to your tent and I'll let Kane know you're okay now."

"Thank you," she whispered. "Issac?"

"Yes?"

"Don't tell Alejandro about the dreams. I don't want him to know. I need to tell Kane about them first."

He cleared his throat. "Umm, Deryn, I...."

"I'm not asking you to lie to your colonel I'm just asking you to leave out the part about me seeing him die again and again. Let me tell Kane first and then I promise I'll tell Alejandro all about it."

"But, Deryn...."

She snuggled in against a comforting warmth and let out a soft laugh. "Issac, I give you my word and I never break a promise. Ever. I'm too tired to argue with you about this. Can we talk about it later?" The darkness consumed her and she gave into it willingly.

Chapter Four

Deryn kicked awake with a start and just managed to bite back a scream. It took her a moment to realize she was in the infirmary on a cot. Glancing around, she found she was far from alone. Kane was next to her on a cot, snoring loudly.

Typical Kane.

Fulk was near the door, lying on a cot. Issac was about six or so feet from him. Ondrea was out cold on another cot. Her chest tightened as she searched for signs of Alejandro but found none.

"No."

She got to her feet, careful to step lightly so that she wouldn't wake any of them. Considering they were all supernatural with heightened senses, it was easier said than done. If it wasn't for the overwhelming, driving urge to assure herself that nothing had happened to Alejandro, Deryn wouldn't have bothered sneaking past them all.

She was almost to the door when something told her to stop. She did. Turning, she spotted Alejandro in the far corner. He was asleep on a blanket, spread on the floor. An empty cot was less than a foot from him yet he'd opted for the floor. It didn't matter. The very fact he was alive and within her line of sight kept her from questioning his reasoning for picking the floor.

Tiptoeing across the room, Deryn made it to him without waking anyone else. He looked so peaceful lying there on his

side. Unable to help herself, she went to her knees next to him. The urge to touch him was great. She gave into it.

Leaning down, she planted the tiniest of kisses on his forehead. She waited for him to strike out, do anything a shifter might do when startled awake. When he didn't stir, she exhaled and let the tears she cried for him every time she dreamt of his death out. As she went to touch him again she sensed something near them. It was on the other side of the infirmary walls. Born to be a killing machine, Deryn had heightened senses as well. She also had a keen understanding of what was going on.

The evil that *Che* had warned her about was stalking them. Watching them. The fact that it had managed to get as close as it did without waking any of the shifters or others said just how powerful it was.

It made its intent known, almost daring her to do something about it. It knew she wouldn't accept what it wanted to do—kill Alejandro. Part of her told her to wake Alejandro so he could help protect himself. The other part knew if she did, she would have to hide what she was and that in itself could cost him his life.

If I could only make him out to be a viable threat to them they'd back off.

She eyed him carefully. He hadn't budged. She spotted the Bowie knife strapped to his hip and decided to test her skills. Slowly, she reached for it, unsnapping its sheath and drawing it from it with care.

Alejandro didn't move.

Exhaling, Deryn steeled herself for what had to be done. "Stop freaking out, Deryn," she said, barely above a whisper. The need to self-comfort was great. "He's like Kane. He won't feel something tiny and he'll heal instantly."

She swallowed back a lump in her throat. "Oh gods, I can't cut him. I can't hurt him. Think, Deryn. Think. You could wake him up and ask him for a tiny bit of blood. I highly doubt he'll let you do what you have to then. He'll get himself killed." She shook her head. "No. Think of something else."

Alejandro rolled onto his back and his arm moved past the knife, cutting him open as it went. It was small but enough to draw blood. Her gaze went to his face. How he slept through that was a mystery to her.

She lifted the knife. His blood stained the blade. It wasn't a lot but it would work. Silently, Deryn watched until his skin healed over. He would be fine. She lowered her voice. The need to explain herself was great but the desire to avoid waking him was greater so she spoke without really putting anything behind it soundwise. "I need to borrow your knife. I'll do my best to bring it back. I'd like to promise you I will but I'm no fool. I'm dealing with something even I'm afraid of and trust me—what I've seen in my life has given me a warped outlook."

Bending down, she kissed his forehead again. "Stay safe."

Deryn got to her feet and stared at the wall of the infirmary. "I feel you out there watching him. I won't let you have him." She raked the blade down the inside of her arm and bit her lower lip to keep from crying out as pain shot through her. Blood pooled, mixing with his and doing what

she knew it would—temporarily blending with hers to mask her scent and replace it with his own.

For a split second, she could have sworn she saw Alejandro watching her. Dismissing it, Deryn concentrated on what needed to be done. She needed to make him out to be a serious threat.

The wound closed quickly, even without the assistance of her powers due to Alejandro's high healing capabilities. She took a deep, calming breath before turning and rushing out of the infirmary.

Taking the knife in one hand, she pulled it down the palm of the other, making sure to cut extra deep. Blood immediately began to drip. Deryn rubbed her hands together and then smeared the blood on her arms and cheeks. It was disgusting but called for. If she didn't, the wounds would only continue to heal rapidly, leaving her no choice but to keep cutting herself to assure she had Alejandro's scent on her. This way, she would carry his scent until she washed the blood off.

Focusing, Deryn did something she rarely did. She mimicked an animal noise. It was a trait she'd gotten from the beastmaster blood that was somewhere in her family lineage. It was also a dangerous game to play because she didn't understand all of the calls of the shifters. Plain, nonhuman forming animals were easy for her get. It was the ones that had the option of walking on two legs that baffled her.

The second she sensed the evil locking onto her, she smiled. "That's it. Come on, let's play."

She thought she caught something moving out of the corner of her eye but what or rather who she thought she saw was Alejandro. That didn't make sense. He was still sleeping. She looked again. Nothing was there. Deryn shook her head and set her mind on what had to be done.

Lifting her pant leg, she put the knife in the leg of her boot and stood. Staring out at the darkness, Deryn tuned her senses into the evil presence. It was closing in on her faster than she'd thought it would. She took off running full force towards the outskirts of camp.

The evil followed close at her heels. Deryn sensed *Che* and his friends before she heard them. She didn't slow her pace. No. She kept going, running at a pace that would wear a normal human out in no time. Since she wasn't normal, she had more stamina. The only problem was, without unmasking her true identity—that of a slayer, she was basically fighting with one hand tied behind her back. Never a good thing especially when dealing with evil as big as this.

She came to a grinding halt when she spotted a solider patrolling up ahead. *Che* leapt out from a tree and Deryn gasped. "*Che*, you scared me." He gave her an apologetic look. She smiled. "See that guard?"

The tiny creature glanced at the solider and then back at her.

"Do me a favor, go steal his hat and run back up closer to base with it. Don't give it back until he's next to others. If he stays out here, the evil ones will kill him. This is a game to them. We're all disposable."

Che voiced his objection to leaving her alone in the form of a shriek. She pointed at him. "You are going to get me killed. Hush and do as I asked. Please."

The second he rushed off to see to the soldier, she started running again. Her night vision wasn't as good as a shifter's even when she was in full slayer mode. Keeping up appearances of being nothing more than a human made it almost impossible to see where she was going at the speed she was running. Branches slashed at her face, upper arms, any exposed skin they could find. Deryn chose to ignore the discomfort. Alejandro's life was more important than avoiding scratches.

The evil rushed at her and she pushed harder in order to stay ahead of it. Her goal was to get it to think it wasn't the baddest thing on the block. If it believed Alejandro was powerful enough to be in two places at one time and then disappear, they'd think twice about trying to attack him again.

The trick was, she had to live long enough to pull it off.

She could feel it closing in on her and she could feel its confusion. Continuing onward, Deryn trusted her instincts to take her somewhere safe. She felt something else. Something that made her think of Alejandro. She stilled and stared around, trying to see if he'd followed her. Finding no sign of him, Deryn caught her breath and kept running.

Stop, amorzão!

She did, positive she'd just heard Alejandro's voice in her head. When she turned to run again she looked closer and gasped. There, in front of her, was the edge of a rather steep

cliff. Had she not listened to the voice that sounded alarmingly like Alejandro's in her head, she'd have tumbled over the edge.

The evil pressed in on her, nearing at an alarming rate. She sensed something else in the area. It wasn't human. Looking to her left, she watched as what appeared to be some sort of a mix of a deer and a rabbit stepped out from behind a tree. Long, floppy ears framed a narrow face and snout. Its wide eyes landed on her and it froze.

Putting her hand out, Deryn let calmness, peace and safety radiate from her. She nodded. "That's right. I won't hurt you."

It pushed similar, friendly feelings out at her.

She looked over the edge of the cliff and then at the deer-like thing. "Is that water I hear? Is it deep enough for me to be okay jumping into from here?"

It seemed to think about what she was asking and then it pushed one simple answer out at her. Yes.

"Good enough for me," she said, yanking her shirt over her head. She slipped her boots off, and carefully set Alejandro's knife aside before taking her pants off. Standing only in her bra and underwear, Deryn nodded at the creature. "Wish me luck."

She jumped, feet first over the side of the cliff. Her stomach dropped and she had to fight back a scream when she hit the icy cold water. Exhaling right before she went completely under, Deryn prepared for the worst but hoped for the best.

Her chest burned as the urge to draw in a breath hit her. She knew better. To do so now would leave her breathing in

water, not air. Darkness began to creep up around her and Deryn knew it wasn't because it was night. No. She was close to passing out. She'd pushed her body too hard. Something seized hold of her and yanked her to the surface.

Deryn drew in a deep breath and coughed as she swam towards the shore. Each stroke left her body aching. The wear and tear she'd inflicted without tapping into her own healing powers was evident. There was no sign of anyone around her but she was positive something had pulled her up.

Crawling onto the shoreline, Deryn made it about two feet before sheer exhaustion caused her to collapse. She knew she could go no further without a break. Focusing, she tried to locate the evil presence and was shocked when she didn't find it.

"It worked," she whispered, her voice hoarse. A tiny laugh escaped her. "He's safe."

She lay motionless but was still happy regardless of what kind of shape she was in. Alejandro was now someone they'd think twice about messing with. The tomb guards wouldn't but she'd deal with them if the need arose.

Get up, amorzão. It's too dangerous for you to stay out here.

The sound of Alejandro's voice boomed through head. Thinking her sanity was slipping, Deryn mentally batted it away. "Go away. I'm too tired to lose my mind right now."

She closed her eyes, silently vowing to rest just a little bit before heading back to camp. Something nudged her and she actually had to fight to open her eyes she was that tired.

When she did, she found a pair of intense emerald green eyes staring down at her. She blinked, sure she'd finally lost it.

The black jaguar that stood next to her didn't disappear. Deryn let out a low, ragged breath. "I wondered how long I'd be here before I started dreaming of you again. Looks like I didn't even make it one night."

It nudged her again. She ran her hand through its fur, near its neck and glanced at his chest. Her eyes widened. "You're not hurt."

Puzzled, Deryn rolled onto her back next to the jaguar she knew to be Alejandro and smiled even though the action left pain shooting through her entire body. "This is the first time I've dreamt of you and you haven't been hurt." She winced as pain shot through her. "Ouch. It would appear I'm the one who is hurt in this one."

She watched as the jaguar morphed into a man in the blink of an eye—a sure sign he, indeed, was not injured in this dream. If he had been, his shift would have been slower.

Deryn stared up at a very naked Alejandro and couldn't help but laugh. "I finally get you naked and above me and I'm too sore and exhausted to do anything about it. Someone up there has a sick sense of humor."

"What were you trying to do? Get yourself killed?" he asked, his voice low but his tone sharp.

Deryn's eyes widened. "You've never spoken to me in the dreams before."

He exhaled deeply and touched her face. "Do they hurt?"
"What?"

"All the cuts and scrapes you have from foolishly running off into the jungle. Alone. At night. Alone."

She giggled. "You already said alone already."

He growled, not seeming to find the humor in it. "I know. I thought it was a sticking point."

"Oh." She couldn't help herself. Seeing him there, unharmed and actually talking to her was too much. Tears welled and she let them flow free.

Alejandro's face fell. "Shit, I didn't mean to make you cry. I just need for you to understand you can't risk your life like this. What in the hell were you thinking?"

A hiccupped sob came from her. "Those evil things *Che* warned me about were outside the infirmary, stalking you. They'd come to prove a point—that they could get close to you without you knowing. I couldn't let them hurt you. I had to make them fear you. I think it worked."

"Don't cry, *amorção*." He touched her cheek lightly and wiped her tears away. "I understand you think you could help but almost getting yourself killed isn't the way."

Deryn cupped his hand with hers. "You don't get it. I did do something. I mixed your blood with mine and then used it to mask my scent. They then sensed two of you moving around—not just one. I could feel their confusion, Alejandro. They thought they knew you well enough from having watched you for months that you couldn't surprise them. Now you have. And now," she winced as she tried and failed to sit up, "they'll think twice before coming after you specifically."

"That's why you rubbed blood all over yourself," he said, sounding beyond shocked. "Deryn, why would you take such a risk for me?"

"If roles were reversed, what would you have done? Sat there and allowed them to hurt me or taken action?"

"I'd do anything to keep you safe—anything." He brushed stray, wet strands of hair from her face. "Before you say it's the same thing, I'm not human. The risks aren't as great for me."

Deryn shook her head and snorted. "Bullshit. This may be the first dream you've talked to me in but it sure the hell isn't the first dream. I have watched you die so many times I've lost count. They call you immortal but all that really means is you're a hell of a lot harder to kill than a human—not impossible to kill. The risk is the same for both of us."

Alejandro sighed. "You are impossible to reason with. You're hard headed."

"Tomorrow, when I'm awake. I'm going to over analyze the fact that in my dream, I had you telling me how hard headed I am." She touched his cheek and smiled. "I'll also spend the day thanking every god I can think of that I didn't have sit by and do nothing while you died."

His brow furrowed. "So, *dreaming* of me makes it easier for you to talk to me?"

She snorted. "Oh, please. Have you looked in the mirror, Colonel? You're gorgeous and have this unapproachable, 'I could snap your neck in less than a second' vibe about you. You intimidate me on every level imaginable but I know...."

"I would never hurt you, Deryn. Ever," he said quickly.

She squeezed his hand. "I know. I was going to say that but you didn't let me finish."

"Oh." Alejandro smiled and moved closer to her. "So, you like the way I look?"

"Pfft." Deryn tried to roll onto her side to better face him but it was too painful so she laid still. "You're joking, right? Your entire body looks as though it's been chiseled from caramel colored marble." She ran her hand over his bare chest. "I love the color of your skin. When I was little I used to sit and watch for shooting stars, in the hopes I'd see one and get to make a wish. I wanted skin this color or the color of Ondrea's," she said, continuing to touch him.

He stiffened beneath her fingertips. "Deryn, you're beautiful. Your skin is so creamy, so white and so soft that it's all I can do to get through the day without touching you."

Snorting, Deryn rolled her eyes. "I must have hit my head or something. Even my subconscious mind doesn't like me that much."

Alejandro smiled. "Oh, you'd be surprised how much I like you."

Deryn laughed.

"What's funny about that?"

"Issac made a joke about not wanting to share the dreams, about you, with me if it was going to be a sex dream. I'm just trying to imagine his reaction if he were still tagging along. Since he could feel what I felt he'd no doubt know what I was thinking about right now and he'd probably try to gouge his eyes out or something."

Alejandro closed his eyes and appeared to be in pain. Deryn ignored her own pain and went to her side anyway. She touched his cheek. "Alejandro, are you okay? Oh gods, don't tell me that my dream is going to morph into the other one. I can't watch you...."

"Shh," he pressed his finger to her lip, "I'm not in that kind of pain. It's the other kind. The kind that leaves a guy taking a cold shower, or in my case, an icy cold swim here in a minute."

Her entire body lit with excitement. "Or, you could just take me and use me to alleviate the pain."

Alejandro's eyes widened. "What?"

"Don't question it. It's my dream damnit. Why can't it work out the way I want it to, just once? This is ridiculous. I know you're naked yet my body hurts too bad to even lean back so I can't enjoy the full show. Not only that but I'm laying here in next to nothing and you seemed unfazed. Always good for a girl's self-esteem. Her own mind rejects her."

He growled. "Trust me, Deryn. I am far from unfazed. I've been willing myself to look into your eyes and nowhere else and it's killing me. If you were feeling up to 'taking in the full show' you would see exactly what it is you do to me. I want to take advantage of the situation in ways I shouldn't but I know in the end people I care about will be hurt because of my lack of will power."

Sick of hearing him voice every reason why they shouldn't do something, Deryn decided to take action. She captured his mouth with hers, silencing him. Easing her tongue in, she savored his sweet taste. Something flared between them just

like it had done when the tomb guard had approached them and Alejandro had healed her.

He broke the kiss and shook his head. "This is wrong."

Her lip tingled with power that wasn't hers. She touched it and gave Alejandro a puzzled look. Lifting her arm, Deryn watched as the scratches on it began to heal before her very eyes. She let out a soft laugh. "I think your blood must be working to heal me while I'm unconscious. That's the only explanation I have for why after we kissed that I can taste your power and feel it moving through me. This must be my mind's way of rationalizing."

"That or when we kiss, I lose track of everything but you—thus opening the link we clearly share and letting my power run down it to heal you." A sly, sexy smile spread over his face. "If that's the case then it would be wrong of me to stop. I mean, if I can heal you it's only right that I...."

"Shut up and fuck me?" Deryn asked, hopeful.

Making the same growling noise he'd made during the day, Alejandro rolled her onto her back and slid his body over hers. His eyes began to swirl with varying shades of green. He closed them and tipped his head to the side. "I'm sorry."

"Look at me," she said, cupping his face and forcing him to do just that. "You have beautiful eyes, Alejandro. I didn't think they could get any better than they normally do but now that I see what they look like when you're on the verge of shifting, I realize just how wrong I was. They do get better."

"I don't scare you?"

"Do you want to?" she asked, sensing the alpha in him.

"No. I don't want to."

She pressed her lips to his and slipped her tongue in. His power rushed into her, overwhelming her senses. Moisture pooled in the apex of her thighs and Alejandro eased his knee between her legs. He spread them wide and settled his very naked form on her. She could feel his erect cock as it pressed against the outer portion of her panties.

Deryn arched her back and ground her clit against him as his power roared through her body, healing and stimulating her to the point she could think of nothing but Alejandro sinking into her. "Please."

"*Acho que devemos parar agora*," he murmured, between kisses, his voice deeper than normal.

"What?" she asked, not understanding a single word he'd just said.

"Mmm," he kissed her, "I said I think we should stop."

"I disagree." She rocked beneath him and cried out in his mouth as pleasure shot through her lower region. He swallowed it with his kisses that became increasingly more aggressive. Wrapping her legs around his waist, Deryn bit his lower lip hard enough to draw blood. She used his momentary shock to flip him onto his back. It should have been easier than it was.

Straddling his waist, Deryn stared down at him a let a sexy smile move over her face. "That's better."

"How...?" Alejandro's eyes widened. "How did you manage to flip me?"

"The better question is, what do I have planned for you now that I have you at my mercy?" She winked.

His jaw dropped. "I need to get into that icy water, now!"

"Or," reaching down, she slid her panties to the side, "you could get into me instead." She adjusted her hips just so and lined the head of his cock up with her wet entrance. "Do you really want me to stop?"

"No."

She started down on him, doing her best to relax but couldn't stop the tiny cry that came from her as Alejandro's girth spread the lips of her channel taut. "Ah."

His jaw went slack and he took hold of her hips. He held her in place, preventing her from taking any more of him. "You're so tight. I don't want to hurt you."

Every piece of her wanted to beg him to let go of her but something caught her attention. She moved off Alejandro quickly and got her feet. She stared out into the blackness, trying to figure out what it was that had spooked her.

"I need cold water, now," Alejandro said, heading straight for the water. "Your *dream* is going to be the death of me."

She turned to face him. "Hit me!"

"What?" he asked. Half his body was submerged in the water.

"Hit me! I need to wake up! Something is close and it's deadly. Help me wake up. I can fight it awake. I refuse to lay there and die. I laid down and allowed one attack in my life to take place. I will not allow another to go by while I do nothing."

He rushed out of the water. "What are you sensing?"

"That I need to wake up!"

"Deryn, you are awake."

She snorted. "Yeah, right. As if you'd ever want anything to do with me in real life. Nice try, now hit me."

"No. And you are...."

Putting her hand up, she silenced him and began talking to herself, "Think, Deryn. How far away from camp do you need to be to safely unmask? Think. Think."

"Unmask what?"

Annoyed, she exhaled deeply. "You know, for being my subconscious, you're surprisingly clueless about me."

"I'm clueless?" he asked, as if it was really her. "You know what, forget it. Since I'm supposedly your subconscious then how about this—tell me what you're sensing and we'll fight it here, in your dream because that's where the threat is. Umm, yeah, it's here in the, umm, dream. Yeah. Dream."

She couldn't help but laugh. He had a point and was probably right. The threat was in the dream. "Hmm, maybe this is my chance at finally changing the dreams. I never get to interfere when they come for you normally. I'm not sensing anything blocking my ability to unmask."

"Unmask? Umm, forget I asked. You were wondering if you were far enough from base to keep them from sensing you. The answer is yes, you are. Now tell me what you're sensing."

Giving in, Deryn let her power up. It coated her slow at first and then sped up. Alejandro gasped and she laughed as she stretched her arms above her head. She knew without looking that, like normal, her hair had more body, her eyes were bluer and her skin looked sun kissed.

"I hate that Vonni sensed what I am. It took everything in me not to knock her on her ass."

"You're really a slayer?"

She laughed. "Don't sound so surprised." She put her hand out and used her power to conjure a pair of black, special ops, pants. Deryn tossed them to Alejandro. "Here. Put those on. You're distracting me."

He slipped them on, all the while staring at her as if she were about to announce she was really a man. She shook her head and glanced down at herself. Not wanting to fight in her bra and panties, Deryn used her power to dress herself in the clothes she'd had on before passing out.

Alejandro gasped again.

She laughed. "Are you going to keep doing that?"

"I don't know. Are you going to keep surprising me?"

Giving him a sexy look, Deryn arched a brow. "If I live through this dream and you're still here, I'll do more than surprise you, Colonel."

She walked to the nearest tree and went to break a long leafless branch off. Alejandro was next to her in an instant, breaking it off at the base for her. He handed it to her, his eyes still wide. It was cute to see how he reacted in the dream. Too bad he wouldn't react the same way in real life. No. She was a slayer and they weren't trusted by shifters.

"Thanks," she said, leaning over and kissing his lips. "I could get used to this."

"Used to what?"

Planting another kiss on his full lips, Deryn reluctantly drew back from him. "You, Colonel. I could get used to having you around."

"What about Kane?"

"What about him?" she asked, unsure where the line of questioning was going. "If you dare suggest a threesome I'll take this branch and hit you upside the head."

"A threesome?" His gaze narrowed. "No, Deryn. If we do end up getting together ... in that way, I won't share. You'd be mine."

Spinning the impromptu staff, Deryn took a fighting stance. "I belong to no man."

A clapping noise came from the right, from somewhere deep in the jungle. Alejandro moved, putting his body between hers and the sound. Even her mind made men think she couldn't protect herself.

A dark shadow emerged from the tree line. For a minute it was nothing but a mass of blackness. The feel of evil pressing in on her was so sudden and painful that it took Deryn to her knees. She cried out and Alejandro turned to focus on her, not the threat in front of him.

"Deryn!"

The evil seemed to be searching her. For what, she wasn't sure. All she knew was that it was painful and that Alejandro was at risk from his concern for her. Gathering her magik, the power that came from being a direct descendant of the Avatars, Deryn threw the evil away from her. Her breathing was shallow as she fought to focus.

"Deryn," Alejandro said, rushing towards her.

Standing tall, Deryn shook her head and motioned for him to stop. He did. "I'm fine. Pissed but fine." She looked towards the tree line at the mass of blackness. "Did you find

what you were looking for? Did you learn all my secrets or just enough to try to win this round?"

The shadow separated into a dozen masses. Each one began to take shape. When Deryn saw the shape they'd decided to assume, her stomach clenched. "No."

There before her was the same band of vampires that attacked her all those years ago. The ring leader took his place in front of the group and leveled his penetrating gaze on her. "Miss me?"

"What the fuck?" Alejandro put his body in front of hers. "You're dead. I killed you with my bare hands."

She touched his shoulder. "It's not really them. It's whatever the hell that evil is masquerading at what it believes will hurt me most—what I'm most scared of."

Alejandro squared his broad shoulders and splayed his hands. Claws emerged from each fingertip. "I was just thinking about how much I wished I could revive you all and kill you again for harming her. Looks like I'll get my chance after all."

The head vampire laughed. "The shifter thinks he is a match for us."

"I killed you once."

Deryn slid her arms around Alejandro's waist and hugged him tightly, needing him to understand what was going on. "These aren't the same vampires, honey. This is the evil that was stalking you—us earlier. This is a test, or my mind's version of one, to see what we're about. To see how powerful we are."

The head vampire glanced at the rest of his group. "She is very intelligent for one raised among humans."

A dark haired, stocky vampire smiled. "Did you hear her refer to him using a term of endearment? He is her *taimar*. She is no *áricus*."

Deryn loosened her hold on Alejandro and moved to step around him. He thrust an arm out and kept her pinned behind him. "No."

Rolling her eyes, Deryn moved out of his grasp and glared at the vampires. "What does it matter to you if he is or is not my *taimar*? You aren't tomb guards so it shouldn't matter if I am or I'm not an *áricus*." It hit her then. "You're learning—testing how Alejandro and I interact with one another. What we're willing to do to assure the other's safety."

The dark haired one looked shocked. "Why is it that she does not fear us? You said she would fear us, *Falusco*. You said she...."

The head vampire, *Falusco*, put his hand up. "Silence."

He smiled as he raked his gaze over Deryn. "I believe her fear is that he," he pointed at Alejandro, "will know exactly what happened to her that night. That he will find out what she allowed to happen."

Rage tore through her. "I didn't allow anything to happen. I didn't know back then what I am."

"Do not lie, slayer. You wanted it to happen. The minute you looked up to find," he spun in a small circle, "this form standing over you, you wanted to be...."

"Shut up!" Deryn's stomach turned at the sound of his lies. She put the back of her hand to her mouth and did her best to breathe slowly, hoping the nausea would pass.

"That's sick, you bastard," Alejandro bit out. "You're twisting things to suit your purpose but it won't work."

"Won't it?" the vampire asked, arching a brow and smiling wickedly. "Tell me why you believe we will not succeed."

"Because I already know all the horrific things they did to her. They had big mouths and liked to brag. It's what got them killed the first time, asshole. She has nothing to be ashamed of. She was a victim. Plain and simple. Now attack or go away. You're beginning to bore me with your parlor tricks."

The vampires glanced around amongst themselves and apparently decided they weren't willing to risk testing Alejandro just yet because they dissipated, taking their stench of evil with them.

Alejandro stood, his claws still out, watching the darkness. "Are they gone?"

"Yes." She dropped to her knees and covered her face with her hands. "Wake up, Deryn. Wake up. You can't do this to yourself again. You can't go back to that dark place. Wake up and forget about seeing them again. Just wake up. Get up, find Alejandro and make sure he's really okay and then pretend this never occurred."

"Deryn." Alejandro moved down next to her and wrapped his arms around her. "It's all right now. I won't let them hurt you again."

"I want to wake up now. I can't deal with them if they come back. It took everything I had not to vomit when he said...."

"Shh," Alejandro kissed the top of her head, "its okay. I'm here. As luck would have it, I can make this what you need it to be, *amorzão*. I can make it be just a dream."

His power coated her, comforting her. She clung to him as she cried, not wanting to let go but knowing that she had to wake up. Darkness surrounded her and she welcomed it.

"Sleep, *amorzão*, sleep."

* * * *

Deryn kicked awake with a start and found herself lying on the cot in the infirmary. For a second, she wasn't sure what was going on but when she realized that she must have dreamt about waking up before, she let out a soft, shaky laugh.

The need to be near Alejandro was so great that she didn't bother laying back down to try to rest. Instead, she gathered her pillow and blanket and tiptoed across the room to where she knew he'd be.

He was there, on the floor, a foot away from an empty cot and fast asleep. She smiled as relief washed through her. "It was just a dream."

Unable to resist the urge to be close to him, Deryn lay down on the empty cot next to him and covered herself with her blanket. She let her arm hang over the edge and her hand skim Alejandro. It was comforting to touch him.

Warriors of the Darkness
by Mandy M. Roth

Closing her eyes, Deryn silently cried herself back to sleep, hoping beyond hopes that the dreams would stay away.

Chapter Five

Alejandro leaned against the edge of the temple and watched Deryn as she and Kane worked side by side in the shade. It had been Kane's idea to set up shop there and Deryn had been resistant. When Alejandro threatened to have her escorted back to base to spend the day in her tent, she stopped arguing and also stopped talking to him not that she'd said much to him all morning.

He could still feel her in his arms. His cock ached to be allowed to enter her again. Its stay within her heated core had been brief but enough for him to know she was a woman he would go to his grave wishing he'd spent just one night with. He was still impressed with himself for resisting her advances for as long as he did. The fact that she thought what had transpired between them was just a dream only made it harder. He could have and most likely would have had sex with her and then allowed her to believe it had been only a dream.

The appearance of the enemy that could assume the form of something she feared had been his only saving grace. It was sad evil had to be what kept him from doing something wrong. It wasn't as if he didn't have enough guilt from having been there when she was under the influence of Vonni's spell, listening to her memories. Memories she'd specifically asked Issac to keep from him. Issac had tried to tell her that he was sitting there holding her but Deryn fell asleep before he got it out.

He now had to carry off the secret of knowing intimate details of her life and that she was what Vonni accused her of being—a slayer. He shouldn't have been surprised. Alejandro had spent the remainder of the night watching Deryn sleep and trying to wrap his head around the fact she was someone that by rights, he should hate. Somehow, hating her was the furthest thing from his mind. All he wanted to do was storm over to her and finish what they'd started last night.

"You're wrong," Deryn said, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at Kane. It was rare anyone told Kane he was wrong when it came to what he was good at—archeology.

"Enlighten me then, Deryn. If it doesn't mean sacrifice then what does it mean?"

She lifted a piece of tracing paper that Ondrea had done rubbings on from the walls of the temple. The tracing paper had been Fulk's idea. That alone still shocked Alejandro. It wasn't as though Fulk was known for ingenious plans. It kept Deryn out of direct sunlight and allowed Alejandro to keep close guard on her. So far, it had been working out well.

Pointing at the lower section of it, she clucked her tongue. "I didn't say it didn't mean sacrifice. I'm saying it doesn't mean ritual in the way you think. You know, drag the virgin up and split her open on the altar kind of thing."

"That means blood, Deryn. You know that as well as I do."

She nodded. "Again, not arguing the point, boy genius," she said, her jaw clenched. Her spunk made Alejandro smile as she continued to give Kane a run for his money. "Would you stop thinking for a minute and just listen? I think it

means a sacrifice of another sort. A sexual one involving blood letting. Umm, I guess it would be the equivalent of the way a vampire or shifter would claim their mate."

"Deryn," Kane shook his head, "I don't see how that can be accurate. Why would they need someone to claim their mate? It doesn't make any sense."

"Not just anyone to claim their mate, Kane. The god this temple was built for."

Kane covered his face with his hands and groaned. "We can't decipher this in a timely fashion and if they attack before we understand how to control or destroy—"

Deryn reached out and smacked Kane in the back of the head, leaving Alejandro doing his best not to laugh. She narrowed her gaze on him. "Did it occur to you either side could be eavesdropping?"

"Umm," Kane shrugged as he rubbed the back of his head, "yeah. Okay, no, it didn't occur to me. I wasn't thinking. I've got a killer headache."

"Shift. It will go away then," she said as if having a man change shapes in her presence was no big deal. Deryn began searching around the table for something. "Hmm, I could have sworn I had my water with me."

Alejandro clenched his fist as Kane pulled his tee shirt over his head and handed it to Deryn. She took the shirt without even looking up from the rubbings she was studying.

Rotating his head, Kane audibly cracked his neck and then started undoing his boots. He kicked them off and then went to work on his pants. "Mine's under those papers. Help yourself."

Alejandro watched her carefully. Would she beg Kane to fuck her since he was the one naked and next to her now? The thought not only sickened him it left the beast within him threatening to surface.

She nodded and went to grab his canteen. Her eyes widened. "*Filhos* and *filhas de santo*? Am I translating this right? It's not Avatarian."

Fighting his own nature, Alejandro almost missed what she'd said. He shook his head and came to his senses. "Are you sure you're reading it right?"

She glanced up and locked gazes with him. It was the first time since she'd gotten up that she'd made eye contact with him. Her cheeks reddened and he knew she was thinking about what happened between them, in her 'dream.' The urge to go to her, take her to the jungle floor and sink into her silken depths was great. It took everything he had not to do just that very thing.

Deryn wiped her forehead and looked nervous. "Pretty sure. I'm damn sure it's not Avatarian. Do you know what it means?"

"Sons and daughters of the saints."

"Oh." She grinned. "Maybe they have big hopes for the relatives of these Avatars?"

Kane shifted forms, morphing quickly into a red dragon. In the blink of an eye, he was shifted back into his normal human form. He was also very naked. Being a shifter himself, Alejandro understood how it worked and he didn't have a problem with it. Seeing how Deryn didn't either set him on

edge. He hated the fact she was Kane's and not his. More than that, Alejandro hated the fact that he hated it.

She's making me crazy.

Deryn's brows drew together. "How do you figure?"

Kane pulled his pants up and fastened them. "What?"

"Not you." She pointed at Alejandro. "Him."

"He didn't say anything."

She wrinkled her nose. The action was so cute that Alejandro wanted to kiss her. He resisted. "I think something is messing with my head here. I could have sworn Alejandro said I was making him crazy."

I didn't say it out loud.

She drew in a sharp breath and shook her head. "I didn't do it on purpose. I swear. It sometimes happens with Kane but only rarely. I didn't mean to...."

"Deryn?" Kane asked, putting his boots back on. "What are you going on about? What sometimes happens with me?"

She cast an anxious look at Kane. "You know how every now and then I hear something you're thinking?"

"Yes. It's a side effect of us growing up so close together. You used to hear some of what Ondrea was thinking too but once the two of you went through puberty that stopped and ours grew stronger." He picked his tee shirt up and pulled it over his head. "Are you going to sit still long enough for me to explain mating among shifters or are you going to sound me out—again?"

"Mating?" she asked, her eyes trained on Alejandro. "How does me hearing what you're thinking at random times have anything to do with that? We aren't mates."

Kane uncapped his canteen and took a drink before handing it to Deryn. "I'm painfully aware of that fact. Don't remind me. My point was that it's common for a mated pair to be able to communicate telepathically."

"Oh, never mind then." She took a drink and winked. "Thanks."

"So, what brought up the questions about hearing what I'm thinking?" Kane asked, sliding up next to her while she mulled over more markings. He ran his hand over hers and laughed. "I can't believe that left a scar."

"It's tiny but I kind of like it. It reminds me of good times, Kane. I miss things being simple." She gave his hand a quick squeeze before glancing up at Alejandro.

Can you hear me? Alejandro pushed his thoughts out at her.

"No, I can't," she said, a little too fast and then sighed. *Way to go, Deryn. The very fact you answered proves you can. Pay attention. If his lips aren't moving, don't acknowledge he said anything.*

Alejandro stood there, stunned by the fact he'd just picked up on her thoughts, too. She ran her hand through her hair and looked as if she were doing her very best to maintain her composure. When she glanced at him again, he wagged his brows.

Boo.

She jerked. He let out a soft laugh.

"I vote for a nap." Kane yawned. "I didn't sleep worth a shit last night."

Deryn tipped her head and gave him an 'oh really' look. "Funny, you were snoring loud enough to wake the dead. Considering what we're currently reading about on these markings I'd suggest you tone that down from here on out."

Thoughts of following her after she mixed his blood with hers, plagued Alejandro. He'd known the second that Deryn's eyes had opened that she was awake but he laid perfectly still, allowing her to think he was asleep. When she'd first taken his knife he'd wondered if she'd attack him but when he heard her arguing with herself about not being able to hurt him, he knew better. He also gave in and cut himself to save her the agony of it.

Following her had been way harder than it should have been. Though, at the time he'd assumed she was just human. Knowing what he knew now, he understood why it was she was faster than a human. The only thing he didn't understand was how she was that way when she clearly hadn't even been tapping into her slayer powers while she was leading the evil that had hunted them on a wild goose chase.

"I do not snore." Kane grinned mischievously. "Not that loud anyway."

"Right, that's why I went to the opposite side of the room and tried to smother myself with pillows. Drowning you out had nothing to do with it. It was just another manifestation of my suicidal tendencies."

Laughing, Kane reached out and hugged Deryn. Every muscle in Alejandro's body tightened. He wanted to shout out, to tear them apart but he knew better. He'd heard Deryn and Issac talking while she was under the influence of Vonni's

spell. He knew that she'd dreamt of his death repeatedly before coming onboard with the project and he knew she was pregnant in those dreams.

They'll make cute babies. He snorted. *See, I knew she'd make a good mother.*

Disgusted with his own sick sense of humor, Alejandro cleared his throat. "I'm going to go check the outer perimeter. Keep your guard up."

Kane released Deryn and nodded. "Will do, Alex. Thanks."

He headed towards the outer edges of their site as quickly as he could. No part of him wanted to think about Deryn and the life she would have with Kane. He knew he should be happy for them. After all, he thought of Kane as a younger brother.

"Colonel?" Issac emerged from the dense jungle, looking around cautiously. "Are we alone?"

"Yes, why?"

"It's about last night, sir." Issac glanced over his shoulder. "About what I saw when I was sharing Dr. Murray's vision."

Alejandro wondered how long it would take Issac to approach him. He smiled. "I'm fine. I'm not planning on dying anytime soon so can we move on with this operation and get back to camp?"

"No, there's something else. Something you should know about Dr. Murray."

Sighing, Alejandro put his hand out. He already knew more than she wanted him to. "I think she'd prefer you call her Deryn."

Issac snorted. "Yeah, Mrs. Vargas might be more appropriate."

Mrs. Vargas?

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

Issac took a step towards Alejandro and lowered his voice. "I know you caught the fact that she is pregnant in those dreams and I triple checked her last night when we moved her back to her cot—she's not pregnant now. She's right. It's just in the dreams."

"Yes. How is this news earth shattering? If the dreams are prophetic she and Kane will probably conceive soon. If not, then maybe it was her mind's way of reasoning out what she was witnessing. With every death comes new life? I don't know and I don't want to discuss this any further."

"Do you like her?" Issac asked, locking gazes with him.

"Sure, she's swell. Do you have a point?"

"Colonel, umm, Alejandro," Issac paused as he drew in a long breath, "permission to speak frankly."

"Granted."

He nodded. "Great, stop being a dickhead and answer my question. Do you like her?"

Dickhead? Alejandro arched a brow, daring Issac to say it again. He didn't. Smart man. Giving in for the sake of curiosity, Alejandro shrugged. "Yes, I more than like her but that doesn't really matter. Does it?"

"What if I told you that it did matter?"

Never one for beating around the bush, Alejandro rubbed his chin. "If you have a point, make it."

"The baby was yours, sir."

Suddenly, it felt as though someone had hit him in the chest with a two by four. He fought for air and to make sense of what he'd just heard. "What?"

"When I touched Deryn's abdomen last night, during it all, I not only sensed her being pregnant but I sensed that it was your baby she was carrying." He swallowed hard. "I also sensed your mark on her, Colonel. In her dreams she's your wife and the mother of your child. She isn't aware of that. I know because I shared her thoughts. She has no clue that baby is yours or that she's your wife. I wouldn't have believed it myself if I wouldn't have sensed it with my magik."

A sharp gasp caught Alejandro's attention. He spun around to find Ondrea standing there, her eyes wide and her mouth open. "What in the hell do you mean the baby is his?"

Issac motioned with his hand for Ondrea to lower her voice. She just glared at him. "I hope the two of you don't think that Deryn invented this all—pulled it out of thin air. She's not a liar. She's an amazing woman."

"No," Issac said. "I'm positive that she didn't make it up. I saw and felt what she did. It was real to her. Not imagined and like I said, she has no clue she's been claimed or that it's the colonel's child. She firmly believes it's her mind's way of telling her that she might be able to save him, give him life by being here. Trust me when I say that the baby was his and she was his wife."

Ondrea shook her head as a sob tore free from her. "Oh gods, if what you're saying is true then every time Deryn has dreamed of Alejandro dying she's..." She stopped and blinked back tears.

Issac nodded. "I couldn't understand her connection to him in the dream. She is smart enough to know she's dreaming when it's going on but she still mourns for the colonel like a wife would mourn her husband."

"This doesn't make any sense. She thought his name was Marido until she got here." Ondrea gave him a curious look. "How could she make that big of a mistake? Since she was wrong about his name then she might be wrong about him dying, the baby, the being mated to him. All of it."

Alejandro exhaled deeply. "*Marido* is Portuguese for husband."

Ondrea's eyes widened as she wrung her hands. "Shit, this is big. You," she pointed at Alejandro, "do not even think of dying right now. I want to be an aunt."

He couldn't help but laugh. "It wasn't on my 'to do' list. But getting married and having a family isn't either so we can disregard the entire thing. Okay?"

"But, sir," Issac said, reaching out for him.

Taking a step back, Alejandro shook his head. "No. You heard me. Disregard it all. It isn't happening. It was just a dream. Nothing more. She's just a doctor here to do a job. She means nothing to me."

Liar.

Ondrea snorted. "Right, so you growl and lay claim to all the ladies who show up here? Then you spend a night forsaking sleep to sit and stare at them all too, huh? Yeah, I saw that. I just chose to give you your privacy."

Issac headed towards Ondrea. Glancing over his shoulder, he winked. "You can lie to yourself all you want, Colonel, but

please don't bother lying to us. You know in your heart who Deryn is to you. It looks as though on some level, she knows, too. She just won't acknowledge it. Will you?"

"Come back here you mangy excuse for a monkey!"

They all turned to watch *Che* rushing towards them with a canteen in tow, followed closely by Fulk. "Stop that monkey!"

Bending down, Ondrea scooped *Che* up with ease and cradled him to her chest. "Oh, that's a good boy. Now, tell me what the big scary Neanderthal chasing you did."

Deryn and Kane broke through the foliage, both laughing so hard they were gasping for breath. Fulk gave them a droll look. "Yeah, very funny."

Kane snorted. "It was fucking hilarious. That monkey managed to knock you on your ass and steal your water."

"We'll see who is laughing when I stuff that thing and send it home with you as a souvenir."

Deryn gasped. "You will not touch one hair on *Che's* little body!"

"Bookworm, I'm not going to argue over a monkey with you. I'm just going to kill it." Fulk drew his sidearm. "Dr. Harris, if you'd be so kind as to toss that thing on the ground I'd be forever in your debt."

"Rodriguez," Alejandro said in a warning tone. He knew Fulk well. He had a hot temper but wasn't one who would kill something just because. Once he calmed down he would be fine.

"Sorry, sir but the monkey has to go. It's been carrying on like it's on something all morning and I'm frankly sick of it."

Alejandro stiffened. "Carrying on how?"

Putting his hands in the air, Fulk mimicked *Che's* motions. Alejandro did his best not to laugh at how ridiculous his friend looked. Fulk glared at the monkey. "See, annoying, isn't it?" He bent down and seized hold of his canteen.

Deryn was on him in an instant. She knocked his gun from his hand and held it on him. Fulk began to laugh. "You caught me off guard, Bookworm. Nice job. Now, give me the weapon before you hurt yourself."

"You are never to threaten *Che* again. Understood?"

Fulk narrowed his gaze. "It's a monkey and...?"

She leveled the gun directly at Fulk. Alejandro took a step forward. "Deryn, don't."

Che began to shriek and Deryn nodded, keeping the gun trained on Fulk. "Put the canteen down now!"

"Take it easy, Bookworm. I'm sorry that I snapped at your pet. I won't do it again." Fulk went to take a sip from his canteen and Deryn fired a warning shot off so close to Fulk that Alejandro wasn't sure if she'd missed on purpose or not. Apparently, Fulk wasn't too sure either because he nodded and dropped the canteen.

In a flash, Kane was on it. Unscrewing the cap, he poured it out and onto a leaf. The leaf began to sizzle and then disintegrate before their very eyes. "*Che* was right, Deryn. It was poisoned. That would have eaten through Rodriguez's esophagus and killed him in a matter of seconds."

Deryn handed Fulk's weapon back to him butt first. "Here, sorry. I would have only shot you in the leg if you'd have tried to drink it."

Issac laughed and Ondrea followed suit. Fulk took his weapon and pulled Deryn into his arms. He gave her a bear hug and lifted her off her feet. "You're all right, Bookworm."

"Okay, put me down, I'm not that great."

"What do you mean? You saved my life," Fulk shrugged, "by threatening to take it but still."

Deryn glanced at Alejandro. "That's my canteen. I left it near Fulk's when we first got here. I didn't know that was in it. I swear to you."

Instantly, Alejandro saw red. He gripped his M-16 and stormed towards Deryn. Kane stood quickly and stepped in his path. Ondrea moved and intercepted him, leaving Alejandro a straight path to Deryn. The second he was close enough to touch her, he cupped her cheeks and fought the urge to kiss her. "You are not to eat or drink anything until I've personally tested it. Understood?"

"Christ, Alex, I thought you were going to hurt her," Kane said, dusting himself off.

"I will never hurt her and I won't let anyone else either," he said, still fighting the urge to kiss her. "Who had access to our supplies before we left?"

Issac shrugged. "Most of the base did. It's not like we've ever had anything remotely close to this happen before."

Ondrea put her hand up. "Umm, not to speak out of turn but I'm going to voice what we'll all be asking ourselves later but did Vonni have a way of getting to Deryn's things?"

"She was in the stockade all night," Issac said, shaking his head. "And I personally bound her powers to keep her from pulling another stunt like she did last night."

"Hey," Ondrea kept her hand up, "I had to ask. The woman has it out for Deryn."

Alejandro didn't want to think anyone would try to harm Deryn but the evidence spoke for itself. "Rodriquez, Issac, check Deryn's lunch and her belongings for foul play."

"Yes, sir," Issac said, heading back towards the jeeps.

Fulk winked at Deryn. "I mean it, Bookworm, you're all right."

"You need to thank *Che*. He's the one who saved your life by stealing the canteen from you to begin with. He sensed something was wrong and didn't want any of us to be hurt."

Groaning, Fulk glanced around. "Where the hell did the thing go?"

"He took off," Ondrea said, motioning in the opposite direction. "You can thank him next time he shows up." She made tiny kiss noises. "He's earned some monkey lovin' don't you think?"

Fulk followed in Issac's footsteps and Kane moved in towards Deryn. "I know you aren't going to want to hear this, Deryn, but it's not safe for you here."

"I can't leave. They'll shut this project down if they think their fail safe is lost."

"At this point I think it would best if they did shut the portal. Whatever is here is big. We can't let it get to Earth. And I won't let it hurt you," Kane said.

"Neither will I." Alejandro refused to remove his hand from her cheek.

"Colonel!" Issac and Fulk came rushing back towards the group. They were both pale and Fulk looked as though he

might throw up. Panting, Issac leaned forward. "Private Jones' head is in one of Dr. Murray's ... err ... Deryn's bags."

"She didn't do it! She was with us all night and hasn't been out of our line of sight since she got here," Kane said, moving to block Deryn.

"No one said she did, Soto." Alejandro soaked in the news of one of his men being dead as best he could. "Rodriguez, radio back to base. I want groups of two patrolling the perimeter of camp at all times. We institute the buddy system starting now."

"What about his family, sir?" Issac asked, looking a bit green. "Should we notify them?"

"Negative. If Deryn and Kane are correct, and the government is itching for a reason to close the link between us and home, then we aren't going to hand them any ammunition. We'll cremate Jones and once this is settled I'll personally visit his mother."

Kane drew in a sharp breath. "Deryn, they're following the steps to resurrect the Avatars. Sacrifice, tainted water...."

She shook her head. "No. They're not acting like they want to resurrect anything. They're acting like they want to assure the Avatars are kept out of this. Jones was their way of making a point. I put him and everyone on this base under my protection. The attack on him is a direct challenge to me. It was my water they tampered with. It's all a way for them to prove how powerful they are and that they aren't afraid of me."

"Bookworm, you need to get your ass back to Earth. This is no place for you." Fulk put a hand on a tree and used it to steady himself.

Deryn glanced at Alejandro and he instantly pictured her belly swollen with their child. The image was so vivid that he had to look away or risk commenting. Deryn brushed past him and moved to a clear area. "Issac, are you powerful enough to do a binding spell on the dead?"

"Yes. Why?"

Kane jerked back. "Oh shit, you don't think they'd try to use him against us, do you?"

"Use who?" Alejandro asked.

"Jones."

Fulk paled. "The only part that we have is a head. I hardly think that can be used to do anything with."

"Someone has his body and that part can be used." Deryn reached out for Issac. "Is that his blood on your hands?"

Issac nodded.

"Fulk, I need your assistance please." She motioned for him to come close to her. He did. She put her hand out palm up. "Use one of your claws and cut me."

Alejandro growled. "You will not touch her."

"Relax," Fulk said. "I wasn't going to do it, Colonel."

"*Che!*" Deryn called out. The monkey-like thing came charging out and raced up Fulk's leg. It bit him in the forearm and Fulk's claws shot out of his fingertips. Alejandro went at Deryn, knowing what she was about to do but was too late to prevent it. She had her palm raked over Fulk's claws in a fraction of a second.

Pulling her into his arms, Alejandro shook her. "What the hell were you thinking? Let me see how bad it is."

Ignoring him, Deryn held her hand out and let her blood drip onto the ground. "Issac, you know what to do."

"Yes," he said, dropping to his knees and placing his bloodied hand on the spot where Deryn's blood now lay. He began to chant in ancient Fae and closed his eyes. Wind whipped past them and Alejandro drew Deryn into his arms protectively.

She put her cheek against his chest and let him hold her as the wind continued to pick up. For a moment, Alejandro thought it might actually blow someone over but it stopped as quickly as it started.

Issac glanced up and nodded. "It's done. Want to tell me why you insisted on it and why you were sure to include Rodriguez and me in the spell?"

"Spirit tomb guards are dead. I think that whatever else is out there is dead too. Anyway, the guards are at their most powerful when it comes to death and all that surround it. The two of you are the ones who found Jones. That means you were directly exposed to a death they most likely caused. That makes you prime targets for them to come after you and for you to be susceptible to them. I just wanted to make sure to sweep their legs out from under them before they could do it to us."

She glanced back at Kane. "As for the rest of you, each of you are prime pickings. They are aware by now of the fact that we seem to be a team. A collective unit. They'll assume you're all my head guards—all except the colonel."

Ondrea gasped. "They'll stick with the assumption that he's your husband and therefore they'll do their best to get to him first."

"Right. If they can't get me, they'll get those that are closest to me." Her blue gaze fell on him. "I'm sorry. I don't know why they ever even thought you were my husband to begin with."

Ondrea cleared her throat. "Yeah, gee, I wonder."

Kane glanced at Alejandro. "It doesn't really matter. If Deryn wouldn't have been here they'd have come after Alex right off the bat. They want who they perceive to be the leader and they'll stop at nothing to get him or her. What we need to figure out is why and how to stop it."

Chapter Six

"What do you make of it all?" Ondrea asked, pushing her tray of food forward. It was virtually untouched as was Deryn's.

Deryn glanced around at the commissary, in an attempt to stay vigilant. "It doesn't add up. From everything we've ever learned about Avatars they weren't ones to be afraid of anything or anyone and I get the sense that whoever is doing this is scared that we'll actually win."

"Yeah, putting a head in a bag screams 'we're scared of you,' Deryn." Ondrea glanced down at *Che* who was munching away on all that they weren't eating. "Want to tell me more about them?"

"Who, the *Checatas*?"

She nodded. "It seems to have taken to you."

"Yeah," she scratched behind *Che's* ear and smiled, "I guess he has. His secrets aren't mine to tell but I can say that they're on our side, Onnie."

"You want me to put my life in the hands of little monkey things?" she asked, arching a brow.

Deryn shook her head. "No. I want you to put your life in my hands."

"Oh, well that I do all the time." Ondrea stretched her arms above her head and yawned. "I'm exhausted. We had a long night last night and it seems like an even longer day. I want a shower and some sleep."

"The shower sounds like a good idea. I don't think I could sleep right now." She lifted her tray and stood. "What do you say we hit the showers and then I'll hang out in your tent and watch over you so you can get some sleep?"

"I'd say you're the greatest friend ever."

Two guards fell in line behind them as they dumped their trays and headed out of the commissary. Deryn noted what each was packing and stayed alert to their position. So far, they'd done nothing more than observe from a safe distance. It was getting too dark to make out their features from afar. The last thing she wanted to do was start accusing Alejandro's soldiers of foul play but Deryn had lived too long and seen too much to think for an instant that they wouldn't turn on her once word of her being a slayer spread.

Issac had assured her that Vonni was still in custody and would remain so until Alejandro said otherwise but she still had access to the guards. They in turn, had access to the rest of the base. All she had to do was convince one to help her and she was well on her way to having a cause.

They continued to walk and the two men stayed on their tails. As Ondrea pulled the flap back for the ladies restroom, Deryn cleared her throat. Ondrea nodded. "Yep, I sense them."

"Good to know we're on the same wavelength."

Ondrea giggled.

"After you," Deryn said, holding the flap back for her friend. They entered the tent and Deryn went immediately to the shower stalls. She turned the water on full blast, not caring in the least that she was fully clothed. Icy cold water

covered her but she paid no mind to it. Instead, she focused on Ondrea. "Are you picking anything up off them?"

"No. You'd think I'd sense something. But they are not emitting anything. That makes me leery." Reaching behind her, she pulled a long bowie knife in a sheath out and handed it to Deryn. "Here, I know you don't think it's a good idea for you to be armed but right now it would be for the best."

"No, hang on to it."

"But, Deryn...."

She lifted the back of the tent and pointed to it. "Find Kane."

"I'm not leaving you...."

Putting her fingers to her lips, Deryn gave the indication for silence. She took her wet boots off and quickly followed suit with her pants. Ondrea gave her a questioning look. Winking, Deryn stepped into the stall and closed the door. The 'ah-ha' that followed told her that Ondrea understood what she was doing—making it look as though she was indeed showering and not ready and willing to kick some ass. She listened as Ondrea slipped away.

The feel of evil pressed in around her and she sighed. Being right about this wasn't something Deryn wanted. No. She wanted to find out it was all a misunderstanding and that she was just overreacting. That didn't seem to be the case.

The heavy feel of evil continued to push in on her and she stilled, doing her best to draw upon her natural born gifts without unmasking herself. Every shifter and vampire on the base would sense a slayer's presence among them if she did

that. The last thing she wanted was to take on the entire base.

Without drawing on her full slayer power, Deryn couldn't tell exactly what she was up against but she did know it was closing in on her fast. The sound of screeches and small animal hysteria made her chest tight. She'd assumed the threat was of a human nature. Hearing the *Checatas* calling out a warning told her otherwise. It was whatever evil stalked the Avatars.

"No one will know if we just sneak a peek," a hushed voice said, just outside the entrance to the tent.

Deryn silently thanked the gods for her sensitive hearing and smiled. The men were harmless. Whatever was coming for her wasn't. She waited until she sensed them—one in each of the stalls next to her. Glancing up, Deryn surveyed her options, shrugged and did what she did best. She launched into action. Hopping over the left side of the stall, she was on the solider before he could even blink.

Punching out, she caught him in the face and knocked him out with one hit. She grabbed his handgun and tucked it into the back of her wet panties. It wasn't an ideal hold but it would have to do. She began to hum as if she was singing in the shower and repeated her steps. This time going to the right. The second solider was none the wiser and went down just as easily as the first.

She opened the stall door only to be knocked backwards. The blow to the stomach stole the very breath from her lungs as Deryn landed on the solider she'd rendered unconscious.

Drawing his weapon, she fired off two shots and whatever was there let out a horrific scream.

Rolling to her feet, Deryn tried to find the enemy. It found her first, striking out and catching her in the cheek. Her head snapped back and she fought to keep her balance. The coppery taste of blood filled her mouth. She took a defensive stance and listened close for any sign as to what or where the enemy was.

A dark shadow moved off to her right. Deryn had a half a second warning before something slashed out. Bending backwards quickly, she just missed losing her head. It did manage to catch her upper arm, slicing it wide open. The sound of breaking wood sounded next to her and she realized that whatever had attacked her had hit one of the stalls.

The second she spotted blood on a piece of broken wood, she smiled. If it bled, it could die. At least she hoped that was true. Deryn clutched a piece of wood and watched for signs of the shadow again. She needed to lure whatever was after her away from the camp so she could stop masking her power and handle the problem at hand. "Come on you cowardly bastard. Come get me!"

Deryn dove to the ground and shimmied under the tent. There was a loud ripping followed closely by the overwhelming feel of evil behind her.

"Deryn!" Kane called out. "Get down!"

Turning, she spotted him running full force at her with Alejandro next to him. Both drew weapons and aimed at something above her. Suddenly, the evil thing seized hold of her hair and lifted her clean off the ground. She thrust the

make-shift stake she had upwards. It lurched backwards, taking her with it as it let out an ear piercing scream.

She considered letting her power out but held back. Instead, she thrashed out, doing her best to kick it without looking like she was a pro. No one could know she was a slayer. The thing holding her flipped her over. When she saw its face and realized that it was a face that haunted her dreams, one of her vampire attackers, she screamed.

The events of that night came flooding back to her. The way they'd beaten her, bitten her, did things to her that she never wanted repeated again. Laughter erupted from it, causing her to scream again. Its voice was identical to one of the vampires who attacked her.

It hissed as blood dripped from its neck. The broken piece of wood, or stake, was stuck in halfway. Gun shots ran out around her. At first, Deryn assumed they had gone with a 'kill anything that moves' stance but when she felt the presence of something else evil near her she knew they were firing at a second enemy. The thing holding her slashed out and caught her shirt, ripping it from her body with ease, leaving her in only a bra and panties.

They began to whisper in the ancient Avatarian dialect. The minute her mind registered what she was hearing, she gasped and screamed out. "Like fucking hell!"

More shots rang out. "What did they just say?" Alejandro asked.

"They said she'd make a fine mistress for their master," Kane said, sounding as disgusted by it as Deryn was. "And

that they would enjoy taking her as much as the men whose faces they now wear once did."

The force of what felt like a freight train slammed into her, knocking her free of the enemy's grasp. It wrapped its body around hers and cradled it protectively as they hit the ground. As strong arms slipped around her and the varying scents of the jungle filled her head, Deryn exhaled. "Alejandro?"

"I've got you, *amorzão*. You're safe," he whispered, his voice sounding like music to her ears. "Look, they're going. It's okay. I've got you."

Kane appeared next to her. "Stop calling her that. She's not yours, Alex. I told you that if you wanted something to fuck that you needed to look elsewhere. Deryn deserves better than a man who has never had a steady girlfriend in his life."

Deryn shook her head and did her best to calm down. "I-I dreamt of them coming for me last night. I ... I ... can't go through that again. I can't...."

Alejandro kissed her forehead. "Sleep."

"But I'm not..." The last thing Deryn felt before she surrendered to a dream-like state was a warm, fuzzy, comforting feeling and magik enveloping her.

Chapter Seven

Something nudged Deryn's leg, pulling her from a deep sleep. Looking down, she found *Che* there and gasped. The minute he looked up at her she sensed what he'd come to warn her about—Alejandro was in danger.

Deryn didn't bother getting dressed. She took off running out of her tent and down the narrow path, searching for Kane's, doing her best to concentrate on counting the tents as she went. She stopped outside one. "Three or is that four? Please don't tell me that I still can't remember how to count."

"Kane?" she asked in a hoarse whisper. "Kane, please. I need your help."

He didn't answer.

She felt it then, something was coming.

"Kane, please, they're coming for Alejandro. I know you're upset with him for something but you don't want him dead. He's your friend. Please help me keep him safe. Watch over him while I lead whatever is coming away. Please."

No answer.

Deryn's temper soared. "Fine," she unzipped the tent and entered, "you want to be this way that's fine by me." The area was too dark to make out much more than a silhouette on the bed but she didn't care. He was sitting up and rubbing the back of his neck.

Marching straight up to him, she took a stance. "You stubborn son-of-a-bitch. I can't believe you'd let one of your

closest friends be hurt because you have this insane need to I don't even know what—annoy the hell out of me."

He placed his hand on her hips and fire shot through her lower body. Gasping, Deryn tried to back away. "Kane? What's going on?"

He splayed his hands over her skin and pulled her down towards him.

"Kane, did you hear me? They're coming for Alejandro. If you don't want to help me then point in the direction of where he is. I'll go to him. But if I fight here the other soldiers will sense me." She tightened, not wanting to remember the last time she'd found herself surrounded by nothing but supernaturals. "I think you're wrong. I think you and Onnie are the only ones who can see the truth about me. They'll think I'm a monster. They'll hate me. Vonni hates me because she knows the truth. The others will side with her. I know it."

"Shhh," he whispered, sliding his hands up and under her tank top.

Deryn pushed his hand down. "Why did you leave my tent? I woke before and you told me that you wouldn't leave. That you'd stay so I could sleep. Thanks for that," she said, sarcastically. "You bitched at me when I asked why Alejandro wasn't there and told me that you'd been the one with me since we were little, not him—yet you jet the minute I fall back asleep. Thanks for that."

He skimmed his hands up her sides and brushed the underside of her breasts. "What the fuck has gotten into you? And why the hell am I liking it?"

A manly chuckle came from him as he tweaked her nipples with his fingertips. Drawing in a sharp breath, Deryn did her best to calm the fire that now burned within her. She backed away fast, tears filling her eyes. "Kane, why are you acting like this? Why are you refusing to help me? Alejandro is your friend."

Che began making noise outside of the tent and Deryn dropped down to her knees, searching the floor with her hands for signs of Kane's weapon chest. "Damn it, Kane. Where the hell are your weapons? I have to prove I'm an *Áricus* or Alejandro is a dead man. I watched him die in my dreams over and over again before I was asked to come here. I won't let it happen in real life."

She stilled, waiting for him to say something snide. He didn't so she continued, "I didn't know how to tell you that I was dreaming about one of the men on your team. You get so upset whenever the subject of other men comes up and I didn't want you to tell me I couldn't come here. Don't be mad at me, please. I didn't mean to keep it from you. I just didn't know how you'd take the news."

"For months I thought I was going crazy, inventing him in my mind, until I got a call from a woman claiming to be Alejandro's mother. She begged me to come to this realm and watch over him. She said that she'd lost one son already and couldn't bear the idea of losing anymore."

Deryn wrung her hands and paced around the tent. "How did she know how to find me? And why did she tell me his name was Marido? She told me that my *Marido* was in danger and that I was the only one who could help him. I know I

have the right guy because I highly doubt there can be two men that unbelievably perfect in the world. Well, there was someone who looked a lot like Alejandro holding his mother while she cried over the news of his death in one of my dreams but it wasn't him—maybe another brother or something. I don't know. They have great genes."

She shook her head and focused. Now wasn't the time to think about how much she wanted Alejandro carnally. No. Now she had to keep him safe. "What I do know is that I can't let anything happen to him. Do you understand?"

He just sat there, not saying a word.

She took a deep breath. "Kane, I will continue to stay in full sun, to walk among men and women who have every right to hate me for what my ancestors have done to theirs if it means Alejandro makes it home to his mother. She just wants him back in one piece. Oh, and something about lots of grandbabies but she talks really fast when she's worked up. Don't laugh at me but like several times I could have sworn she said that we had to give her at least five. *We?* I heard that wrong, right? Because I can't ... well ... never mind. Anyways, his mother also tends to blend languages when she's upset. I don't speak Portuguese so I miss most of what she says when she's excited. But for her to contact me and know who I am isn't something I'm willing to blow off. Say you'll help me. Please."

Again, he remained silent.

Deryn sighed. "Kane, his mother knew that I was not only born a slayer but a descendent of the Avatars, an original slayer. She knew that I have the blood of beast master in me

too and that's why I can communicate with animals the way I do."

It was his turn to draw in a sharp breath.

"She also knew all about the vampire attack on me all those years ago. The one that happened the night of the prom." She hated bringing that up and knew Kane wouldn't want to hear about it but he needed to.

"How could she know about that? Only Onnie, you and I know what happened. Well, now Issac does too but he doesn't count. But she knew. Alejandro's mother knew." Deryn sniffled and wiped her cheeks as a stream of tears started. "She knew things that only I know. How hurt I was by your words and how much I wanted to stay with the man I ran into outside of the bar but..." She stopped and covered her mouth.

"Ohmygods, Issac helped me understand who that was. It was Alejandro—her son. It makes sense now. We're all linked somehow. I don't understand it but she does. She knew that I wasn't aware of who or what I am back then. And that I'd never seen a vampire before that day. She knew I was too scared, too terrified to even scream when they attacked me." She sobbed uncontrollably. "That I shut off at some point, unable to deal with what was going on and that when I blinked again—it was you, Kane, that was next to me, covering me, trying to keep the sun from burning me anymore while doing your best to find a spot on my body that wasn't injured."

He caressed her tenderly. "Shh."

The feel of danger increased as did the need to see to Alejandro's safety.

"Kane, his mother knew what the vampires did to me." Putting her head down, she took a deep breath. "She knew details about what they did to me that I have never and will never tell you. Secrets I'll take to my grave. His mother also knew how they tried to turn me into one of their own kind so they could keep doing the horrific things they'd started."

Deryn lost her battle to maintain any sort of composure. "Kane, she said that Alejandro killed almost all of them. And that she could prove it. That all I had to do was ask him to see the locket that he keeps with him, the one he took from a group of vampires he killed fifteen years ago—the locket has a picture of me with my mother and grandmother when I was just little in it. She said that he kept it in there to remind him of me—she said he knew me somehow."

She covered her mouth and stifled a random cry. "Do you really want to let something happen to the man who kept them from coming back and finishing what they started with me?"

Kane didn't respond.

"Please believe me, Kane. Onnie was there one of the days that Cecilia, Alejandro's mother, called me. She heard us talking. She knows that I was asked to watch over him. I also described what the man looked like in my dream to Onnie. When we got here she took one look at Alejandro and came rushing to find me." She was desperate for him to believe her. "How do you think I knew about Samurai Soto?"

Cupping his cheek, Deryn let out a soft laugh. "Cecilia told me. She also said that he hates it when you call him Alex-V because it reminds him of the brother he lost—who you now fill in that spot in his heart, Kane. He thinks of you as family. Don't let anything happen to him. Please I can't protect him against all of them while I'm fighting off shifters stationed here too."

Che went nuts outside of the tent. "I have to find Alejandro!"

She tossed her arms around his neck and squeezed tight. As Deryn went to press her lips to his cheek, he turned his head, causing their lips to brush. Before she knew, he had his tongue in her mouth and she liked it way more than she should. He tasted so rich, so pure that she wasn't sure she'd get her fill before she had to go. This wasn't right. Pushing on his chest, Deryn shook her head. "Kane?"

"No," he said, capturing her mouth with his again. This time with more aggression. Deryn went to move away but found his arms wrapping around her, pulling her back into him.

As her raised nipples grazed his bare chest, Deryn hissed. The sensation was too much. Her inner thighs quivered a second before her pussy began to moisten. Fighting what seemed so natural, Deryn pressed her fingers between their mouths, breaking the kiss.

Her breathing was ragged at best. "This ... isn't right. I, we, this isn't us. We agreed that things could never be sexual between us, Kane. We both agreed that it could and would cost us our friendship in the end and that it wasn't worth it.

You know all of this already so snap out of whatever this is and help me."

Che raced into the tent and up Deryn's body. She had him in her arms before she knew it. He carried on, screeching and clawing, unintentionally.

"Ouch, settle down, you're hurting me, *Che*. I know the tomb guards are coming."

As her mind read his, she shook her head. "No!" She touched Kane's chest. "Kane, they have Fulk and several others. Ohmygod, what if they have Alejandro?"

She didn't wait for an answer. Instead, Deryn ran full force out of the tent, carrying *Che* as she went. As she hit the end of the row of tents, she found the open clearing that doubled as the camp courtyard.

At least thirty tomb guards stood around the circle staring at their captives who were on there knees. All except Fulk. No, he was chained and spread eagle between two large posts. It was obvious that he'd put up a hell of a fight and taken an even bigger beating.

"They look human."

Turning, Deryn found herself staring into emerald green eyes. "Alejandro? You're okay?" She tried to hide her excitement but failed.

"And you're in your undies and a tank top."

"Umm, I couldn't sleep and, uhh, oh forget it. Do you want to die tonight or live to see another day?"

"Interesting question." He motioned towards the guards. "If they have their way I think we'll all be having issues. I'd normally say that these guys don't look the least bit

intimidating but considering they have Fulk, a one man incredible hulk, chained tells me they're good."

All of the guards wore loincloths, gold bands around their arms and held various types of sword-like weapons. Several had whips, while others had chains. It was a nightmare.

One of the guards with a whip struck out at Fulk, catching his face and tearing it wide open. Deryn went to charge in, only to find Alejandro's pinning her in place. "I have to help him. They'll kill him."

"Tell me what I can do to help," he said, quietly.

"You're not going to make fun of me for being a bookworm and tell me to get behind you?" Deryn was too stunned come up with anything beyond that. Her gaze slid over his caramel-colored steely chest. Each muscle was so well-defined that the urge to touch him, to just feel his skin against hers was great. He was exactly how he was in her dreams. A small bit of black curls started below his navel and disappeared beneath the tops of his camouflage pants.

"Dr. Murray, how can I help you?"

She kept her gaze trained on his lower half. Licking her lower lip, a low whimper tore free from her. "You can promise to wear a shirt while you're around me and to stop looking at me like that."

Alejandro pushed down slightly on the tops of his pants, exposing a dark thatch of hair. Deryn's entire body lit with need. Closing her eyes, she swallowed hard. "That's not helping."

"When we touch, do you feel some sort of energy pass between us?" he asked, keeping his pants pressed low.

Denying it would have been so easy. Deryn didn't. "Yes, but I think it's this place."

"Why?"

"Because I felt it when Kane touched me tonight—just a minute or so ago. I've never felt that with him before but I felt it here. It must be the place."

A sly smile spread over Alejandro's lips. "Yeah, must be."

"Tell me why this is more important than Fulk and the others."

Alejandro took a deep breath. "Can the tomb guards sense someone's mate? Even if they aren't officially mated yet?"

"I don't know. Can you sense them?" she asked, doing her best to keep her gaze on his face, not his torso.

Alejandro nodded. "If the bond they share is strong enough, then yes. I can. Why?"

"Because the Avatars molded man in their image. That goes for the tomb guards as well. According to what I've been told, the guards are various forms of shifters. Some are even vampire-like. It stands to reason that a powerful shifter from our realm, our plane, would possess skills closely related to them. One with a blend of magik in them would be even closer to what they are."

"Don't walk out there, Doctor. Kane is coming. Wait and we'll go in together."

Sighing, Deryn shook her head. "I won't risk Fulk or the other men they have out there. And I won't risk something happening to you. I just need to prove that you aren't my *taimar* and that I'm a ... umm ... yeah." She couldn't believe that she'd almost spilled her secret that quickly.

"So, what if you can't prove that I'm not your *taimar*, your *marido*?"

Deryn froze. "What did you just say?"

"I asked what would happen if you couldn't prove that I'm not your husband?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh fuck, it's not a person's name. It means ... ohh," she clutched her stomach, "you're married?" Shaking her head, she let the tiniest of laughs escape. "No pressure there, Deryn. Someone else is waiting on him to come home. She could have told me that."

"I'm not married. And who could have told you what?" he asked, the look on his face odd, almost like he knew but was being kind enough to let her explain it to him.

Deryn rubbed her neck. "Did you just run into Kane? Did he tell you something about me, about why I'm here?"

"Answer my question, Doctor. What happens if you can't prove that I'm not your husband? And I don't care about them trying to kill me. Will they hurt you?"

She was about to answer when Kane pushed his way up and next to them. Issac followed close at his heels as did Ondrea. Kane's eyes widened when he looked at her. "Uhh, Deryn, you're unarmed and in your underwear."

"Which is not my way of saying kiss me," she bit out, still confused by how the kiss had made her feel.

Kane jerked back a bit. "Okay. Though, I should tell you that I learned my lesson when you bit the hell out of my lip for trying that. If you've been thinking about giving a relationship between us a go just say the word."

That didn't make any sense. He'd just kissed her not even five minutes ago while she was in his tent. "Kane?"

The sound of another whip cracking caught her attention. "I have to help him, Kane. Do you remember what grandma taught us about how the tomb guards fight?"

Issac laughed. "No offense but why are we going to listen to a grandma?"

Ondrea snickered. "Everyone assumes she's wrinkled up and old. Picture that," she pointed at Deryn, "with darker hair. That would be grandma or Nava if she hasn't adopted you as a grandchild yet. I'm sure she will the minute she sees you. She has a thing for blondes. Kind of like me."

Issac shook his head. "Hold up, I thought Dr. Murray was human. She's giving off all the signals a human does and nothing else."

"Shit, he's right, Deryn. You've got to stop masking your scent and your power if you're going to be able to fight these guys. You got your ass kicked all over the girl's bathroom today because you were holding back."

"I know." Looking up nervously, Deryn locked gazes with Alejandro. "Colonel, I...."

"Alejandro," he said, correcting her.

She nodded. "Alejandro, I honestly thought you knew all about me before I agreed to come here. I would never harm you or any of your people. Please remember that." Unable to offer anything else, Deryn unmasked herself. As her power released, washing over her, she knew what it was doing. It was changing her into one of her pre-chosen slayer garbs and giving her pale skin its natural sun-kissed look back. It also

allowed the others to sense who and what she was—a killing machine.

She looked up to find Alejandro visually tracing his way over her body. She already knew that she had on a black pair of boy cut bottoms and a matching fitted tee-shirt. She tapped a now boot covered foot on the ground as she ran her hands over her hair, double checking it was pulled back and away from her face. When she felt the do-rag on her head, she snickered. "I finally got that one right. It only took me fifteen years worth of trying."

"Your eyes," Issac said.

Ondrea laughed. "Everyone is always amazed with how blue they really are, Deryn. It's a good thing you keep that hidden or everyone would guess you were something supernatural."

She looked at Issac and found him smiling wide. "I don't scare you?"

"You're a slayer, right?"

Ondrea snorted. "Not just a slayer but yeah, you could call her that."

"My people spent centuries fighting vampires and dark ones. To the Fae, slayers aren't the reaper, they're frontline soldiers who deserve our respect and assistance. Now, to shifters and vampires...."

Deryn glanced at the ground. "I represent all who they've encountered before me. The ones who were gifted with the ability to fight among supernaturals and entrusted to help police them but used the power for personal gain—siding with the governments, taking part in witch hunts, mass killings,

the hunt and slaughter of so many that it sickens me." She stared at Issac. "Yeah, I know. Just as so many of the distilled blood lines of slayers don't discriminate when it comes to killing supernaturals. The supernaturals don't discriminate when it comes to killing a slayer."

"I take it that you adhere to the original reasoning for your creation," Issac said. "To only take out the ones who prey on innocents. If you didn't, you wouldn't be best friends with Kane and Ondrea."

Deryn nodded. "That's right to a degree but I wasn't made to police supernaturals as you know them. I was made, first and foremost, to," she pointed behind them at the tomb guards, "police them. To keep the tomb guards from turning on the Avatars. Oh, and kill the evil things that are the sworn enemy of the Avatars. I've never actually fulfilled my true destiny because until I got here I'd never met one."

Issac's brow furrowed. "When you were attacked, on the night of your prom, you had no idea what your true identity was, did you?"

Not wanting to talk about the vampire attack, Deryn simply shook her head and averted her gaze. "No. My grandmother was hell bent that I not be used by the government to destroy innocent supernaturals and for some other reason she doesn't like talking about. Anyway, until that night she didn't think I was in any danger. She thought that if she kept it hidden from me that others wouldn't sense it either."

"She was wrong," Alejandro said, matter-of-factly. "I sensed it in you the first night I met you—outside the bar."

You weren't able to mask your scent then like you do now. I didn't get a good look at you then to be able to recognize you later."

Kane slid up next to her. "Deryn, what is he talking about? Do you know Alex from somewhere else?"

Puzzled, she stared at Kane. "I just explained this all to you in your tent. Weren't you listening?"

It was his turn to look confused. "Deryn, I wasn't in my tent. I was in Ondrea's talking about what happened today and what it might mean. Our tents are next to each other so I knew I'd hear you if you woke up or if anything approached. I asked *Che* to watch over you and alert me if you needed me."

Deryn huffed. "No. You were in your tent and Onnie was not there." She thought about what Kane had just said. "Wait, your tent is by Onnie's? I thought it was four down from mine."

Kane's face went blank and for a moment, Deryn thought he'd sounded her out. When he glanced at Alejandro she knew he'd been listening. "So, Colonel, get an ear full?"

"Kane?"

He sighed. "I'm not mad at you, Deryn. You got turned around and confused. After the evening you had it's understandable."

"Not mad at me for what?"

Pulling her down towards the ground, Kane locked gazes with her. "I need you to be level headed right now. Everything is fine. We're fine. You know that, right?"

"I thought I did. You got all touchy feely on me in your tent and now I'm not so sure."

Arching a black brow, Kane glanced towards Alejandro. "Touchy feely? Umm, sorry about that. It won't happen again."

"That's a shame. I actually liked it," she said with a wink. "You're right. My head needs to be in the game. I've never come up against anything close to these guys and to be honest, I'm a little scared. Onnie's right. I did get my ass kicked all over that bathroom today. Normally, even without tapping into my slayer abilities I can take down just about anything."

Kane arched a brow. "Like two guards that were assigned to you?"

"Hey, they were trying to watch me shower. I just taught them a lesson. They're fine, aren't they?"

"One has a broken nose but yes, they're fine," he said, barely managing to hide a smile.

Exhaling, Deryn tried to mentally prepare herself for what she was about to face. "I need to be the one to figure out how or if they can be killed. I won't risk any of you."

"Deryn." Kane kissed her forehead. "You keep forgetting that we aren't human either. You know that I'm..." He stopped and glanced around nervously.

She knew why he didn't want others to hear him. Kane was more than just your average dragon shifter. He too descended from the Avatars, though he had no slayer blood in him. She forced a smile to her face. "I know that you're not weak and I know you can hold your own. My gut tells me that we're going to need a distraction. I'm going to be it. Follow my lead and then come in with your guns blazing."

"Shit, Deryn," Kane ran his hands down her arms, "you're unarmed, sugar. You can't go out there like that."

She winked. "I won't be unarmed for long. I promise. Oh, and however they die, I'll probably die that way too so if they do get a leg up on me, don't let them take me with them alive. Kill me." She took a deep breath. "I refuse to be some fucking god-like man's whore for eternity. If you don't, I'll find a way into the sunlight, Kane, and you know how horrifically slow and painful that death will be for me. Make it quick and clean. Please."

She pointed at Ondrea. "Don't forget what you promised."

Ondrea glanced over at Alejandro. "I'll keep in contact with her and make sure she's safe, Deryn. I promise. And I'll watch over her son. I'll explain it to Kane so he can, too. You have my word. Now, worry about what you need to, not all of us. We'll manage."

"I already told Kane all about the dreams."

"Told me about what dreams?" Kane asked, looking lost.

Rolling her eyes, Deryn chanced a glance at Alejandro. He didn't appear to be shocked or horrified by her secret. In fact, he looked horny as hell. "You okay?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"I mean, are you okay with me being a slayer?"

He nodded, a slow grin moving over his handsome face.

"Oh, I'm fine with that."

"Told you they were different here, sugar."

"Kane, I can mask your scents and make it so that the tomb guards have a hard time hearing you. It will also wake the camp."

Issac shifted a bit. "What do you mean? What are you going to do?"

"You aren't the only magik worker on the premise, Issac."

Licking his lips, he narrowed his gaze on her. "But slayers aren't magikal."

Ondrea chuckled. "Told you she was more than a slayer or did you miss the whole mystical change of her clothing thing?"

"I'll keep the rest of the camp from hearing what we're doing," Issac said, keeping his gaze trained on her. "Worry about what you have to, Deryn, nothing else."

"Fulk!"

The sound of Vonni's voice made Deryn cringe. "Aww, shit. She is the bane of my existence. Who let her out?"

They all pointed at Alejandro. He shrugged.

"I vote you kill her," Ondrea said, smiling wide.

Deryn winked. "What fun would that be? Though, I won't hesitate to knock her on her ass if she pulls another stunt like she did at the bar. Anyone got a problem with that?"

No one objected.

"Great, are we set?"

"Wait." Ondrea held up a digital camera and grinned. "I finally remembered to bring it along. That time that group of werewolf bikers thought they could have a little fun with the two girls on a road trip is the last thing I have pictures of. The head in the jukebox is a classic. That guy never saw it coming. I got you an eight by ten for your birthday."

Deryn rolled her eyes. "You would. Gee, you were so much help that night, sitting at the bar sipping your drink and snapping pictures while I fought a pack of werewolves."

Ondrea wagged her brows. "You had it all under control. I'd have just been in the way or broken a nail."

"I love you. Take care of them if something happens to me." Without a second thought, Deryn took off running out and into the open.

Vonni came rushing in from the other direction. "I should have known you were behind this! You came here to cast your spells over them, make them want you, just so you can kill them, slayer."

"The word you're looking for is *áricus*."

The tomb guards rushed at Vonni. Several more came out of the shadows and came at Deryn. Pointing at their loincloths, she laughed. "Nice get up. Does that only come in medium? I'm in the market for an extra large. But I did dream about one that was actually too big. Never thought I'd hear myself say that."

"Shit, Bookworm, go," Fulk said, sounding like he was in a great deal of pain. "The colonel will kill me if anything happens to you."

She cast a sideways glance at him. "Rodriquez, there won't be anything left for him to kill when they're done with you so shut-up and pray real hard that when I throw my books, I hit my target."

Vonni lashed power out at the tomb guards coming at her. They absorbed it and snatched her up and off her feet. For a split second, Deryn entertained letting them keep her as a

parting gift. Deciding against it, she put her hands up and let her power free, filling the area with the sound of music. She picked something loud, confusing with a hard beat.

The guards stopped and stared around. They began speaking in their native tongue, wondering what sort of god was causing it to happen. Deryn whistled. They looked over at her. Smiling, she answered in their language. "That would be me and Rob Zombie. Amazing, isn't he?"

They couldn't have looked more shocked if they tried. She winked and continued speaking in Avatarian. "That's right, boys. I told you what I was and you didn't listen. I wish to speak to your god."

They glanced around amongst themselves. One, who Deryn could only assume was the leader stepped forth. "You will not stop us from killing the rightful god. You will die," he said, in Avatarian.

"Bookworm, you got any idea what the hell they're saying?" Fulk asked.

She nodded. "It would appear that we have a group of traitors attacking us. That means...."

Fulk coughed, clearly in pain. "It means there will be no reasoning with them. I got it. Thanks for clearing that up now get the hell out of here."

"Can't do that, Rodriquez," she said, keeping her eyes on the tomb guards. "They know who and what I am now so they have no choice but to kill me and they never had any intention of leaving any witnesses. Dying is not on my to do list tonight so what do you say I get us out of this?"

"I'll make you a deal, Bookworm. You get out of here and I'll stop teasing you about being smart."

Shaking her head, Deryn snickered. "No deal. Tell you what. You let me get you out of here alive and I'll let you call me whatever you want." Concentrating on the tomb guards, she put her arms out. "Your only option is to kill me because I will tell your god what you're planning and technically, I was created to keep you from harming him so I guess I'll just have to kill you to keep my end of the bargain."

They all came running straight at her. Two shifted into large black panthers. Another held his whips out and began to flip them around, watching her carefully. Deryn concentrated on him, learning his technique.

A panther leapt up, heading straight for her. Jumping into the air, Deryn spun, thrust her leg out and slammed the heel of her boot into its rib cage. A cracking sounded as it fell off its original course and hit the ground with a thud.

Landing on her feet, Deryn could almost feel the whip as it moved through the air. The man wasn't aiming at her. No. He was aiming at Fulk. Running hard and fast, she launched herself into the air once more and took the brunt of the whip across her back rather than let it hit Fulk again.

Fulk's eyes widened as he fought against this restraints. "No!"

Deryn hissed as her skin split from her low back to her upper shoulder. Her power flared to the surface, instantly beginning to heal her. She landed directly in front of Fulk and stared up at him. "Do you trust me?"

"Huh? Doc? What the hell?"

"Do you," she fought for breath, "trust me?" She straightened slowly and stood before him.

"Yes."

"With your life?"

"Yes."

"This is going to hurt at first." Deryn punched her hand through Fulk's stomach, driving it past his flesh and deep within him.

Vonni screamed and thrust magik out at Deryn even though she was being held by tomb guards. Putting her free hand out, Deryn harnessed Vonni's power and used it to help her with Fulk. He slumped forward and she put her forehead against his. "Now, we'll heal together, Rodriquez."

Her power flared through her, mending the wound from the whip. It didn't stop with her. No. It went straight into Fulk, repairing the damage he'd sustained from being tortured by the tomb guards.

Pulling her hand out of him, she left no damage to his stomach. There wasn't even a drop of blood. Fulk lifted his head and locked eyes with her. "Thanks, Bookworm."

"Feel up to kicking some ass?" she asked, already knowing that Fulk now carried some of her power within him, thus giving him a higher healing rate and additional strength.

He nodded.

Deryn took hold of his left wrist. "On the count of three. One. Two. Three." She yanked hard with him. The chain broke free of the post but remained attached to his wrist. She did the same with the other side. Fulk dropped to the ground, crouched and then stood tall, looking pissed.

"How do I kill them?"

"Not sure yet," Deryn said, spotting the other panther headed straight at Fulk's back. "Can I use you?"

A slow smile spread over his face. "Bookworm, you can do whatever you want to me."

Laughing, Deryn spun Fulk around fast, moved in front of him and grabbed hold of one of the chains. "Throw me as far as you can and then yank on the chain hard."

Fulk eyed the panther and then smiled down at her. "Clothesline. I love it." Lifting her like she weighed nothing. Fulk twisted to one side and sent her hurdling through the air.

Deryn held the chain out and dropped a second before the panther struck. She wrapped the chain around its neck, flipped over its back and prepared for Fulk to yank. He did. She and the panther hit the ground hard. Not giving up, she rolled with it, wrapping the chain tighter as she went. It stopped struggling and she knew it was dead.

Looking up, Deryn found Fulk standing there smiling. "Nice."

"Thanks. Can you get untangled?"

"Yep." His eyes widened. "Whip guy, ten o'clock."

Kane and the group moved in from the shadows, attacking the tomb guards from behind, taking them by surprise. Deryn didn't see Alejandro with them. The second she spotted him slamming into the man with the whip her breath caught. They rolled, locked together.

Fulk moved in close to her back and struck out at something. It was then that Deryn realized she'd been so

worried about Alejandro that she hadn't sensed the danger moving in from behind her.

Fulk touched her shoulder. "He'll be okay, I'm sure of it. He's a hell of a lot stronger than any other guy I know."

"But...."

"If you get in the way, he'll get hurt worrying about you. Is that what you want? Do you want your husband hurt?"

"Husband? Oh, gods, not you, too." She went to yell at him and found him grinning from ear to ear. "Very funny."

"Oh, it's funny all right, in a 'wait until you figure it all out' kind of way, Bookworm. Now, I think I need to go free Vonni. Though, it's tempting to leave her there."

Deryn snorted. "I had the same thought. But, you're right."

* * * *

Alejandro let the beast within rise up enough to extend a clawed hand. He swept it out, caught the man's neck and severed his head. The man caught fire almost instantly. Rolling off him fast, Alejandro came to his feet and looked for Deryn. "Decapitation works!"

The moment he'd first watched Deryn spring into action and the panther coming for her, he'd tried to get to her, only to find Kane, Ondrea and Issac all pinning him to the ground. He'd lost control of himself and told them that he and Deryn had technically been intimate. He also made an official claim on her, stating that she was his true mate—his soon to be wife and gods willing, the mother of his children. The shock of

it was too much for Kane. He let his hold up enough for Alejandro to break free.

Ondrea ran past him with a tomb guard on her tail. Alejandro took its head off with ease and Ondrea turned, panting and nodded. "Thanks."

"Where's my mate? Where's, Deryn?"

"She's doing fine," Ondrea said, pointing in the other direction. "Deryn is an amazing slayer. I mean it."

He spotted her, fighting hand to hand with a tomb guard. She was beyond skilled. Deryn moved with a speed and grace he'd never seen before. His cock hardened at the very sight of her. When she'd wandered into his tent and woken him, he didn't know what to do. Every part of him wanted to flip her onto his cot and fuck her. His dreams had been filled with her image. It had been her body that his mind had left him exploring in his sleeping hours. Waking to find her standing there, in a see through top that his shifter eyes easily picked up and a tiny pair of barely there panties was almost too much. It had been all he could do not to pull those thin panties down and taste her pussy, lick her cream.

She was so open, so talkative thinking it was Kane with her that he let her go, hoping to be allowed just one touch, one taste of her. The shock of learning what she was had been nothing compared to the shock of hearing just how many things in their lives overlapped. Alejandro was positive the woman his mother talked about often, Nava, was Deryn's grandmother.

Most importantly, the locket Deryn had talked about was indeed in his possession as it had been from the moment he'd

spotted a vampire boasting about the hot little thing he'd just sampled. He'd recognized the locket the second the vampire pulled it out to prove his story. She'd been so innocent, so unexposed to violence that she radiated it. It was easy to see why Kane's friends had teased her about being a virgin goodie two shoes because she oozed it. There was nothing wrong with that.

He chastised himself for not doing more to keep her from going. Had he taken more time he might have been able to prevent it and he might have met his mate fifteen years ago. They could already have lots of little ones running around if he'd have just focused.

It still sickened him to think about what that vampire had boasted about doing to his victim—to Deryn. Her allergy to the sun made perfect sense now. She'd survived a brutal attempt at turning her into a vampire. His heart ached for her. He'd been so close to preventing it from happening but had thought it best not to follow a young girl home, even if his intent was to assure her safety and nothing more.

Rage and regret ripped through him. He wanted to shout out and change history. Mostly, he wanted to revive the vampires so he could kill them yet again. The vampires had told him that they'd killed the girl they attacked or he would have gone looking for Deryn himself.

"Heads up!"

A flash of blonde hair appeared in front of him a second before something struck him. He hit the ground. Glancing up, Alejandro spotted a tomb guard holding a sword. It said something in a language he didn't understand. From the looks

of it, the guard would have taken his head off had he not been knocked out of the way. He watched in awe as Deryn kicked out, catching the guard in the chin before he even had a chance to swing the sword at her. She artfully disarmed him and spun in a circle, taking the guard's head clean off. He burst into flames.

Rolling to his side, Alejandro pushed off the ground and got to his feet. "Thanks."

Deryn stared at him with wide blue eyes. "Are you hurt?"

"No," he said, unable to help his smile. She cared. That meant something to him. "Are you?"

"Kiss and get it over with." Fulk moved up next to Deryn. Alejandro wanted to smack the grin off his friend's face but held back. "You know you're both ecstatic that the other one is unharmed so kiss and get it over with."

"Rodriguez," Alejandro said in warning tone.

Ondrea joined them. "We got all but two."

"Which way did the other two go?" Deryn glanced at him, her eyes wide with worry. "What are you, really?"

Confused, Alejandro shrugged. "I'm a man, first and foremost. A man who can shift into a were-jaguar but you already knew that." A sickening thought occurred to him. "Don't tell me that you're not okay with that. You aren't so fine with supernaturals after all. Are you, slayer? It's one thing to want them in your dreams, it's another to want to share their bed in real life."

Deryn jerked back as if she'd been slapped and he instantly regretted opening his mouth. Her gaze hardened. "For your information, Colonel, I have no problem with your

being a shape shifter. I just wanted to know what else you are. It's obvious by the way you cut through the tomb guards that you are something more than just a shifter." She snorted. "Sorry I asked. It's plain to see you're an asshole in addition to being a shifter. My mistake. I thought it was something else."

"Yeah well, you aren't just a slayer are you, Dr. Murray?"

Shut up, you idiot. What are you doing? Apologize to her. Get down on your knees if you have to. This woman is your mate. She's the mother of your future children.

Ignoring his inner voice, Alejandro found himself taking a defensive stance. "Pack your things. You're going back to Earth tonight. You don't belong here. You aren't one of us."

"Colonel, you're pissed off about something. Don't take it out on...."

Alejandro glared at Fulk, daring him to continue. He didn't. Glancing back at Deryn, he found her standing with one hand on her hip and the other still holding the sword she'd taken from the tomb guard. "You understand that by sending me back you are most likely dooming everyone here?"

She was right and he knew it but that didn't stop him from wanting to win the argument. "You want to play that card? Fine. You can stay but you'll be placed under guard during your stay with us."

Ondrea gasped. "What for? Deryn hasn't done anything but help your asses."

"The way I see it," Alejandro stared at Deryn, "she brought the problem. All was fine until she showed up."

He was lying through his teeth but the need to assure she was out of the line of fire consumed him. If he couldn't get her back to Earth then he'd damn well be sure to keep her safe and away from anymore tomb guards. "Lt. Rodriguez, take Dr. Murray to the stockade."

"Sorry, sir but I can't do that." Ondrea tried to push past Fulk but he caught her around the waist. "I can't let you kill the colonel either, Dr. Harris."

"Are you disobeying a direct order?" Alejandro asked.

"She risked it all for me, Colonel. Hell, Bookworm even took a lash that split her wide open to save me from it. I won't have any part in locking her up. In fact, if you try to have her confined you're going to have to lock me up, too."

"Me, too," Issac said, brushing past Alejandro. "Sorry, Colonel, but if Deryn goes, so do I. I've seen into her soul. She isn't a threat to any of us and you know it. You know exactly who she is and it's scaring the living hell out of you but not for the reasons one would think."

"You lay one hand on her and I'll rip it off." Ondrea glared at him, letting her eyes do a partial shift. "That girl has not slept in months because of you. I've held her hair while she's vomited over shit she's seen in dreams about you and now you're talking about having her locked up? You heard Issac, you know that it's your...."

"Enough. Onnie, its fine." Deryn bent down and tipped her head to the side. "You can come out now."

The monkey-like creature she called *Che* came rushing out from the tree line. It ran up her arm and sat on her shoulder. She let out a soft laugh as it began to carry on. "Don't mind

him, I expected this. Why should he be any different than any other man I've met?"

If cutting him to the quick was her goal, she succeeded. Alejandro clenched his fists. The need to hit something, anything was great. He'd done exactly what Ondrea had warned him not to. He'd turned on Deryn after he found out she was a slayer. It didn't matter that he only wanted to protect her. In her eyes, he was punishing her for what she was.

"Onnie," Deryn reached out for her friend, "keep your promise to me, please."

Ondrea shook her head. "Oh, no way am I watching over his sorry ass. Hell, I might be the one that kills him. How can you even care what happens to him after what he's pulling?"

"What's going on?" Kane asked, running up from the sidelines. "Is everyone okay?"

"Colonel Asshole is trying to have Deryn locked up or kicked out of here," Ondrea said, her gaze narrow and her rage radiating off her.

Kane arched a brow. "Oh, really?"

"Do you have a problem with that, Captain? It would appear everyone else does."

Deryn took a step towards him. "Kane has no problem with it. Neither do I. Do what you feel is right, Colonel."

Chapter Eight

Deryn sat, staring at the wall and shaking her head. Alejandro had held true to his threat. He'd personally escorted her to the cell the night before. He'd been nice enough to permit her to shower and get dressed but that was it. Footsteps approached and she glanced towards the cell door expecting to see Kane or Ondrea. When a set of emerald green eyes fell upon her, she snorted. "Oh, you. Great."

"Don't sound so happy to see me, Dr. Murray," Alejandro said, his voice clipped.

Opting to stare at the wall instead of him, Deryn shrugged. "Have no fear, I'm not."

He unlocked the cell door and tossed it open. "You're free to go."

"Uh, thanks but I'll pass."

He looked stunned. "What? You want to sit in here?"

"I've played this game before, Colonel. I'm not in the mood nor do I have the strength so if you want me dead, kill me now and save us both some time."

His brow furrowed. "What game? I don't want you dead."

"Cute." Deryn, brought her knees up to her chest. "Do you all practice your 'you can trust me' faces and speeches or do they come naturally?"

"What are you talking about? This isn't a speech. I said you can go, so go."

"And the minute I set foot out of here I become the hunted. You and all your buddies shift and stalk me until only

one of us is left?" She shook her head. "I'll pass. Like I said, I've played this game before."

"Someone did that to you?" he asked, concern lacing his voice.

Deryn almost let her guard down but knew better. "Yes, someone has done that to me before." She glanced around the cell. "Though, he claimed that he was locking me up for my own protection. He was worried that someone would attack me. Rather, he used the time to succumb to peer pressure. That was quite a fun weekend in the mountains. I not only got to try to evade attack from men who were born to be one with nature but avoid the sunlight as well because he made sure I was vulnerable to it."

"Give me his name," Alejandro said, his voice deeper than normal.

Glancing up, she found him clutching the bars of the cell so tight that his knuckles were white. She snickered. "What? Upset that someone already thought of this or upset that you didn't think to fuck me first? At least he was smart enough to get that out of me before he pulled this."

"Tell me," his gritted his teeth, "who did that to you. Was it Dean? I heard you and Ondrea discussing him outside of my tent."

Of course he did.

"Why? Dead men can't talk. If you're looking for helpful tips on how best to tear the slayer down you'll have to find someone else." Deryn locked gazes with Alejandro. "I killed him and every one of his friends. *Dean* got exactly what he wanted—a fight. Funny, Onnie said you'd end up just like

him." She glanced around the cell. "Aside from the fact he was a Sheriff, everything else fits. I love being wrong—dead wrong."

"I'm not trying to trick you, Deryn."

Resting her chin on her knee, she let out a soft laugh. "It's Dr. Murray to you, Colonel, and you'll have to excuse me if I don't believe you. I'll wait here. You can send Vonni and whatever henchmen she gathered up in here. See this way, I don't have to deal with the sun or try to figure out how to survive on my own in the wilderness in another realm."

Alejandro growled. "Do not lump me in with something like that guy. I did put you in here for your own safety, Dr. Murray. You refused to go back to Earth and I was worried something would happen to you."

Deryn couldn't hold her laughter in. "Oh, this is too good. Could you please humor me by getting on your knees, asking me to marry you and spend my life with you? It's the only thing missing from the equation. Must be a cat-shifter thing. He was one, too."

"He asked you to marry him right before he...?" Alejandro's shock seemed genuine. That caught her off guard.

"No. He asked me to marry him about three months before he pulled that stunt. I have to say that I never saw it coming." Her bottom lip began to tremble but she refused to give into tears. "When I walked out and found the noon day sun up I tried to go back inside, he didn't let me. He was nice enough to pull his gun on me and make sure the rest of his buddies had a trail of blood to follow. It's really fun to try to run and climb in the wilderness when you've been shot in the

upper thigh." Taking a deep breath in, Deryn calmed herself. "No biggie. Par for the course they tell me. Ondrea was right. I need to stick with human men."

Alejandro rubbed his palms over his face and then through his black hair. "I really thought I was doing the right thing, Deryn ... err ... Dr. Murray. I wanted you safe." He shook his head. "There is nothing I can say or do that will prove I'm different, is there?"

"Nope."

His eyes lit. "Wait." He reached into his back pocket and pulled her leather case from it. "Kane gave me this to make sure you had your shot for the day. I also brought you a long sleeve, light shirt and a hat."

Trust him.

Deryn mentally batted at her inner voice. Narrowing her gaze, she watched Alejandro as he approached her. Taking her case from him, Deryn opened it slowly. She withdrew a syringe and a vile of serum.

Trust him.

Sitting on the end of the cot, Alejandro kept a close eye on her. "What exactly does that do for you?"

"It took me awhile to perfect it but it boosts my immunities and my cell count. My body reacts to the sun the same way a vampire would. It's easier for me when I'm not hiding what I am. I can tolerate the sun without any real problems but that doesn't do me any good or allow me to live among others undetected. They tell me that if the vampires would have come back and forced their blood into me, I'd have fully

changed. I don't know if that's true. I don't want to find out either."

Alejandro touched her leg and fire raced through her. She hissed and tried to pull away. He moved with her, shadowing her just right, leaving himself settled between her legs while she was flat on her back. "Do you feel that?" He shifted a bit, rubbing his erection against her lower abdomen. "I don't mean that. I mean the way something flares between us when we touch?"

"Don't flatter yourself, Colonel." Deryn tried to focus on anything other than how close his lips were to hers. Her breathing grew shallow and her nipples hardened. "This happened last night when I wandered into..." She stopped in mid-sentence and thought about the events that transpired. Her eyes widened. "It was your tent. Not Kane's."

The slight nod and curve of his smile sent Deryn's blood pumping at an alarming rate throughout her body. Alejandro put his forehead against hers. "You do feel it."

Wiggling, Deryn tried to get out from under him but only succeeded in grinding her clit against his clothed cock. A moan escaped her lips. Alejandro moved his hips and in turn, rubbed her swollen bud just right, sending shockwaves of pleasure through her lower region. Without thought, Deryn slid her hands up the backs of Alejandro's muscular arms and countered his pelvic movements.

He scanned her, his green eyes seeming to penetrate her inner defenses. "I want to kiss you."

Her gaze went to his full lips. Every ounce of her wanted to sample them but the thought of past betrayals haunted her.

"Please don't."

"Why? You want me. I can smell your arousal."

Deryn licked her lips. "And I can feel yours pressing against me. That's not the point, Colonel. You said it yourself. I'm not one of you. I don't belong here. You're right. I should leave."

He sighed. "I was an asshole, Deryn. I admit it. Please don't hold my wanting to keep you safe against me."

"You had no problem holding my need to keep you safe against me, Colonel," she said, purposely refusing to call him by name. She needed to safeguard her heart. Alejandro had the power to break it. "Since it was your tent I was in you got to hear all the details about me talking with your mother, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I won't apologize for that."

He traced his finger down the side of her face. "I never asked you to."

"What do you want from me?"

Alejandro ran his thumb over her lower lip, leaving Deryn fighting back another moan. "I want your trust, Dr. Murray." He leaned down. His lips brushed past hers.

Gasping, Deryn turned her head. "Please don't. I can fight anything but I can't fight you, especially if you use that as your weapon."

For a moment, Deryn thought for sure he would get off her. When his lips captured hers she was powerless to stop

him as he slid his tongue into her mouth. Their tongues danced a well choreographed dance, delving into dark crevasses. Heat continued to flare between them. Deryn did her best to remember to breathe but it seemed secondary to tasting Alejandro.

His cock dug into her mound just right, stimulating her clit and bringing her close to her peak. She tugged at his tan tee shirt. The need to feel him, skin to skin was great. Deryn pulled it free from his camouflage pants and ran her hands up his powerful back. It was easy to imagine it rippling as he thrust in and out of her. The next thing she knew, she was easing it over his head.

His kisses came faster and Alejandro mirrored her movements, easing her tee shirt over her head as well. Deryn knew she should stop. Nothing could come of it. He was a shifter and she was a slayer. The only promise she'd made Cecelia was to get her son home safely. Nothing was said about falling for him.

As Alejandro kissed his way down her neck Deryn knew it was too late. She'd already fallen for him. Her nipples ached with need as he brushed past them. Moaning, Deryn arched her back and Alejandro responded by dropping his mouth over the satin portion of her bra.

He drew one nipple into his mouth, rolled it along with its fabric casing around with his tongue as she ran her fingers through his hair. He looked up at her and a sexy smile spread over his face. "I love how you respond to me."

Alejandro went to work on her pants and then paused as his eyes looked down the length of her. "I could do this the

conventional way or I could give you what you deserve, something special."

Confused, Deryn tried to sit up. He shook his head. "Cover your eyes. Trust me, Deryn. Please."

She did and half expected him to try to take her head off with a clawed hand. What she didn't expect was to feel his magik rushing over her. Her breathing halted as she waited for whatever it was he was doing to be over with. She sensed something coming towards her face and stiffened.

Please don't let him be like the rest. Please.

"I'm not like the rest and I'd really rather never hear you mention another man again. I don't share," Alejandro said, taking her by surprise. "Before you ask, no, you didn't say that out loud."

"But how...?" Her protest was halted when something sweet and juicy skated over her bottom lip. Deryn opened her eyes to find Alejandro poised over her with a piece of mango in his hand.

He put it in her mouth and then pressed his lips to hers. She'd never tried to chew food and kiss before. Thankfully, Alejandro had perfected the art. Deryn was just about to surrender to him when it hit her that he hadn't come with fruit in his hand.

The sound of rushing water filled the area and a light floral scent came to her. Reluctantly, she pulled back from the kiss and looked around. They were no longer in the stockade. They were now in what could only be described as a tropical paradise.

"What? How?"

Alejandro winked and motioned with his head for her to look down. She did and her mouth opened wide but no sound came out. Where once there had been a cot, there was now mounds of white pillows of varying sizes laying on a white sheet. Huge, elephant tree leaves hung low, almost touching some of the pillows. That wasn't the best part of it. The best part was that the only thing she and Alejandro were now wearing was matching white sheets.

"Is this real?" she asked, reaching out for him.

He took her hand in his and bit his lower lip. "Do you like it? Tell me you like it. I've never used my magik to impress ... err ... umm, I mean that with all the women I've been with I've never ... shit, I didn't mean that...."

Deryn bit back a laugh. "Are you trying to tell me that you've never used your magik to create something like this before?"

Scratching the back of his head, he nodded. "Uhh, yeah. Do you like it?"

"I love it." It was the most amazing thing a man had ever done to impress her. Others had tried but none had even come close to Alejandro's paradise. "You do know that you didn't have to do this."

"No. I did," he said, sliding his body over hers and guiding her down onto the plush pillow wonderland. "This has to be special for you."

Touched, Deryn ran her hands up and laced her fingers together behind his neck. "It's very special. Thank you."

* * * *

Alejandro propped himself up on one elbow and captured Deryn's lips with his. His insides were still in a knot over how she'd react to his use of magik to alter their surroundings. Issac's words had plagued him the entire night.

I sensed that it was your baby she was carrying.

When he'd first heard that, all he wanted to do was deny it. The idea of putting any stock in it only to find it wasn't true was a risk Alejandro wasn't willing to take. He thought if he didn't acknowledge it or the fact that Issac also told him that Deryn was mated to him in her dreams then it wouldn't be true. It hit him that he wanted it to be true. He wanted to wake up every morning for the rest of his immortal life and see Deryn's beautiful face.

The slayer blood in her combined with her Avatarian ancestry meant that she too was immortal—at least she would be if she stopped hiding who she was by dropping her powers and accepting mortality.

The reservation of what his mother would think of her vanished the second he heard her confession about his mother contacting her. The fact that his mother had told Deryn to call him *marido* meant she knew that his destiny was intertwined with Deryn's—that she was his mate, the mother of her grandbabies.

It was up to him to make it official and that was exactly what Alejandro was attempting to do. It was also the reason he'd decided to use his magik. His soon-to-be wife deserved something better than an army cot in a temporary facility's cell. Deryn deserved better and he intended to give her everything.

The feel of her fingers sliding down his back only served to heighten his already overblown senses. Alejandro couldn't stop the purr-like noise that emanated from the back of throat. Deryn responded by arching against him and wrapping her legs around his waist. He let out a manly chuckle. "Did you like that?"

Her eyelids fluttered as her mouth opened. The smell of her arousal spurred him onward. He purred again and watched as Deryn's eyes swirled with various shades of royal blue.

Her pebble-like nipples scraped against his chest as he slid down her, the need to taste them too great to resist. They were perfect, rosy and waiting for him. Alejandro caught one in his mouth and nibbled lightly on it as he sucked. Sliding a hand down the length of her toned torso, Alejandro eased it between her legs. The realization that Deryn was shaved hit him. The tiny black panties she had on when she'd thought she was dreaming had obstructed his view of her mound.

Parting her slit, Alejandro began to rub her swollen clit. Deryn writhed beneath his touch making his erection border on painful. No part of Alejandro wanted to harm Deryn and that's what he would do if he took her without making sure she was prepared.

He slid a finger into her pussy and damn near came on her leg at the memory of having the head of his cock sheathed within her. Planting kisses on her smooth skin, Alejandro moved down her slowly though every ounce of him wanted to hurry.

The sweet smell of her cream called to him on a primitive level. The beast within him rose to the surface and teetered on the edge of breaking loose. He knew better than to try to deny it from taking its mate—his mate.

Giving in, he let his mouth begin to shift. His incisors lengthened as did his tongue. In place of his normally smooth tongue was now one that had a bit of a sandpaper feel to it. He licked a long line up her pussy and knew she liked it when she grabbed hold of his head and moaned.

Alejandro eased his unnaturally long, shifted tongue into her tight vat. The taste of her berry-like cream left him tongue fucking her with a fierceness that caught him off guard. Deryn held the sides of his head while her legs quivered. The second he felt the walls of her pussy clenching down on his tongue he knew she was coming.

He wanted to lap up every ounce of her cream but knew better. He'd need that to help him enter her without causing her pain. Thankfully, Deryn was dripping by the time he withdrew his tongue. Tipping his head downwards, he forced his mouth to reshape into that of his normal, human, form.

"Please, Alejandro."

He moved up and over her. "Please what?" he asked, staring down into her swirling eyes.

"Please fuck me." Deryn's words threatened to bring out the beast within him again.

He held it at bay and pressed his lips to hers. She chuckled. "You taste like me."

Easing himself between her legs, he aligned the head of his cock with her soaked entrance. "Tell me if I hurt you in any...."

Deryn thrust her hips upwards hard and fast. The unexpected movement left Alejandro going in to the hilt in her excruciatingly tight pussy. She cried out and he bit his lower lip to keep from coming. He propped his body up in a semi-pushup position and stared down at Deryn. "Did I hurt you?"

"Yes," she whispered, a slight smile on her face. "Now, hurt me more."

"Deryn."

"I won't break."

He stayed rooted in her, afraid to move out of fear of harming her. "That's just it, Deryn. You're still masking your power so you very well could break. It's hard enough for me to control my own strength but the feel of your hot, tight pussy has me on the verge of losing control already."

Her brow furrowed. "You just entered me."

"I know and I'm not exactly proud of that. It would be my luck to fall in love with a woman I can't be in more than a second before I want to fill her full of my seed." Dropping his head down, he went to kiss her only to find her staring at him with wide eyes. "Deryn?"

He just confessed to being in love with me. She narrowed her gaze on him. No. I must have been hearing things. He can't love me. He hardly knows me. I'm a slayer he's a shifter. I'm a....

Drawing almost all the way out of her, Alejandro paused. She whimpered and tried to pull him back to her. He shook his head. "No. Not until you stop thinking so much. I said what I meant. Leave it alone, Deryn. Let it be what it is."

"Please."

"Agree to let whatever will be between us happen without over analyzing it."

Deryn dug her fingernails into the flesh of his ass cheeks and bucked beneath him. "Oh gods, yes, Alejandro. Just please don't stop."

Since all he'd wanted to do from the moment he'd picked her up on Earth and brought her to this realm was sink into her and find bliss, he gave in. He thrust into her, savoring the feel of her pussy grasping his cock. Deryn countered his every move, making it a competition over who exactly was in control.

Alejandro wanted to lose himself in her warmth, to drill his body into hers until he could move no more but he knew better than to lose control while Deryn was masking her powers. Instead, he decided to busy himself with her sensual mouth while his body found solace in hers.

He swiveled his hips ever so slightly, changing his rhythm enough to drive Deryn over the edge. She cried out and raked her nails down his back. The shifter in him reacted to her drawing blood and inflicting pain during intercourse as a sign of the mating process beginning. It lurched forward, taking Alejandro by storm. His teeth lengthened and claws erected from his fingertips.

"Oh, yes, I'm coming. Yes," she panted, wrapping her legs around him and holding him to her.

Letting his power ride over Deryn, he used it to take any pain she might experience from him as he sank his teeth into her shoulder. The second her coppery blood filled his mouth, his cock erupted, soaking her womb with his seed.

"Alejandro," she whispered his name as she held tight to him.

Her power surged forward, meeting his head on. She unmasked, allowing her slayer powers to come through. Having her magik mixed with his only intensified the most amazing moment of his life.

He continued to come in her, his cock twitching as he went. "Mine."

It took a minute for his mouth to reshape so he kept his head down, not wanting to alert Deryn. He licked his bite mark and watched as it healed over almost instantly. It was official she was his mate—his wife. "*Eu te amo.*"

She kissed her way along his jawline and stopped at his ear. "You could say just about anything you wanted to me in that language and I'd melt. Though, I'm a little leery on trusting people blindly anymore so the next time I'm home I'll try to figure out what you say to me."

Alejandro smiled. "When we get home I'll teach you whatever you want to know. You could teach me Avatarian in return. Does that sound fair?"

"Wait," she raised a dark blonde brow, "does this mean you're going to want my phone number?"

Unable to help himself, Alejandro ran his hand up her side and tickled her. Deryn tried to get out from under him but only succeeded in turning onto her stomach. She wiggled, still laughing as he tickled her and her ass rubbed against his cock. It stirred back to life even though it should have been sated.

Hooking an arm around Deryn's waist, Alejandro brought her to her hands and knees. Waves of blonde hair spilled down her back and he couldn't help but lace a hand in it. As he lifted it, he noticed the tattoo at the base of her neck. There, on her skin was a black jaguar looking back at him. Bending down, he planted a kiss on her marking knowing with all his heart that it was just one more sign letting the world know she was meant to be his. He lined up with her cleft and rubbed his cock back and forth in her juices.

"Alejandro?"

He thrust into her, completely sheathing himself in her depths. Deryn cried out and rocked back against him, taking him faster than he felt safe doing. The threat of hurting her, while lessened by her slipping back into her slayer powers, was still very real and he wouldn't let that happen. He eased his movements.

Deryn apparently wasn't too happy with that. She slammed herself back onto him and proceeded to pump her body over his cock. It felt so good, so right that Alejandro gave in and greeted her thrust for thrust.

"There. Right there." Her breaths came in ragged pants.

The sound of it mixed with the fact he could sense her heart rate increasing told him he was doing a fine job

pleasing her. Not that he needed confirmation. No. She was made for him. His mate. His life. It was a given that he'd be able to please her and she him. It assured they would want to be together forever, as immortal couples were meant to be.

"Mmm, baby, you're so tight. You're killing me here."

Reaching around, he flicked her clit lightly before rubbing it. She jerked as a tremor tore through her. Alejandro's body tightened and he knew his orgasm was close. A raspy moan came from Deryn as her pussy clenched his cock. The pleasure actually bordered on tortuous as he tried and failed to stave off coming. As his balls drew up, he pulled on her hips and held her still as his cum jetted into her.

Spent, Alejandro withdrew slowly. The wet smacking sound that accompanied his action made him smile. It meant she was full of his seed. He went to his side and pulled Deryn down into his arms. He laid there spooning her while his heart beat feverously, no doubt as excited as the rest of him that she was now his.

"Mmm, Alejandro?"

He kissed the back of her head. "Yes, *amorzã*."

"*Eu te amo*," she whispered, her pronunciation dead on. Deryn laced her fingers through his and settled in against him. "I don't know what it means but I had the urge to say it back to you. Don't laugh."

Hiking a leg over her hip, Alejandro assured himself that his new bride couldn't bolt before confessing what it meant. "Why would I laugh? I love you, too."

Deryn's body went rigid. "It means I love ... umm ... love you?"

Snickering, he kissed her soft shoulder. "Well, if you disregard the stammering then yes, it means I love you. I'd like to think you could say it with some conviction." Planting another kiss on her smooth skin, he chuckled. "It's not as hard as I thought it would be. I had horrible visions of dropping dead the minute I ever found myself in a position to tell a woman that. Nope. Didn't happen."

She stiffened.

"I love you," he whispered.

"Please stop."

"Stop what?" he asked, unsure he wanted to hear her answer.

"Stop making me think this will last. It was what it was." She kissed his hand before letting go of it and slipping out from under his hold. "Thank you for all of this. It was beautiful. All of it."

He sighed. "I take it that you want me to pull my magik back now?"

"That would probably be best."

"Best for who, Deryn?" The last thing he wanted to do on his wedding day was fight with his wife. Of course, the last thing he thought he'd still have ahead of him was the tricky part about telling Deryn they were now officially mated. "I'm sorry."

He sat up and took in the sight of Deryn's glorious body. She was breathtaking. "You're beautiful."

Snorting, Deryn glanced over her shoulder. The action left her in a pose that screamed 'come and get me.' It took everything in him to keep from doing just that. His gaze fell

to the tribal looking tattoo on her lower back. It extended almost the entire way across her and was about two inches high. He knew from overhearing her and Ondrea talking that it was Avatarian but he wasn't sure what it meant. He wanted to ask her but thought it best to let her have time to think.

"It means that I'm an original slayer—a child of the Avatars, created to protect them and others." She winked. "You were thinking really loud again."

"Hmm, I guess I'll need to be more careful of my own thoughts then." He smiled all the while doing his best to contain his joy. She'd read his thoughts with ease. The mating was a success.

"Oh, Colonel?"

"Yes."

Deryn gave him a pouty lipped look that left his cock throbbing with need. "Come and get me."

"My pleasure."

Chapter Nine

"Feeling better?" Alejandro asked, smiling down at her.

Deryn finished lacing her boot and nodded. "I am. Though, I'll admit that I still don't understand how you did what you did with your magik." She patted the cot and grinned. "I'm really happy you did it. This place sort of lacks the luster of the paradise you created."

He stroked her cheek. "All you have to do is say the word and I'll do it again."

"Okay, Romeo, relax. You can't tell me that didn't take it out of you. It's odd but I could almost feel the drain on you. Does that sound silly?"

"Not in the least. It's a side effect," he said, staring down at her with eyes she would miss almost as much as the man when they were all done here and went back to their lives.

"I'd ask you to elaborate on the side effect thing but I'm learning quickly that you only skip getting to the point when you know it will get you in the doghouse ... err ... I mean cathouse with me."

"Thanks for clarifying that and I do not do that." No sooner did he sit down next to her then he was shooting up at the sound of a tiny shriek. In an instant, he had her thrust behind him and a clawed hand out. It was too fast not to be instinctive and that meant more to Deryn than she could ever voice.

Running her hands over his broad shoulders, she smiled. "Easy there, killer. It's just *Che*."

"I know. That thing seems to announce the coming of bigger shit that I, for one, am not willing to let have another go at you," Alejandro said, not backing down.

"Colonel," she pressed her mouth to his ear, "Alejandro, its okay. I promise."

The tension in his upper body eased a bit. "Then why is he carrying on like that?"

She snickered. "I think he's jealous."

"Jealous?" Alejandro glanced over his shoulder and raised a brow. "So, tell me, Doctor, am I in danger of losing you to a monkey?"

Biting her lower lip, Deryn winked. "I didn't realize you had me to begin with, Colonel."

"If you only knew. So," he smiled, "you're saying that the monkey is in the lead. I could shift if you prefer that sort of thing."

"You know, appearances can be deceiving."

He nodded. "I caught onto that, Bookworm."

"Then stop underestimating *Che*." She held tight to him, enjoying the feel of having her arms wrapped around him. "If you betray me, he will kill you."

"He's like a foot tall and," Alejandro raked his green gaze over her slowly, "I won't betray you so he'll have no reason to bite my ankles."

"Mmm, such confidence. I really hope he does bite you. It would serve you right." She drew back from him slowly, not really wanting to lose contact but knowing she couldn't hang on to him forever. "I should get my things packed up."

"You're leaving?" he asked, turning to face her.

"Not for good but I have a meeting back on Earth with my uncle and several other key players later today. If I miss it or do anything out of the ordinary they might get a little suspicious."

Alejandro tipped his head back and sighed. "Shit, it's been three days already? Is it wrong that I'm torn between wanting you to go so I know you're safe and wanting you to stay for purely selfish reasons?"

"No, but you need to stop trying to 'protect me' and let me live and work among you. Trust goes both ways, Alejandro."

"You can't ask me not to worry about you." He cupped her cheek the action was so sweet that it caught Deryn off guard. "It goes against my very nature to let my mate be in harm's way."

"Your what?" she asked, sure she'd heard him wrong. There was no way Alejandro could have referred to her as his mate. *Che* pounded on his chest and began carrying on like a crazed maniac. As *Che's* shenanigans registered Deryn's eyes widened. "He is not my keeper!"

"What's the monkey saying now?" Alejandro asked with a shit ass grin on his face.

Taking a tiny step backwards, Deryn forced out a laugh. "He says that you're ... umm ... never mind. It's silly."

Che thumped his hands on the floor and made a series of odd noises. Deryn couldn't believe what she was hearing. The blood of the beast masters ran through her veins, allowing her to understand animals regardless if they could form real thoughts or not. What she was picking up from *Che* was more than she wanted to know. She stared down at the tiny

creature and put her hand on her hip. "That will be enough of that. He did not do that."

"I didn't do what?"

Deryn chuckled. "Tell him that you didn't announce to the rest of the gang that I'm your rightful mate and that you didn't officially claim me. I think living in the jungle all these centuries has affected *Che's* hearing."

Alejandro stilled. "Centuries?"

Waving her hand in the air, Deryn did her best to get his attention. "Hello, talking to you here. Tell *Che* that you didn't...."

"You are my rightful mate. I did tell the gang all about it. I also made it official by marking you while we were making love, so it's official. You're my wife now. Oh, and those dreams that you find yourself pregnant in ... that's my baby you're carrying. My mother was apparently coming to you for help because she knew you're my mate. She wanted us together. She's been after me for grandbabies for fifteen years. Since a little after I first met you. I don't think that's a coincidence. I'm also hoping that one of those rounds we just had left my seed planted in you. I can't wait to see you singing nursery rhymes with our children. I love you, Deryn. Now, about this monkey's age. Is it really centuries old?"

Something crashed and Alejandro grabbed her by the hand and pulled her through the cell doors. He didn't give her time to protest or focus on what he'd just said. Instead, he yanked her behind him and then came to a grinding halt at the end of the hallway.

"What's wrong?" Deryn asked, staring at a tray of food that lay scattered on the floor.

"I asked Vonni to bring you some breakfast."

Deryn glanced at the food and back at Alejandro. "I wouldn't put it past her to poison me or put a head in a bag." She still couldn't figure out what she'd done to set Vonni off. Whatever it was, the woman hated her. The feeling was mutual so Deryn didn't really mind.

"Come on," Alejandro gave her a slight tug, "let's go get you something to eat. You haven't had a whole meal since you got here."

Thinking back, Deryn realized he was right. She hadn't eaten anything substantial since she arrived. At times, her serum suppressed her appetite but never to this point. Something was off that much was clear. "I'm not really that hungry."

"Deryn, you need to eat and you need an injection," Alejandro said, wrapping his arm around her in a protective manner. "I'll clean this up. You handle what you need to. Unless you need me there. Is it painful every time you inject yourself?"

"How did you know that in my dreams I'm pregnant?" she asked, her face reddening from embarrassment.

"I held you in my arms when Issac was with you." He offered her a comforting smile. She refused to accept it.

"Why in the world would you think the child is yours?" It came out harsher than she wanted it to but she couldn't help herself.

He glanced back at the cell and smacked his lips together.
"Hmm, no idea."

"Smartass."

"I do try." He opened the door and someone yelped.
Alejandro sighed. "I told you not to sit there."

Fulk got to his feet and shrugged. "And I told you that I wasn't leaving until she was out. I just, umm, sort of fell asleep. Vonni woke me up running like a bitch out of hell a second ago. I didn't realize you'd be chasing her. You better not be thinking about starting anything up with Vonni. Bookworm's good people and I've never called you a stupid son-of-a-bitch before but you are one ... umm ... sir."

Alejandro stood, blocking Deryn's path to Fulk. "And why, exactly am I a stupid SOB?"

"Because you know as well as I do that you only locked Bookworm up in there because you were worried that they'd attack again. I mean, you slept on her cell floor, Colonel. You wouldn't do that with someone you suspected of being dangerous to you or us."

He slept on my cell floor?

Touched by Alejandro's thoughtfulness, Deryn planted a kiss on the back of his shoulder. That man was teddy bear. A lethal one but one all the same. Alejandro shifted as if he were embarrassed.

"If I say you're right, will you shut-up?" he asked, groaning. "I'm picking up that I'm apparently a lethal teddy bear. I'd like to stop there."

Fulk seemed to think about a minute. "What about Bookworm?"

"What about me?" Deryn asked.

A huge smile broke out over Fulk's face. "You've been sprung!"

In an instant, Deryn found herself being lifted into the air by a rather affectionate big guy with a gun. Fulk spun her in a circle before drawing in a deep breath and coming to a dead stop. Under normal circumstances, she'd have taken that as a sign of a hygiene issues. Having just heard the confession of a lifetime, she knew better.

"He did it, didn't he?" she asked, eyeing Fulk closely.

His jaw dropped. Fulk stared from Deryn to Alejandro and then back again. "I'm confused. Does this make you Mrs. Colonel, Dr. Vargas or just plain old Mrs. Vargas?"

Deryn's chest tightened and her gaze instantly went to Alejandro. He acted as if it were no big deal. The cocky way he leaned against the doorway made her want to smack him. The sexy way the sun made his black hair have purple highlights made her want to kiss him. For the sake of maintaining what little sanity she had left, Deryn decided to just glare at him. "You could have told me."

"I did tell you."

"I mean before you did it."

He shrugged. "Nah, you'd have said no and tried to beat me up. It was better for all involved that I made what everyone else around here seemed to figure out long before we did official. Now, about this meeting. I'm scheduled to be at it. I need your honest opinion on whether or not you think they'll lock the place down once we set foot through the portal."

Deryn patted Fulk's shoulders and he set her down slowly. She kept her eyes on Alejandro, positive that if she dared to even blink he'd drop another bombshell on her. "Are you crazy? I mean it, are you insane?"

"Not according to my last psychiatric evaluation. You know, those mandatory ones they make us do randomly." He gave her a sly smile. "Why do you ask? Was it something I said?"

She launched at him only to find Fulk picking her up as if she weighed nothing. He lifted her high into the air and smiled at her struggles. "Hey, Bookworm, your little healing trick left me with a bit more strength than I'm used to. It's also helping me keep you from killing the colonel."

Deryn stared at Alejandro with wide eyes. "Why in the hell would you just take it upon yourself to fulfill a prophetic dream? Did you ever stop and think about the fact you die in it? Do you want to die? Is that why you tied yourself to me, because you think it's better to go out with a wife than alone?"

"Deryn, you know better than that," Alejandro said softly.

Kicking out, she tried and failed to break free of Fulk's grasp. "How dare you make me love you and then do your best to fulfill something that leaves you dead? It leaves me grieving over your dead body, Alejandro."

"Aww," Fulk flipped her over his shoulder and patted her rear, "you love the SOB, Bookworm. Now, what do you say we go meet Kane? He's with Ondrea gathering notes for the meeting you all have today."

Ohmygods, I just told Alejandro that I love him.

Warriors of the Darkness
by Mandy M. Roth

Looking up, she found her husband watching her from the doorway. He gave her a tiny salute and a wink before turning to head back into the building they'd just left. Part of her wanted to call out and beg him to come with her. The other part still wanted to strangle him.

"Why, exactly do you have Dr. Murray over your shoulder?" Issac asked.

Deryn couldn't see him from her vantage point but she knew he was close. Fulk laughed. "Nope, she's not Dr. Murray anymore. She's ... umm ... what are you now? Something Vargas. The colonel made it official and now Bookworm wants to kill him."

"I see. Carry on then."

"What? Issac, tell him to put me down!"

A chuckle was the only response she got.

Chapter Ten

"So," Senator Wilcox said, from the other end of the long boardroom table. "Your findings, to date, are that this planet or realm is suitable for human life?"

Every ounce of Deryn wanted to impale the man with the ballpoint pen she was holding but she held back. After having spent the greater portion of the past two hours in what could only be described as a debriefing, she was not only sick of the repetitive line of questioning but seeing clearly through the governments lies.

Kane nodded. "Yes, Senator. We've found that...."

He put his hand up and cut Kane off. It was easy to see that Kane shared her thoughts on impaling the man. The senator stared at Deryn. "Dr. Murray, again, I'll ask what your...."

Having had more than enough and seeing no end in sight, Deryn stood. Her uncle, who sat at the head of the table, stood as well. "Dr. Murray?"

"I'm sorry, I need to stretch my legs. I hope you don't mind if I walk and talk at the same time." She cast him an 'I dare you to tell me I can't' look.

He smiled. "Of course. We have been at this for a long time now."

She set her sights on the middle-aged senator. He seemed to be the trigger-happy one. Her money was on him being behind the removal of the men and women associated with the projects from the NHD. It would take his kind of pull and

connections, under normal circumstances. She glanced towards the clock on the wall and wondered how Fulk and Issac were coming with the project she'd given them.

"Senator, to answer your question, again, yes, it's suitable for human life. I'm sure you knew that already since our military has had men stationed there for seven months now." She let out a tiny laugh as she strolled across the boardroom to stand directly behind him. "Those men and women do count as humans, right?"

He shifted awkwardly in his chair and adjusted his tie. "Most certainly and I can't tell you how happy the higher ups will be to learn that you agree with their original assessments, Doctor. Any luck on dating the artifacts found there or accessing one of the realm's multiple temples?"

Arching a brow, Deryn cast him a friendly smile. "I've started a series of tests but have no results as of yet. My lab at the university is assisting in the matter. I can tell you that whatever is there predates carbon readings. How far," she put her hands up, "I couldn't honestly tell you. It's an amazing find. Though, I wasn't aware that there were multiple temples."

The senator shifted and cleared his throat. "Yes, with all the paperwork we sent you at the last minute to get you up to speed, it would be easy to miss that."

She smiled. "Interesting, I guess my photographic memory is slipping on me. I'll have to pay more attention next time. Tell me, did you remember your anniversary this year? Your wife certainly deserves the best. This is your thirtieth, correct?"

"How did you know that our anniversary is coming up?"

She folded her arms and shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. It stuck in my mind from the last time you were in for a visit. When you were touring the campus with your daughter. I do miss having her as my teaching assistant. Becca is such a bright girl. Loves learning."

"Ah, yes, Rebecca still raves about you and your class, Dr. Murray. Though, I wasn't aware that we visited campus around our anniversary."

Deryn winked. "You didn't. You were in a hurry to get through. Got a call on your cell phone, motioned for Becca to continue on, dropped your planner and I handed it back to you. It had fallen open to this month. You were taking your wife to dinner at seven thirty and had tickets to a ten o'clock show. That was quite a time crunch for you since you had meetings scheduled down to the wire three states away and were catching the three o'clock out of Detroit that same day."

Shocked was an understatement. The senator looked dumbfounded. "That was like six years ago. How would you remember that?"

"It was eight years ago and I remember because I glanced at the book while I was picking it up. If I read it, I tend to retain it." She tapped one long finger on her forearm.

"Whenever I have a problem sleeping, I read. If I run out of books at home, I take to my computer. I've spent many a night curled up with a laptop. With my clearance, I get all the good data. The NHD is a favorite of mine."

His eyes widened. "I'll call my office in the morning and let my secretary know that she clearly forgot to include all the paperwork you needed prior to your trip."

She nodded. "Thank you. That's so sweet of you. I know how busy you are. Oh, how does Becca like her new place? She's engaged now, right?"

Adjusting his tie, he nodded. "Umm, yes. I take it you saw it in the paper. We're very proud. Joseph is a fine young man."

"I'm sure he is. But no, I didn't read it in the paper. I read it in an email Becca sent me. I'm sure you know that she has trouble sleeping, too. It's hard slaying those inner demons, Senator." Deryn put a lot of emphasis on the word slaying. She knew Becca was a slayer and that it was kept hidden from her—as it had been hidden from Deryn once, too.

The senator jolted, sending paperwork scattering about. "Dr. Murray, it's so good to know that the two of you keep in touch. She never mentioned that."

"Like you never bothered to tell her she's a slayer?"

He glanced around the room and shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about. Rebecca isn't a...." He paused and then nodded. "I suppose I owe you a thank you. I take it that you're the reason she walked away from what she did her freshman year. We didn't mean to keep that from her. Really. We adopted her and didn't know what was going on until...."

Deryn sat on the edge of the table next to the senator. "Until she started displaying advanced skills at an early age. She was stronger and faster than other little girls. She

excelled in gymnastics, dance, any sort of game requiring strategy, was able to focus on a task for extraordinary lengths of time while still retaining information taking place around her. Started having nightmares at random stages of her life that would coincide with when something evil was near, stalking, hunting her because it smelled what she was—and wanted to be the next big thing to take down a slayer. It was easier to keep her tucked away, hidden and safe than to let her roam free. The minute you did, she was attacked."

"Did she tell you all of that?" he asked, his face pale.

Deryn shook her head. "No. Becca still has no clue what she is, Senator. I was just telling you how my childhood was. I imagined hers was similar. Though, I had the added advantage of having an uncle," she nodded towards her uncle, "and two extremely close friends that are supernatural. Becca's only exposure to the supernatural came in the form of her security guards—your hired guns."

Laughing, Deryn rubbed her neck. "Do you know what Becca said to me the first time I ordered the guards out of my classroom and away from my area of the university?"

"No."

"She said, thank you. They hate me. I know they do." Deryn teared up. "Did you know that she tried making them things when she was younger? Pictures and other things to show them how much she admired them—how much she knew they were helping to keep her parents safe and to try to make them like her more because she could sense how much they couldn't stomach her. She had no idea why. Like I had no idea why."

He shook his head. "I never knew. They never harmed her. They protected her."

"Of course they did. It was their job. Like it or not, they did it. Just like Joseph proposed to her because you told him to. He has been in your employment for some time now."

"He can keep her safe." He gasped. "Wait, does Rebecca know?"

"She is the one who told me he's gay so I'm assuming so. She didn't want to worry you by telling you that things weren't as happy as you thought. But mostly, she doesn't want to give up the freedom of living without men who hate her controlling her every move. Joseph may not love her like a husband should, but the man does care for her. He and Dr. Harris have had words and he understands that Becca's safety is his first priority—her happiness second."

"You've talked to Joseph. He's gay?"

Ondrea snickered. "Umm, I had the same reaction. It's always the sexy ones. Doesn't matter, he's prepared to marry her anyway just so he knows she's safe but he agrees with Deryn and I that someone won't always be there for her. She needs to know how to protect herself." Ondrea grinned. "Hey, Deryn, didn't you mention you had an opening on your staff? A need for a research assistant?"

"As a matter a fact, I do."

The senator closed his eyes and nodded. "Margie told me to come to you, Dr. Murray. I didn't know where to begin so I went to your uncle instead. That's why I have such a keen interest in this project. I need to know that Rebecca has somewhere to go in the event the others come."

"Others?"

He checked his watch. "I have to go. Your uncle has my permission to divulge all aspects of this project to those of you in this room, if I have your guarantee that if a time comes that Rebecca needs protection, guidance, she will be permitted to come under your wing."

"If," Deryn said. "I have your word that you will not shut this project down and leave those men and women stranded. That, should the need arise to seal off the portal, they will be evacuated back to Earth first. Otherwise, I'll make a few calls and let the media know that I'm a slayer. They'll look into my history, every bit, examine those close to me and try to make me into a celebrity—Becca's name will show up. Word will spread and the rumors will start to fly. If that's not good enough, I've also got a tape of your daughter making a glass beaker spin in mid-air using nothing but her mind."

His eyes widened. "You'd be killing her."

"And you'd be killing hundreds if you seal that portal." Deryn bent down and smiled sweetly. "We understand each other, right?"

"Yes," the senator said, standing slowly. "I'm running out of options, Dr. Murray. New threats have come to light. They're bigger than anything we've ever faced before. She's at an age that she wants to have children." He shook his head. "I won't let my grandchildren be hunted. You not only have my word that I won't trap anyone there, you have my lifetime allegiance if you can get Becca brought on, too."

"Done."

He nodded and shook her hand before pulling her into a hug. "Thanks, Dr. Murray."

Deryn watched as he left. Her uncle put his hand out. "Deryn, if you would remain behind a minute I'd appreciate it."

Alejandro and Kane exchanged knowing looks before heading towards the door. Neither so much as glanced Deryn's direction. That was odd. Apparently, Ondrea thought so too because she cast Deryn a questioning look as she followed them out. When the room had cleared, her uncle came to her.

"Deryn, it sounds as though you've enjoyed the experience of getting to go."

Her gut clenched. "And that sounds like the start of you telling me that my experience is over."

He tipped his head to the side. "Colonel Vargas and Captain Soto have brought it to my attention that the effect of the two suns on you is severe and they're concerned for your safety." Sighing, he patted her shoulder as if it would make it all better. "I'm not saying you can't visit there again. I know how thrilled you must have been to get to work there but as far as you remaining there, I'm going to have to say no."

It felt as though someone had kicked her in the gut but Deryn maintained her composure. "I had some issues my first morning there but that was it. It was a matter of me getting acclimated to it. That's all."

"Ah, Deryn, you know as well as I do that if I allow you to go back with the knowledge that you're at risk there, your

grandmother would string me up by my toes." He gave her a serious look. "If I'm lucky."

"But...."

He shook his head. "My decision is final. Why don't you take some time to say good-bye to Soto and Dr. Harris before they head back? I can call you with frequent updates on their progress and you know that you're always welcome here to observe from our end. The senator trusts your judgment on this project as do I."

Knowing her uncle and that he wouldn't change his mind, Deryn nodded. "Yes. Thank you."

She walked towards the door at a normal pace when all she really wanted to do was run. The minute she hit the hallway, she increased her steps as she headed towards the labs. She entered the room and slammed the door shut behind her.

Ondrea jumped. "Deryn? You scared the shit out of me. Come help me gather what we'll need to tweak your serum. Kane is ignoring me when I ask him to lend a hand."

Deryn's gaze went across the room and landed on Kane. He drew his lips in and nodded. "I take it that your uncle told you."

"Told her what?" Ondrea asked.

"Apparently, Kane and the colonel told my uncle that the suns there are too damaging to me so I'm not allowed to go back with you." It took all she had not to lash out, yell, cry, do anything other than stand there.

Ondrea didn't bother practicing reserve. She pointed at Kane and narrowed her gaze. "This is because you're jealous!"

I knew the second you smelled the colonel's mark on her that you'd do something stupid. I didn't know it would be this."

Alejandro appeared from the adjacent lab. He crossed his arms over his expansive chest and gave Ondrea a hard stare. "Actually, it was my decision. Soto tried to talk me out of it, even with the knowledge of what had transpired."

"You?" Ondrea shook her head. "You of all people should want her close to you."

Deryn touched Ondrea's shoulder. "Leave it be. It's fine."

"Fine? Deryn he's your...."

Not wanting to discuss it further, Deryn arched a brow and brought out her inner bitch. It was that or bawl at Alejandro's feet. That was something she refused to do. "He's nothing to me."

"Deryn," Ondrea said, softly. "Don't do this. Talk to him, make him change his mind."

She snorted. "And do what? Beg him to let me come with him? I don't think so. Not my style. I've shed more tears in the last three days than I have in my entire life. I'm done. In fact," she leveled her gaze on Alejandro, "I expected him to betray me in some way. This really isn't that big of a shock. At least Dean had the courtesy to ask me to marry him. He didn't just do it before he turned on me."

"Leave him alone, Deryn," Kane said, defensively. "He doesn't want anything to happen to you there. Those things are coming after you full force and they won't stop until you're dead or seriously injured."

"Right and I suppose they'll just stop coming after anyone and go back to watching from the sidelines. Yeah." Deryn

rolled her eyes and stared at Kane. "You know, I never in a million years thought you'd betray me, too. Never."

He made a move to come to her and she took a large step backwards. He shook his head. "Deryn, no, it's not like that. I want you safe, too. Alex is right. It's too dangerous for you there."

"Deryn is the only one of us qualified to be going up against these things and you two know it," Ondrea said, heading straight for them.

Deryn caught her by the arm and held her in place. "No. It's fine. There's something I've wanted to do for years and now that I have some free time from the university, I can do it."

The look on Ondrea's face was one of pure terror. "Fight this, Deryn. Please. Go to your uncle. Make him understand. Go to your grandma. She'll make your uncle let you back in!" The minute Ondrea began to cry Deryn pulled her into her arms. Ondrea hugged her tight. "Don't give up. Please."

"Ondrea?" Kane asked, concern etched on his face. "You never cry in front of anyone. What's wrong? What's going on?"

"What do you care?" She practically spat at Kane and it took a lot of Deryn's strength to hold her in place. "You've washed your hands of her just like you did on the night of her prom."

The room fell silent. Deryn closed her eyes and put her cheek against the top of Ondrea's head as she held her friend. "I better get going. Be careful."

She gasped. "Call Cecelia. Call Nava. Don't go home alone. No. I'll stay. Kane, I'm staying."

Deryn forced a smile to her face. "Onnie, you live for the chance to explore ruins like they have there. You go but promise me that you'll stay close to Fulk. He may not understand what's happened to him but he carries power similar to mine now. I thought it would dissipate. It's getting stronger in him."

"Deryn, no, I'm coming with you."

Kane stepped forward. "Ondrea, why in the hell are you acting this way? Why would you want her to call her grandmother? And why in the hell is Deryn taking this so well? With that temper of hers she should have already tried to gut me with something."

Ondrea ignored Kane and focused on Deryn. "Don't you dare do it."

"Onnie, really, you're being very dramatic. They don't want me back there and I've accepted that. Take care of yourself and be sure to hug Issac and Fulk for me." Deciding it was best to get while the getting was good, Deryn released her hold on Ondrea and headed for the lab door.

"Tell them why it is you memorized the NHD database, Deryn! Tell them!" Ondrea screamed out, not seeming to care that others might hear.

"Ondrea?" Kane asked. "What are you going on about? Deryn's been doing that for years. She started with it during her recovery after the..." He drew in a sharp breath. "Oh, fuck, she's been looking for the vampires who got away."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Deryn continued towards the door, doing her best to keep it together.

Ondrea seized hold of her arm and spun her around. "Bullshit," she shook her head, "I heard you on the phone with Cecelia. I heard you trying to deny what you'd been planning on doing but she knew. Somehow she knew and she was worried. You forget, Deryn, I have supernatural hearing. I heard everything she said to you every time she called and I was there."

"What did my mother say?" Alejandro asked.

Deryn couldn't help but laugh as she glanced over her shoulder at him. "She said you were an amazing man. Since she was clearly wrong about that, the rest of what she had to say is suspect."

His gaze went to Ondrea. "What did she say?"

"This is pointless. I need to head out now. I still can't remember if I left my coffeepot on." Deryn smiled but it was anything but friendly. "Maybe I'll get lucky and it will catch fire. The fire department hasn't been out recently and I have to admit to missing certain aspects of that."

Alejandro growled. "Deryn."

She glared at him. "I don't appreciate being used and lied to. I have no idea what prompted you to go to the extreme of claiming me and I frankly don't care. I do find it rather funny that someone who is well known for his sexual exploits would do that. Especially since, from what Onnie's told me about shifters, they mate for life."

The muscles in his neck tightened to the point that cords began to pop out. He was as pissed as Deryn suspected he

would be. She smiled. "Thankfully, this is one situation where it doesn't go both ways. See, as you've pointed out before, I'm not like you. I can do as I please. Enjoy yourself. I know I will."

The growl that came from Alejandro was the loudest one he'd done yet. It actually made Deryn jump slightly. He was on her in an instant, pressing her against the wall with his face close to hers. His eyes swirled with shades of green. "You will not touch another man."

She smiled. "You know, you've got a good point. Men do seem to enjoy the 'no hands approach' to going down on them." She winked. "Thanks for the tip. Now, if you'll excuse me. I need to make flight arrangements."

He gritted his teeth. "Soto, inform the general that we've seen the error of our ways and are sure we can accommodate the doctor's special needs. She's coming back with us."

"No," Deryn didn't back down an ounce, "I'm not."

Alejandro's nostrils flared as his breathing grew shallow. "You win. It was wrong of me to go behind your back on this. Now, get ready to go. You're coming back with us. I can't believe you'd even consider being with another man."

"Alex, we agreed that it's too dangerous for her with us," Kane said, his voice low. "You said it yourself, you couldn't survive if something happened to her. Allowing her to come back is like signing her death warrant. You can't let her use other men against you. I mean, you had to have thought about the fact that we might not walk away from this. Deryn will move on without you. She'll just be doing it sooner that's all."

The snarl that ripped through Alejandro made Deryn nervous enough to press her back to the wall. He turned his head and stared at Kane. "Tell me that a piece of you isn't loving this ... loving the fact that even though I did the one thing you couldn't—claim her, that I don't get her either. Tell me that you aren't happy to know that she won't be with me."

"She's not a prize to be won or lost, Alex." Kane squared his shoulders, an action that always meant he was planning on fighting. "I want what's best for Deryn. It's not safe for her there and you know it."

"It's not safe for her here either, Kane," Ondrea said, followed close by a choked sob. "You know Deryn and you know that she'll do it, she'll go after the vampires that survived."

"Ondrea," Kane exhaled deeply, "Deryn is an excellent slayer. She'll kill them and then she'll be fine. Not to mention safe from the tomb guards and whatever the hell else is after her."

"You're wrong, Kane. She won't win against them. Psychologically, they have the advantage. They'll mess with her mind and one slip could cost Deryn her life. She's an asset to us. She'll help keep anything from breaking into this realm."

Kane sighed. "Ondrea, I understand the risks of that but the risks of her returning with us are worse."

Deryn pushed on Alejandro's chest. "Would you please move? I'd like to book a flight and get home."

He locked gazes with her. "I didn't betray you, Deryn. How is wanting my wife safe a betrayal?"

Rolling her eyes, she pushed on him again, trying to get him off her. "Move. Now."

In an instant, Alejandro had his mouth covering hers. It was so full of passion that it seemed to engulf Deryn, igniting a fire deep within her belly. She went into his arms, needing to be closer to him as their tongues intertwined.

The door to the lab opened. "Deryn, I wanted to apologize again. I know how.... Unhand my niece!"

She and Alejandro stopped kissing and glanced at William. He looked livid.

"Uncle Will." Deryn offered up a small smile as she touched her swollen lips. "It's okay."

"No. It's not. I have not spent my life constantly worried you'd end up with Soto to turn around and be fine with you taking up with another shifter." He glared at Soto. "The only reason I permitted you to remain in her life is because Nava said you're like Deryn, you have Avatarian blood in your veins and were created to be her protector—to guard all of the original slayers. That is it! I can't stand that she's best friends with shifters. The thought of her dating one is even worse."

Shocked, Deryn stepped forward. "I can't believe you'd say that. *You're* a shifter."

He narrowed his gaze. "A fact that cost your aunt her life. She thought that others wouldn't see her as a threat because she was married to me. It didn't change anything. They still came. They still attacked her but they waited until I was out of the country to do it."

"Aunt Senna died in a car accident with my mother. She didn't...."

William slammed the door shut behind him as his chest heaved. "No. That's what Nava and I decided would be best to tell you, Deryn. She didn't want to say that your own father was the one who tipped off a local group of shifters and vamps about what his wife and her sister truly were—original slayers."

Deryn let out a soft laugh. "That's absurd. My father passed away before I was born."

"No," William said, his voice clipped. Rage was evident on his face. "Your father didn't die, Deryn. He's very much alive. Your mother realized that she was in over her head with him—that he had insane ideas about promising you to a fellow god, that the union would somehow strengthen his power and his hold on the other Avatars."

"Another god? Still alive? Uncle Will, are you feeling okay?" Deryn asked, lost as to what he was talking about. "You're making it sound like my father was an Avatar. That's insane. Grandma said that he had the blood of the beast master line of gods in him but that...."

William snorted. "Well he better, he is *the* beast master god, Deryn. He's powerful and deadly. Why do you think Nava hid what you are from you? She didn't decide to settle down and make a quiet life here on Earth. She came when she learned that her daughters had been slaughtered and that her granddaughter had been taken by her own father."

"Deryn, I hate to say it but it makes sense. Your grandmother has always been adamant that you hide who

you are. She's done everything to keep your name off the NHD list," Kane said, voicing what she didn't want to be true.

"No. Grandma said that my parents were madly in love and that...."

William tossed his hands in the air. "Deryn, do you think she would want you to know that your aunt and your mother fled when your mother found out she was expecting? They weren't the only women from my understanding. There were others that left, too. Many were goddess or demi-goddesses."

Ondrea stepped forward and drew her brows together. "What made them want to leave?"

"Many had been blending in, living as normal supernaturals or even posing as human for hundreds of years. The realms of the gods had become littered with politics and power struggles. They didn't want to be a part of it. Many also had started families—some with shifters, vampires, whatever ... that doesn't matter, what does matter was the response the head council of the Avatars gave to the realm's population, many of their own, both men and women, who had dared to taint the lines with other blood."

Deryn stood there, too shocked to do anything but listen as her uncle continued to speak. "They ordered the execution of any offspring that resulted from the unions that were outside the Avatarian race. They also wanted the mates destroyed to teach any future ones a lesson. Your mother was instrumental in ushering many to safety and then hiding who they truly were. She didn't have to do that. You're a pure blood, Deryn. You weren't going to be executed. But many of her friends' husbands and children were."

Ondrea gasped. "Her brother-in-law was on the chopping block, too."

William nodded. "Yes. They wanted me dead as well and Phadra wouldn't allow that to happen. She loved Senna too much to see her lose ... well, me."

"Phadra?" Alejandro asked, as he pulled Deryn back and cradled her to his chest protectively. "Your mother's name was Phadra?"

William rubbed his temples. "Damnit, Cecelia and Nava are going to kill me for telling all of you this." He glanced at Kane and Ondrea. "I doubt your parents will be pleased either."

"Our parents?" Ondrea asked.

Kane touched her shoulder. "Ondrea, I'm like Deryn, I come directly from Avatars as well. It would stand to reason that they'd want me dead, too. After all, my father doesn't come from the blood line. He's a normal supernatural. A dragon shifter. My guess is that one of your parents is tied to it all too. It would explain why Nava is so overprotective of the three of us and why she made sure we'd grow up close."

"Kane's right," William said, leaving Ondrea to stand there with wide eyes and a blank look on her face. "Nava clumped the sons and daughters of the mixed Avatarian lines together in clusters so that they would have added protection and not draw suspicion due to the fact that they would naturally possess more power than other 'normal' supernaturals."

Deryn drew in a deep breath as she leaned into the comfort of Alejandro's embrace. "That makes sense. Others around them would assume it was just natural evolution not a separate race."

"Hold up, if the Avatars hate us so much, why in the hell are we hanging out in a realm that seems chocked full of their culture?"

Alejandro spoke next, "My guess is that the children born from these unions are now adults who are more powerful than they first thought. It would make sense to scout locations suitable for them to relocate to if need be. What better place than a place thought to be abandoned by them?"

Turning to face Alejandro, Deryn kissed his cheek and her uncle made an odd noise. "What? Tell me what's so wrong about me being in love with a shape shifter?"

"In love with him?" William looked faint. "The two of you have been back together for three days and already you know you love him?"

"Back together?" Ondrea asked, stealing the question from Deryn's lips. For some reason the idea of her being with Alejandro seemed to terrify her uncle.

William pinched the bridge of his nose. It was clear he didn't want to be discussing this. "This isn't the first time the two of you have been around one another."

"I know." Deryn shrugged. "We figured out that we had a chance meeting the night of my attack."

Shaking his head, William snorted. "Chance? I doubt it. Alejandro has always had an affinity for visiting you. I imagine he sensed that something was going to happen but since Nava and Cecelia tried so hard to sever your connection, he probably couldn't figure out why it was he was there."

"Connection?"

William let out a soft laugh. "Your families go way back. Nava and Amador, Alejandro's grandfather, used to be like you and Kane are. They were the best of friends. Cecelia, Phadra and Senna were best friends. Virtually inseparable until Cecelia met Alejandro's father and fell in love. Still, the girls stayed close."

Alejandro tightened his grip on her. "What are you talking about?"

"Okay, there was or rather is an entire council of head Avatars. They only need a majority vote to make decisions and from what Nava's told me, some council members are more prone to bucking the system than others. Alejandro's grandfather, Amador, is one of them." William leaned against the wall. "He and your father, Deryn, tend to butt heads. Their powers tend to overlap as did their taste in women. His grandfather had a crush on your grandmother for the longest time."

Deryn's eyes widened. "We aren't related somehow are we?"

"Oh gods, I hope not, that would be sick." Ondrea made a gagging noise.

William looked shocked. "By the gods, no! It was never sexual between them. Ever. Keep in mind that Avatars don't age so the guy still doesn't look any older than mid-thirties and he's well into his thousands by now. In fact, he and Alejandro could pass for the same person if someone didn't know enough to notice that Alejandro is free of Avatarian tattoos while Amador is covered in them as are most Avatarians.

"That's not really the point. The point is that during the height of the turmoil among the gods themselves, Amador's tomb guards decided to attack. Nava issued an order to her slayers to protect him and his family at all costs. Amador had already lost his wife during childbirth and had only one daughter."

"Cecelia," Deryn whispered.

"Yes. The tomb guards staged an uprising, doing their best to seize power. Your mother, being one of Nava's finest slayers answered the call. She was assigned to guard Cecelia and her young family." He sighed and shook his head. "Not that Nava even had to tell her girls to protect Cecelia, the boys and her husband. No. Senna and Phadra loved her like she was their sister, too."

Deryn chanced a glance at Ondrea and found her standing there with her mouth wide open, clearly as shocked as Deryn was. "Can you get to the point, Will?"

"The point is, Cecelia had mated with a normal shifter, not an Avatarian one. While Amador wasn't too pleased, he in no way wanted his grandchildren or their father slaughtered so during the course of the tomb guard uprising, he asked your mother to hide Cecelia and her family on Earth. She agreed."

William shook his head. "It was several months after that when strange things started happening." He laughed. "I can still remember Phadra's face when this little boy, no more than five at the time just appeared out of thin air. She recognized Alejandro immediately and called Cecelia to let her know he was okay. When his mother demanded to know what he was thinking using his magik to move through space and

time, he pointed at Phadra's very swollen belly and said he wanted to visit the baby."

Alejandro stiffened. "Wait, you're telling me that I somehow teleported myself to see Deryn when she was still in her mother?"

"Yep." William nodded. "You'd taken a shine to Phadra during the course of her assisting your mother with hiding you all and you'd always loved Nava. Of course, none of us knew that Phadra was pregnant at the time. She wasn't showing yet. Well, all of us, but you. You kept asking her about the baby. When was it due? When would you get to play with her? When could you keep her? She thought you were a cute, albeit a delusional little boy. When you began making regular house calls to visit Deryn after she'd been born, they realized they might have a problem. Especially since Phadra had been forced to cut ties and hide from Deryn's father—Teryn. Every time you used your Avatarian magik to visit, you left a trail. You couldn't help it, you were just a little boy."

Ondrea burst out into laughter. Everyone stared at her. She put her hands up and kept laughing. "What? I can't be the only one who thinks it's hilarious that Alejandro has been in love with Deryn since before she was even born? Come on, this is too perfect."

William pointed at her. "You hit the nail on the head, Ondrea. Alejandro was in love with Deryn. Well, at the time they assumed it was a one sided accidental connection. That Alejandro might have accidentally mystically attached himself to you while your mother was saving his life."

Ondrea eyed Deryn carefully. "Hmm, looks like the attraction is mutual to me."

"Nava told them not to worry about it, that Alejandro and Deryn were most likely mates. She said it made sense that the Fates would put them together. Regardless, it wasn't safe for Alejandro to be transporting himself half way across the world at that age so Nava agreed to allow his mother and your mother to temporarily bind Alejandro's ability to sense and locate you, Deryn."

Alejandro let out a low growl. William shook his head. "No one wanted to keep you apart out of spite. It was too risky for that much power to be in one room together. We all had enough problems binding Deryn's powers because she kept making things in nursery school fly across the room. You name it, she did it. You weren't exactly easy on the power usage around her either." William pointed at Alejandro. "You even branded Deryn by accident."

Everyone gasped and looked at Alejandro for an answer. His eyes widened. "What? I don't remember any of this."

William laughed. "Deryn was just a baby and she was fussing something fierce. You appeared in her room and began to sing to her. When she'd quieted down, you planted a tiny kiss on the back on her neck while she slept peacefully on her stomach."

Alejandro reached out for Deryn but pulled his hand back fast. "Oh gods, the jaguar on the base of her neck. I put that there, didn't I?"

Nodding, William rolled his shoulders. "Yes, you did. I remember that Cecelia was furious that you'd do something

like that. She summoned your grandfather to remove it. He did and Deryn immediately woke and began to cry. She spent weeks carrying on like that. It wasn't until Senna made a joke about how she missed her kitty boyfriend that everyone stopped and thought about it. They called Amador back. He replaced what Alejandro had given her and she instantly fell silent."

Absentmindedly, Deryn began rubbing the tattoo in question. Her gaze flickered to Alejandro's and for a minute, she thought he might take her to the ground and bury himself in her then and there.

William touched Alejandro's upper arm, drawing his attention from Deryn. "By the time you were six, Alejandro, they had managed to keep you from being able to pop in at anytime. Nava had been dead set on one stipulation before she and Amador agreed to the binding of the power that permitted you to do that."

"What was that?" Ondrea asked, caught up in it all.

"She refused to agree to bind Deryn from sensing and locating Alejandro. She was also careful to only give them the spell to temporarily keep Alejandro under control—not permanently."

Deryn covered her mouth in an attempt to block her sob. It didn't work. "That's why I dreamt about him."

William nodded. "You didn't just dream about him, Deryn. You somehow managed to tap into Cecelia as well. She called you and then she called Nava. Nava called me and informed me that come hell or high water I was to get you to Alejandro. She was also adamant that all involved in this

project be protected from discovery by your father or the countless others like him."

She soaked it all in. "You're the one who has been removing their names from the NHD."

"Yes. Senator Wilcox and I have been doing it slowly so as not to draw attention to it but it was necessary to keep their identities a secret. He's got just as much at stake if they find Rebecca."

"Why now? Why do it after all these years?" Deryn asked, vaguely aware of Alejandro rubbing her lower abdomen. He caressed it, drawing lazy circles over it before planting a kiss on her shoulder. "Why would my father suddenly resurface and come after them again."

"No, Deryn, not just your father. There are many who supported the cause. And to answer your question, he has never stopped looking for you." William sighed. "As far as the dreams of Alejandro dying, Nava and Cecelia discussed binding your ability to sense him. They knew it would stop the dreams and keep you out of all of it."

"All of it?"

"The temple was one built to honor Alejandro's grandfather. One of the major tomb guard uprisings took place there. In order to maintain order and keep mankind safe, there has to be Avatars powerful enough to fight their peers. Word of this will eventually get back to your father. He has always been suspicious of Amador due to his close relationship with Nava so he has many spies planted within his temple. It's part of the reason Nava and Amador have gone so long without seeing one another. He fears he'll lead

the enemy to your doorstep, Deryn. He's also gone without seeing his daughter or his grandsons for the same reason. That has to be a lonely existence."

She instantly thought about seeing Alejandro in the dreams and sensing how alone he was. It broke her heart to think of it. "Can we find him? He shouldn't be forced to live an eternity alone."

"That would not be wise. The very fact that Alejandro is almost an identical replica of Amador is reason enough to keep them apart. Should someone see Alejandro and Amador in the same room, they'll figure out who Alejandro is and that's not good." Deryn watched as her uncle unbuttoned his collar. "I still don't know how you managed to tap into him, Deryn. Nava's gut reaction was to consider binding your ability to sense Alejandro. Her love for Cecelia and her respect for his grandfather kept her from doing that. She knew if she didn't make sure you got to him that he would indeed die. The idea of allowing harm to come to your true mate for the sake of keeping you out of harm's way was something Nava couldn't do. She lost your grandfather to the wars shortly after Senna was born. She knows firsthand what it's like to lose your husband. She also knew that it was time to let what was meant to be—be."

"General," Alejandro said, letting go of Deryn and causing a chill to run up her spine. "The tomb guards and whatever the hell else the Avatars once fought are still there. They've made several attempts on Deryn's life."

"No, Alejandro, he'll shut the project down." Deryn made a move to go to him but the hard look he gave her stopped her in her tracks.

"Good. Call Nava and have her bind Deryn."

Deryn fought for breath as the reality of what she was hearing sunk in. *My husband doesn't want me.*

"What's going on?" William asked, eying Deryn up.

Alejandro motioned for Kane. "Soto, we've got a temple to take back. Dr. Harris, you'll be staying here as well. General, please seal the portal after we're through it. If we survive and win, we'll find a way to open it again. If not, Earth isn't at risk for whatever the hell is still there to invade."

"Alejandro, are you sure? Without a portal being open at all times, the other realm's time will move differently than here. You could come back and find that hundreds of years have passed on Earth or the opposite could hold true. We have no way of knowing. I think it would be wise to leave the portal open. The link keeps the times in sync."

Deryn shook her head and rushed towards her uncle. "No, don't agree to this. It's suicide. Make them take me with them. Please."

"I claimed her," Alejandro said, so soft that Deryn almost missed it.

Her uncle, on the other hand, heard it loud and clear. "You did what? You claimed my niece within three days of being back around her? Are you insane?"

Ondrea cleared her throat. "Umm, Uncle Will, he's been in love with her his entire life. Be happy he waited that long. Geesh, he branded her as a baby for crying out loud."

Warriors of the Darkness
by Mandy M. Roth

"Her father or the others like him will find her if she's with me. She stays. End of story." He walked out, leaving Deryn standing there on the verge of tears.

Kane caught her in his arms and hugged her tight. "I'll get him home safe to you. You have my word."

Chapter Eleven

Alejandro stood, staring out into the jungle, his mind wandering again to thoughts of Deryn. It had been close to three weeks since he'd left her standing in the lab on Earth and walked out of her life. It had been the single hardest thing he'd ever had to do but he didn't have a choice. The risk to her was too great to be around him. No part of him wanted Deryn harmed because of him.

"Colonel," a soft voice said from behind him.

He turned to see Vonni standing there holding a tray of food. She lifted it slightly. "I thought you might be hungry. Rodriquez said you haven't been eating. Are you sick?"

"I'm not hungry, Vonni, but thank you for thinking of me."

"It was for the best, sir," she said, setting the tray on the ground and walking towards him. "She is a slayer. She doesn't belong with us."

"She's my wife." He didn't bother to hide his disgust.

Vonni ran her hand over his upper arm and brushed her body against his. "Come on, I think we both know that she bespelled you somehow. Be happy that you cut her out of your life when you did. She would have staked you in your sleep or something."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Alejandro rolled his head, doing his best to avoid the temptation to knock Vonni on her spoiled ass. "I would prefer to be alone."

She ignored him and went to work on trying to pull his tee shirt free of his pants. Alejandro caught her wrist and held it

firm. Vonni cast him a seductive smile. "I can help you forget her."

"You are excused. Now go."

"Colonel, let me help you take your mind off her." She ran her free hand up his torso. "You don't really think she hasn't moved on from you, do you?"

He went rigid.

"Oh, sorry. Did I strike a nerve?"

"Leave."

She didn't move. "I'm sure she's moved on. No woman would wait that long for a man to come back. Umm, err, I mean, three weeks would feel like a long time."

He sensed it then, she was hiding something. He glanced down at her and arched a brow. "What did you do?"

"N-nothing."

"Do not lie to me, Vonni. I don't have the patience to deal with it right now. What did you do?"

She glanced at the ground. "I, umm, I overheard Kane telling Issac to keep the portal open so the times stay linked."

"And?" he asked, positive he wouldn't like where this was headed.

"And I just thought you needed to move on. To get over her. It was a mistake. I know you didn't mean to bind yourself to her. I know that she tricked you somehow that you...."

"What did you do?"

"I closed the portal when Issac wasn't around. Just for a little bit and just a few times."

Alejandro's stomach dropped. "You did what?"

"You're better off without her. You'll see. I can guarantee she moved on. She isn't...."

Storming away from Vonni, Alejandro stopped in front of a purple tree and slammed his fist into it. Pain radiated up his arm and he knew he'd broken a few bones but he didn't care. He'd heal. The pain of not having Deryn was worse and the need to drown it out was great. He punched the tree again but didn't stop with just one hit. He wailed on it, using it to work out some of the frustration he felt.

"Hey!"

Something slammed into him, taking him to ground. Immediately, the beast within him tried to surface. Growling out, Alejandro twisted, ready and willing to kill something. Fulk's face greeted him and he stopped in mid-motion.

"Colonel?"

"Everything hurts, Rodriguez." He collapsed on the ground, not caring what he looked like.

Fulk arched a brow. "I'd imagine so, sir. The tree looks worse though."

Shaking his head, Alejandro thumped his head against the ground. "Not that."

"You mean it hurts on the inside." The hulk of a man dropped down next to Alejandro and stared up at the sky. "I'd say that I feel bad for you but I don't. She should be with you—with her husband. You were wrong to make her stay behind."

"Gee, I'm so happy you got over your phobia of telling me when I'm being an ass," he said sarcastically.

"Hey, Vonni, would you excuse us please?" The sound of Issac's voice made Alejandro moan. Issac laughed and held a beer out and over Alejandro's head. "This is an intervention, Colonel."

"Better yet, Vonni," Alejandro bit out. "Why don't you just go the fuck away!"

"Sir?" Fulk asked.

Issac held a beer out to him. Not really feeling like eating or drinking anything, he passed on it. "No thanks. I notice Kane is absent, again. I take it he still hates me." Alejandro didn't bother to sit up.

"That's not it, Colonel. He's just got a lot on his plate." Issac sat down next to him. "He's the only one who can read the symbols on the walls and he's the only one who speaks Avatarian among us. He wants to unlock the secrets of destroying these things as much, if not more, than the rest of us."

"What I want to know is why the hell they stopped attacking us. I want to kill every last one of them but I can't until they show themselves." Alejandro reached out and took the beer Issac had originally offered him. "I changed my mind."

"I think I can answer that," Kane said, moving through the dense jungle brush. "I decoded another section of the temple."

"And?" Alejandro sat up and eyed the man he had come to think of as a brother. It was ironic that the one thing that should have brought them closer, Deryn, put a wedge between them.

Kane's expression was one Alejandro had seen only on the day he'd confessed to claiming Deryn. The fact he wore it now worried him. "I think we might have a problem."

"Bigger than crazy evil things in this realm that can take the form of others?" Issac asked, not missing an opportunity to toss in his smart assed remarks. He lifted his own beer and saluted Alejandro.

Kane didn't laugh. "How about crazy evil things that can take the form of others and who don't need a portal to move between realms?"

Fulk got to his feet so quickly that Alejandro had to do a double take. Whatever Deryn had done to him had certainly enhanced his natural abilities. He dusted his backside off and shrugged. "What? I'd say that's worse. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Wait." Issac got to his feet too and extended a hand to Alejandro. "So you're saying that we've been guarding this portal, thinking we were protecting Earth and they've always had the power to move without it?"

Kane shook his head. "Yes but without the portal remaining open, time changes would occur. But yes, they have always been able to travel without the aid of this one. We can move back and forth too without it. Any of us here that are direct descendants to the Avatars or powerful Fae Princes who like to pretend they aren't the magikal shit."

Issac cringed. "Can we not start on the prince thing again? It's a title. One that I renounced ages ago. I take orders from Mohammed Al-tree-beater over there. Carry on."

"I know why they haven't attacked again." Kane locked gazes with Alejandro. "I think they figured out who you really are once Deryn arrived."

"So, why aren't they trying to overthrow me? Or don't they view me as a threat?" he asked, wanting more than anything to start hitting the tree again. He held back.

Kane sighed. "No. They view you as a threat. A big one. They've just changed their goals. I think they believe that you and Deryn are the one the prophecies speak of. The ones who will resurrect not only the god but his warriors as well."

Alejandro's brow furrowed. Kane had always had a way of making simple things complicated. "What? They think that Deryn and I can bring them back to life?"

"That's exactly what they think."

He snorted. "So why aren't they trying to kill me then?"

Fulk nudge him. "Excuse me, sir, but that would be a bad thing. Don't sound so excited about it."

Kane ignored him and stared at Alejandro. "The tomb guard's attack on the camp was a test. They needed to be sure that you were a mated pair, that she was an *áricus*, that you were both powerful warriors and that you were truly the descendant of the god they tried and failed to overthrow. They got it all that night. You claimed Deryn outright for everyone to hear. She demonstrated her power by healing Fulk and taking them on. You then came charging in with your 'warriors' and made quick work of them."

He remembered it all, how terrified for Deryn he'd been and how she'd asked him what else he was after she'd seen him fight. He'd taken her question the wrong way. After

talking with the general, Alejandro now understood that he was something more than just a shifter.

"If they don't want us dead, then what do they want?"

"To make a long story short, they want you and Deryn to give them life the same way you would anything else—the old fashioned way. All they need is to find the *áricus* and once she's pregnant they can basically hitch a ride by devouring the baby's soul and replacing it with their own."

The shock of it all sent Alejandro staggering backwards. Fulk grabbed him by the upper arm and yanked him to his feet. "Yeah, I guess that'd be a lot to absorb."

Alejandro drew in a long, ragged breath. "They need me alive to assure Deryn is pregnant?"

"Well, maybe. I'm not sure on that one but that's not all," Kane said, leaving Alejandro bracing himself for bad news. "Now, at first I read it as they'd somehow enter you and then through you spill their essence into Deryn's womb. I was wrong. They don't even need you to act as vessel for them. They can become corporeal and do it themselves. They see you as their chance at redemption. Their god put into power again to make amends with the other Avatars so that after they return to the land of the living, they aren't hunted and killed."

"So, as long as I don't get Deryn pregnant, she's safe?" he asked, hoping he was staying on track.

Kane shook his head. "See, this is where I'm not sure. Under normal circumstances that would be the case. Since Deryn survived a brutal vampire attack, she carries many of their traits—among them, a tie with the dead. It's how she

knew to ask Issac to do the binding spell on Jones' body. It's also what might allow them to impregnate her and skip you." He bit his lower lip. "Or rather, become you."

"What?" Alejandro clenched his already bloody fists.

"They took your form when she first got here. They watch and learn. I wouldn't put it past them to try it again. If they can figure out a way to get past Deryn's built in alarm system while disguised as you, every single one of them could have a go at her, Alejandro. Once they've gotten her pregnant or at the very least, leeches onto a child the two of you created, there is nothing we can do to stop them without killing Deryn."

"Holy shit, one of them could be banging Bookworm as we speak."

"That's if the *kektau* haven't found her first. They'll rape, torture and then maybe kill her if they lose interest in playing with her," Kane said, looking slightly nauseous. "The *kektau* are what attacked Deryn in the showers and what took on the form of the vampires that attacked her. Think of them in terms of fallen gods and fallen tomb guards and you're close to what they are. Pure evil."

"Get me to her, now! They will not lay one hand on my wife."

* * * *

"Deryn, we worried sick about you. When Alex told me that Vonni was tampering with the portal I thought the worst. I thought hundreds of years could have passed." Kane headed down a narrow hallway in Deryn's apartment while Alejandro

and the others fanned out to cover the rest. "Alex, it's clear back here."

Issac and Fulk returned to the living room. "Clear."

Deryn stood there, watching it all closely and Alejandro couldn't help but feel relieved at how well she'd accepted him back into her life. The need to hold her once more struck him with a force. He stormed across the room and took her in his arms.

"I missed you," he whispered, pressing his lips to her forehead. She seemed cooler than normal. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine, why?" Deryn laced her arms around his waist and squeezed him tight. "I missed you, too."

"I can't believe that they didn't make an attempt to reach you," Kane said, holstering his weapon. "I thought I had it figured out."

"No. I already told you that everything has been quiet around here. Too quiet. I missed you all so much."

"Hey, Bookworm, can I use your bathroom?"

Deryn stood eerily still with the same happy face she'd been donning from the moment they'd walked in. "Can I make you all some lunch?"

"Hello, Bookworm?"

She didn't respond. Alejandro took a tiny step back and stared down at her. "Darling, why don't you get changed and I'll take you all out to eat. There's no sense in you cooking."

"Colonel?" Issac asked, his voice laced with concern.

Deryn smiled wide. "I think that sounds wonderful."

"Why don't you wear the same dress you had on the first time we made love." Licking his lower lip, Alejandro watched her for her reaction. When she nodded a hollow feeling started in the pit of his stomach.

"Colonel, I'd really rather not be present if you're going to discuss your sexual escapades with Dr. Murray ... err ... Vargas," Issac said, clearing his throat and heading towards the door.

Deryn kept the same fake smile up. "I'll go get changed."

Seizing hold of her neck, Alejandro forced her back against the nearest wall. She yelped and in an instant he had all men he'd brought with him doing their best to yank him backwards.

"Colonel!"

He snarled as he stared into whatever the thing before him masquerading as Deryn was. "Where is my wife?"

She gave him a wide-eyed innocent look. "Alejandro, what are you doing? It's me. It's Deryn."

Kane came at him fast and Alejandro was left no choice but to knock his friend away. "No! This is not Deryn. Where is she?"

"Alex?" Kane staggered and shook his head. "Look at her! It's ... oh shit ... she offered to cook us lunch! Where's Deryn?"

Nodding, Alejandro stared into the thing's eyes. "You are not, Deryn. Tell me where she is!"

As tears began to fill its blue eyes, eyes that looked identical to Deryn's, Alejandro began to second guess himself. What if he was wrong?

Fulk stepped forward. "She didn't seem to know I was talking to her when I called her bookworm. Our Deryn would know."

"I am your Deryn," it said, looking as though it were on the verge of crying.

Alejandro took a deep breath in and shook his head slightly. "Then tell me what color dress you wore the first time we made love?"

"Alejandro please. I don't know. I can't remember. I have so many dresses that I can't remember which one I had on."

Kane gasped. "Where the fuck is our Deryn?"

The thing beneath his hand began to lose its form for a moment before it flickered back. It smiled and then laughed. "Your Deryn is living a happy little life with her husband—with you. She's moved on."

Issac moved up next to Alejandro and glared at the thing. "Colonel, could you excuse me for a moment?"

"No. I want to gut it. Where is my wife?"

It laughed again. "She's fucking you, Colonel."

Issac's magik buzzed all around Alejandro. He let go of the thing's neck for just a second and Issac used that opening to thrust his power at it. It hissed and clawed at its skin—skin that looked like his wife's, at least until it began to sizzle.

"Where is Deryn?" Issac asked, his voice not sounding like his own. It sounded like hundreds of voices wrapped in one. It was power in its purest form.

The thing spit at him and shook its head. "You worry about the life of one woman when you should be worried about the lives of your people, prince?"

Issac ignored its goading. "Sir?"

"Yes."

"It won't tell us where she is. Want to kill it now?"

Alejandro let his claws protrude from his fingertips. "Yes."

* * * *

Crouching, Alejandro glanced toward Fulk who was moving up from the other side. They'd spent the last hour casing the area. Issac had managed to latch onto the residual magik that the *kektaus* had left behind. So far, they'd bounced all over the world, opening portal after portal and ending up at various locations. In the four days they'd searched endlessly, each spot had led them to another Deryn impostor. It had even gotten to the point that they'd come across *kektaus* posing as Ondrea as well.

A little part of him, one that he didn't want to think about, was beginning to wonder if Deryn was still alive. Leaving her behind had been the worst thing he could have done. Had he just kept her with him she'd be safe, by his side. Now, as he looked around at the tropical rain forest they'd walked into from a portal, he couldn't help but wonder what he'd do if Deryn truly had moved on without him or with who she thought was him.

His gut churned as he edged out further and broke through to a clearing. There, in the full sun was Deryn, or at least a semi close replica of her. He sighed. This one had some obvious differences. One, being the fact it was running about in full and direct sunlight. Another was that it wasn't trying to hide the slayer portion of itself. It also had on a long white

cotton wrap skirt and a matching bikini top. Its hair was piled up onto top of its head, leaving tendrils falling over its shoulders.

"Deryn doesn't have tattoos on her wrists," Kane said, moving up next to him.

He was right. She didn't.

"Look," Fulk said, pointing towards a rather nice looking white house.

Alejandro spotted Ondrea there or something pretending to be her anyway. This one's hair was longer than Ondrea's. She was also busy talking with a man who had his back to Alejandro. When he turned, Alejandro couldn't believe his eyes. It was him, or at least it looked just like him. For the most part anyway. The impostor's hair was about three inches longer than Alejandro's and his choice of clothing wasn't something he would have selected.

No. He tended to be a jeans and tee shirt kind of guy. The imposter had on black leather pants and a matching mesh short sleeved shirt.

The impostor covered the distance to the other Deryn and lifted her up and off her feet. She laughed and the sound moved over Alejandro, making him think of his Deryn. His body ached to hold her, be near her, anything.

The impostor snapped his fingers and music began to play all around them. He pulled Deryn into his arms and began to dance with her. They both burst into laughter as they did. He touched her chin and planted a chaste kiss on her forehead before moving towards a tree next to Deryn and picking something up.

The man disappeared into thin air before Alejandro could get a good look at what he was holding. It didn't matter. He'd had more than enough of things pretending to be Deryn and him. He was done.

"Move in. Kill anything that moves," he said, motioning towards the impostor Deryn.

* * * *

Deryn glanced back at Ondrea and shook her head. "He loves doing that. How long do you think the music will play for this time?"

Laughing, Ondrea bent down and picked up a sparring staff. She tossed one to Deryn who caught it with ease. "I have no idea but the man never ceases to amaze me. You were right to find him, Deryn. He needed us."

She smiled and caught movement out of the corner of her eye. "Onnie."

Picking up another staff, Ondrea nodded. "Right there with you, babes."

The second that she spotted a glare, she knew someone was aiming a weapon at her. "Onnie!" She ran hard and fast towards her friend. They needed to get out of the open and get the other slayers organized.

The sound of gunfire filled the air. Bullets whizzed past her as she ran with the staff still in hand. Ondrea began running towards the complex as well. There was blur and then suddenly there was a man who looked like Alejandro standing in front of her, his claws out and his face full of hate.

Ondrea let out a soft laugh. "Oh, lookie, they made a Kane, too. I thought they were done trying this shit with us, Deryn."

She glared at the man before her. "So did I."

"Where is my wife?" the man asked.

She snorted. "I don't know. Where's the last place you left her?"

Not waiting for an answer, Deryn struck up with the staff, sweeping his legs out from under him. He flipped into the air and spun in mid-motion, landing on his feet with ease. He kicked out and struck her stomach with a force that sent her hurtling backwards.

"Where the fuck is my wife? You are not her!"

Rolling to her side, Deryn tried to get up only to find the man was closer than she thought. He kicked out again, this time catching her rib cage just right. Something important cracked. Pain radiated throughout her as she tried to draw in air.

Deryn coughed and spit blood. Grabbing the staff from the grass, she struck out with it, hitting the man and knocking him back from her. She staggered to her feet and glared at him.

"I am beyond sick of you things." Coughing, she spit more blood and winced as she took a fighting stance. Her hand went to her side automatically as she did her best to brace her ribs until her powers could work their magik and heal her.

"Where is my wife?"

She let out a soft laugh. "At least you got new phrases. I was sick of the lame ass come ons." She shook her head.

"Forget it. It doesn't matter what you try, you will not harm my family or any of my girls."

He slashed out fast with his clawed hand and caught her across the face. She bit back a scream as she felt her flesh tearing. Deryn struck out and hit him in the side of the face. He came at her with his clawed hands and she did her best to duck and weave out of his reach. The pain from her punctured lung left her slower than normal, giving him the upper hand.

Time seemed to still as she watched his clawed hand come at her stomach. She knew she wouldn't be fast enough. She braced for the pain she knew would come. He rammed his clawed hand through her flesh, driving it upwards, lifting her off her feet in the process. Pain stole the scream from her throat.

"Where is my wife?"

Deryn couldn't have answered even if she wanted to.

"Issac," the man said. "Get this thing to dump the Deryn look. It doesn't deserve to die looking like my wife."

As she stared down into his green eyes, she felt it, the pull, the draw to him. Her brow furrowed as she looked at his hand buried to the wrist in her stomach and the look of pure rage on his face. "A-Alejandro?"

He glared at her. "Where is my wife?"

The pain intensified tenfold and she realized that he was pushing in further. "Me," she whispered. "Me."

Issac appeared next to Alejandro. He lifted his hand in the air and thrust magik at her. It felt as though someone had

dunked her in a vat of acid. Her entire body cramped and blood pooled from her mouth and nose.

"Where is my wife?" Alejandro repeated. He glanced at Issac. "Why isn't it shedding its skin?"

Issac tore his power away from her and gasped. "Oh gods, put her down! Put her down now!"

"No, this thing will answer me. I am tired of this!" Alejandro shouted, ramming his clawed hand into her more.

Issac grabbed his arm and stared at Deryn with wide eyes. "Colonel, stop! It's Deryn. She's the real Deryn!"

"Bullshit! My Deryn doesn't have tattoos on her wrists, wear skirts, hang out in the sun in full slayer mode. Where the fuck is my wife?"

"It's her, sir! It's her! I know it is!"

Alejandro laughed. "Fine. Then it can tell me what the first food I fed it was when we were together and what color dress it wore."

Deryn struggled for air as pain continued to tear through her. She pleaded with her eyes for Issac to help her.

"She's in too much pain to answer, Colonel! Put her down!"

"Ohmygods, Deryn!" Ondrea shouted. "Alejandro, no! It's her. It's your Deryn."

"It's her, Alex." Kane rushed up and drew in a sharp breath. "Put her down. Now!"

"Not until it answers my fucking questions."

Deryn drew on her strength and stared down at the man she'd assumed was dead. Tears filled her eyes. "*Marido,*" she whispered.

He stilled and tipped his head to side. Alejandro touched her lip with his free hand and put his bloodied finger in his mouth. His breath hitched and at the same moment, she felt his claws retract.

Deryn fell to the ground and laid there, staring up at a blood covered Alejandro. He made a move to come to her and she crawled as best she could. No part of her wanted him to touch her.

Ondrea dropped down next to her. "Deryn, oh gods. What do I do?"

She clutched onto her friend's hand. "Take Alex and run."

"What?" Issac asked, sliding down next to her. He touched her leg and let out a sob. "Colonel, you punctured her lung and have put a hole clean through her. She's not healing the wounds. I don't know why but her body isn't even beginning to."

Ondrea screamed out and grabbed Deryn to her. "No! She can't heal something like this right now. Alex was too hard on her system."

"Yeah, I'd say so, he gutted her."

Ondrea shook her head. "No, not Alejandro, Alex. It took everything Deryn had to carry him to term. She's still not back to a hundred percent."

"What are you talking about?" Issac asked. "Term? She couldn't have had a child, we've only been gone three weeks, Ondrea."

Kane pushed everyone out of the way and dropped down next to Deryn. She stared up at her lifelong friend and blinked

slowly. He shook his head. "I won't let this happen again. Nava! Nava, come now! It's Deryn. She's hurt!"

There was a white flash and Deryn looked up to find Amador standing there with baby Alex in his arms. She shook her head and motioned for him to go but he didn't. He took one look at her and energy began to buzz throughout the air. "Who dared to harm my granddaughter? Who?"

"Granddaughter?" Kane asked. "Who are you?"

Ondrea touched his arm. "That's Amador, Alejandro's grandfather and that," she motioned to the baby in Amador's arms, "is Alex. You've been gone for a year. We thought you were dead."

Amador handed Alex to Ondrea and bent down. He lifted Deryn with ease. "Who did this to you?"

"I did," Alejandro said, his voice weak.

Amador turned around, leaving Deryn and himself to face Alejandro. "Look! Look at what you have done, Alejandro. Are you happy with yourself? I watched this woman go through hell to assure your son lived, that your memory lived on. She came to me. She risked everything to see to it that I was part of Alex's life too and this is the thanks you give her? This is how you treat your mate? A gift that you couldn't stay away from more than a few hours when you were a little boy? A gift that you claimed as your wife within three days of having her back?"

Kane stepped forward. "Sir, we all thought it was one of the *kektau* posing as Deryn. We didn't know. We've been searching for her and have run into nothing but *kektaus*."

"Alejandro, come here." Amador held Deryn out towards Alejandro. She wanted to argue, but was too weak. "Take her. You are the only one who can heal this damage for it was inflicted at your hand."

* * * *

"This is a picture of her at six months," Ondrea said, pushing one of the photo albums she's insisted on showing him. "Look."

He didn't want to look. Looking made him think about what he'd one. He'd almost killed his own mate. That wasn't all of it. His decision to make her stay had left her fighting to protect herself from attacks and fighting to survive the pregnancy.

The shock of being someone's father still hadn't worn off. Each time Ondrea offered to bring Alex out to him, Alejandro declined. He clearly wasn't safe to be around. His judgment was skewed. He'd done the unthinkable. He'd turned against Deryn when he swore he never would.

Alejandro glanced at the picture of Deryn. She had on a pair of jeans that were under the tiny swell of belly she had.

Issac touched it. "She hardly looks pregnant at all."

"Yeah, it was hard for Deryn to gain weight. The serum curbs her appetite and she was left no choice but to unmask her presence. She couldn't keep taking it and without it, in mortal form, she would die. That's how we ended up here, far from others. She can roam around and just be herself."

She reached out and patted Alejandro's leg. "The day after this picture was taken, Deryn came to me and confessed she

could no longer feel a link with you. She assumed you had died." Tipping her head back, she did her best to keep from crying. "She wouldn't eat or drink. She wouldn't come out of her room. She wanted to die. Nothing I said or did changed that. It wasn't until Alex started to kick, making his presence really known to Deryn for the first time in the pregnancy that she realized she had to get up and keep going for him."

"Who delivered him?" Issac asked.

"Becca, me, Nava, Amador and a couple of the other girls."

Kane rubbed his temples. "Let me get this straight. We've been gone a year, according to your time, and in that time, Deryn's become a mom, you now train original slayers, Becca Wilcox came on board and you've been collecting some of the lost Avatarian women along the way?"

"That and we went and got Alejandro's grandpa. Deryn thinks we rescued him from a life of loneliness. Umm, I saw his harem. The man was hardly lonely."

Alejandro expected Fulk to make a comment about having a harem. When he didn't, he looked around the room for him. "Rodriquez?"

"He watches over the child now," a deep voice said from the doorway.

Glancing up, Alejandro found Amador leaning against the doorframe, one leg crossed over the other. His gaze was hard and locked on Alejandro. The man didn't need to tell him how much he'd fucked up. He knew and he hated himself for it.

Amador let out a slight laugh, sounding less than amused. "Hating yourself and entertaining leaving your wife and son for 'their own safety' is not the answer and it is not what *my*

grandson would do in a situation like this. If I didn't have an uncanny ability to weed out impostors, I would have assumed one slipped past. You are letting human emotions cloud your judgment, Alejandro." He put his hand up to stop the protest he must have sensed coming. "Before you say it, you are not human. You were simply raised among them. Do not make their mistakes. Do not do as I once did—give it all up because you believe it is best for all involved if you just disappear."

Ondrea snorted. "Yeah, having eternity with a harem looked like hard work."

Amador cast an almost sad look at Ondrea. "One would think that lifestyle is fit for a god, a king even but...."

Issac shook his head. "It's fine the first few years. You're almost numb to it all. When you start to feel, you fuck it away." He looked at the floor. "Only every time you're in one of them you can't help but think about how much they aren't the one you love. How they never will be. You think about your daughter and how she'll never know her father. Never know how much you loved her and her mother. You think about how you're still alive and how you should have been the one to die. That it should have been you home that day. The sword was meant for you, not her. You think about how one error in judgment, one bad decision changed it all—put her and your daughter at risk, leaving them dead and you to forever have to find a way to live with the pain. Soon, the harem girls no longer help numb the pain. Nothing does. It never really goes away. You just find a new way to deal with the pain. A new cause to put your life on the line for."

The room fell silent. Issac's words sunk in and for the first time in the years he'd known Issac, Alejandro realized that other than knowing Issac was born a Fae prince, he knew little about his past. He knew the man was over a hundred and that he never went home to see his father. He had no idea he'd been married.

"You mean son," Ondrea said softly. "Alejandro has a son."

"Yes." Issac locked gazes with him. "He does. He was lucky enough to find them alive, to have his child born healthy and able to exist outside of his mother. He was lucky enough to be his wife's true soul mate, giving him the power to heal mortal wounds. He's one lucky bastard who better not even think of walking away from her or that little boy or I'll kill him myself." He stood quickly and stormed out of the room, leaving Ondrea staring at him with a blank expression.

"Umm, would you like to meet your son now?" she asked, her voice small.

"When Vonni confessed to tampering with the portal all I could think was that decades, maybe even centuries had elapsed here and that I'd find Deryn had moved on or worse yet, not made it. I couldn't stand the pain." He tapped his chest. "On the inside. It was nothing compared to seeing her look up at me, terrified of me and to hear her beg you to take Alex and run from me. She doesn't want me near him or her."

Amador ran a hand through his hair, revealing an arm full of Avatarian symbols. "That attitude will not only leave you alone for the rest of your very long life, it is the kind that will leave your family dead. Do you honestly think they would be better off without you? The others have not even really begun

to attack. No. They are still unsure exactly what is going on—who is who and so forth. When they do, they will come at little Alex with a force you cannot even begin to imagine."

Alejandro growled and stood. "No."

"Yes. Already we fight to stay ahead of them for the sake of Deryn, you, others like you. Do you really think they will lay down arms the minute they find out the children they once sought to kill are having children of their own?"

Alejandro shook his head unable to believe someone would hurt an innocent child. "He's so tiny."

Amador laughed. "Yes. And powerful. In the womb he marked his mother. The morning before he arrived, Deryn woke to find her wrists burning, buzzing with power that felt so much like yours that she dreamt it was you at first. I watched as the ancient symbols for mother, wife, beloved and warrior appeared as bands around each wrist. They were written from a son to his mother. They were done to give her hope that they would be all right—that she was loved by both he and his father. That they, you and he, would always be there to protect her. I did not know how to tell Deryn that she must have stopped sensing your presence when she was pregnant with Alex due to the drain he put on her system because she'd already come to terms as best she could with you being dead. To give her hope only to find that you never came for her would have been worst thing I could have done to her. Alex disagreed. That's why he marked her. He wanted her to know you were still out there—still loving her. He was powerful enough to do that and he wasn't even here yet, Alejandro. Do you think the enemy will care how tiny he is?"

Another growl tore free of him. "No. I will not allow them to harm my family."

"Then," Amador tipped his head and let a slow smile spread over his face, "get your ugly ass in there and make sure your wife knows that. She is positive you will leave."

"Hey, his ass is identical to yours, and ugly is the last thing I'd call them," Ondrea said, covering her mouth as soon as it popped out.

"Deryn's awake? How is she?"

Amador nodded. "She is as she will always be so long as you are alive and by her side—she is in perfect health now. As it was meant to be."

He stilled and eyed his grandfather carefully. "What do you mean, perfect health?"

"You have already felt the way your body naturally mends hers. So long as you are with her, she is as strong as she would have been without the attack in her past, without the strain of having Alex. Had this Vonni not interfered, Deryn would have had no complications during the pregnancy because your body would have known what to do. You would have caressed her, kissed her, made love to her, healing her from the inside out without thought. It is part of who you are, Alejandro. She is part of you. Born for you. Cherish her. If you do not, *I will*."

Alejandro didn't miss the threat at the end. A low growl of ownership rippled from him. "You will not touch her. You can't anyway. I'm her mate. Not you."

"Then act like it or I can and will release the part of my scent that is identical to yours, Alejandro. You seem to forget

you come from me—my bloodline. You are almost a mirror image of me. That alone is enough to cloud Deryn's protests. Do you honestly think she would turn me away?"

In an instant he was across the room and slamming Amador against the wall. He held a clawed hand to his throat and let his eyes swirl with shades of green. "You will not take my family from me. I have lost too much time with them as it is. I will not let you sweep in and take the rest of it. She is mine. Alex is mine. I love Deryn more than life itself. Without her, I won't wander around fucking endless strings of women to get her out of my mind." He growled. "I will cease to exist. I would die without her. I know that. I realized it over the course of what has been three small weeks to me. Three weeks! That is all it took me to know I can't be without her. Do you think finding out I have a child born from the woman I can't be without will diminish that?"

Alejandro didn't give Amador a chance to answer. He continued shouting, "Hell no! She is my heart. My soul and I can't even get near Alex yet but already I know I feel the same for him. He is mine. He is part of Deryn. I will not allow some cocky fucking god who I happen to look like, waltz in and take them from me. Family or not, I will kill you over her—over them."

"Alejandro."

Turning, he found Deryn standing in the hallway with a woman who could have been her twin had her hair been blonde. The woman offered him a soft smile and he realized who she must be.

"Nava?"

She nodded. "Alejandro, kindly retract those claws. Amador is goading you because he is so very like you that he knows how to get under your skin. What makes you tick. He too is a stubborn fool. That's why he is working overtime on assuring you do not repeat his mistakes."

Ondrea let out a tiny squeal. "Nava! You're here. The two of you never show up here at the same time. I about fell over the day he showed up while you were helping to deliver Alex."

Nava smiled, as her gaze stayed on Amador. "If you'll remember, I really did fall over. The man scared at least a hundred years off of me popping in behind me like that. He hadn't done that in almost...."

"Thirty years," Amador whispered.

Alejandro stared at his grandfather, wondering what his secrets were. What the pain was that he spent so long trying to erase and what would keep he and Nava separated for so long if they had been as close as Kane and Deryn were.

Kane.

It hit Alejandro then. Amador, like Kane had developed feelings on some level for a woman he couldn't have. Had Amador's feelings been even more intense than Kane's?

It wasn't a question he was prepared to ask and he was quite certain Amador would avoid the answer so he let it be. Instead, he focused on his wife. She was breathtaking. Her skin had a natural glow to it and her eyes were a blue unlike any other found in nature. The fact that she was wearing another long skirt, this one a soft pink with an even lighter pink cropped tank top was not lost on him.

Nava patted Deryn's arm and winked at him. "Who would have guessed I had a woman beneath all that ruggedness in my granddaughter? It turns out, having Alex brought about her nurturing, softer side. It made her whole. It made her see her true beauty."

Emotions swelled in him that he couldn't control and didn't even want to. Retracting his claws, he turned his attention to Deryn. He closed the distance between them and gave into what he felt. For the first time in his life, he surrendered to the tears that wanted to come and dropped to his knees before her. Wrapping his arms around her waist, Alejandro kissed the very spot he'd harmed her and held tight to her. "*Amorzão.*"

Deryn ran her hands through his hair and cradled his head to her body. A choked sob came from her and he knew then that she was crying, too.

"I'm so sorry."

Sinking down before him, she cupped her face and forced his gaze to her. "*Eu te amo.*"

As the words fell from her lips, Alejandro felt what control he had left crumbling. Unable to help himself, he pressed his mouth to hers and savored the salty sweet taste of her tears as he thrust his tongue in, kissing his wife with all he had.

The second he felt Deryn's tongue returning his advances he let go—gave into the carnal need to be even closer to her. He took her in his arms and eased her to the floor, never once breaking their kiss. With his body over hers, his cock pulsed to life, hardening at an alarming rate.

The feel of Deryn's erect nipples poking through her thin top, scraping his chest was more than he could bear. Instinctively, Alejandro went for Deryn's skirt, pulling it up, caressing her thigh as he went. Her hands were suddenly between them, unfastening his pants as she bit at his lower lip. He slid his hand up and cupped her ass at the same moment she pushed his jeans down a bit, freeing his cock in process.

Someone smacked his ass cheek and he knew it wasn't Deryn. Her hands were stroking his cock. He froze, realizing what they were doing—going at each other in a hallway full of people. Not just any people either. No. They were doing it in front of their grandparents.

"Oh, would you look at that ass," Nava said, laughing softly. "Amador, have you been hiding one that sexy from me all these years?"

Amador chuckled. "Well, Nava, you spent the greater part of our lifetime threatening to kick it, so I thought it best to keep it covered."

"Hmm, if I could persuade Alejandro to roll over, would I get an accurate idea of what else you've been hiding from me?"

Alejandro stiffened and Deryn burst into laughter. Shocked, he stared down at his wife. "You think this is funny? Your grandmother just smacked my ass and wants me roll over and give her a view of my...."

Deryn pumped his cock and wagged her brows. "And, oh, what a view it is. Use your magik and make them all go away or shut up and fuck me."

Amador burst into laughter. "Oh good gods, she is certainly your granddaughter, Nava."

"I was not *that* bad."

"Was?" Amador asked. "Am I to believe the legendary lover, Nava, has given up on sex?"

She sighed. "Correct me if I'm wrong, Amador, but whose name means lover? Right. Yours. And if you dare bring up the time I made R'quem late for battle I will kick that amazing ass of yours. You'd had his attention on the battlefield for months. I needed attention, too. I'm sorry I kept him a little longer than I should have."

"A little? He was two days late for the battle. Two days, Nava."

She laughed. "Oh, I didn't realize that. We never left the bedroom so I sort of lost track of time. Sorry. My apologies. You're right, she's as bad as me. We should go now and let them do what they need to do."

"No," Amador said. "I for one would like to be able to walk in the hall sometime in the next two days. Alejandro can use his magik to move them to their bedroom. I suggest he do it soon before the pressure of having us as an audience affects his performance. That or his son will need his mother's attention. Either way, he should get a move on."

Deryn let out a sultry laugh as she stroked his cock, her hand and his shaft were carefully hidden between their bodies. "I don't think it will be a performance problem. Fulk is with Alex now but he'll need to be breast fed soon so you better hurry up."

Alejandro arched a brow. "You better be talking about my son latching onto those breasts and not Rodriguez."

Deryn's jaw dropped and Alejandro laughed as he drew his power around them, coating them in it. He moved them quickly to the bedroom and stared down at Deryn. Her blonde hair fell in waves around her and her lips were swollen from their kiss.

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on, Deryn. I still can't believe you're my wife. That I get you for eternity."

"Mmm, flattery will get you everywhere, Colonel."

"Right now, I'm hoping it gets me in you."

She kissed him gently. "Make love to me, Alejandro. My body has ached for you for a year. Make it stop."

He slid his hand up her skirt and stared at her with wide eyes. "You're not wearing any panties."

A sly grin came over her face. "One of the perks of wearing dresses now that you're home is that it makes for easier access."

"Home." He kissed the tip of her nose. "I like the sound of that, Deryn. You have my word that I will never purposely separate us, our family, again. I love you."

"I love you, too. Now, about that making love to me thing."

Aligning himself with her wet core, Alejandro plunged in, taking himself to the hilt and groaning out at the feel of sheer ecstasy he felt being in Deryn once more. He wanted to come then and there, give into it but the idea of taking before he gave pained him.

Deryn wrapped her legs around his waist, allowing him to sink even deeper into her silken depths. "Ah, baby, don't move."

Ignoring him, she countered his thrust, rubbing her clit against his lower abdomen. Alejandro sensed how close she was to coming and gave into his much needed release. His cock twitched as cum shot forth from it, filling his wife fully.

Deryn cried out and cinched his waist with her powerful legs as her pussy milked him. Tears came to the corners of her eyes. "I thought you were dead. I thought...."

"Shh, I'm here now. And you will be with me wherever I go from here on out. You and Alex."

She ran her foot up the back of his jean clad leg. "Now that we got a quickie in, would you like to meet your son?"

Alejandro let out a nervous laugh. "What if he doesn't like me? What if I make him cry? What if he wants Amador instead of...?"

Pressing her lips to his, she silenced him.

What if you just shut up and meet your son.

As Deryn's thoughts entered his mind, he closed his eyes and kissed her passionately.

I love you.

I love you too, marido.

There was a collective uproar from the other end of the house and a pounding on the bedroom door. Alejandro withdrew from Deryn and went to work righting himself as he ran towards the door.

"Deryn!" the sound of an unfamiliar male voice shouting for his wife left Alejandro's beast threatening to surface.

"Deryn, I will beat the door down to kill that bastard."

"Ellery, no," Deryn said, pushing past him. "I'm fine. He didn't mean it. He didn't know it was really me."

Ellery?

"Open the door or so help me I will kick it in."

Never one to back down from a challenge, Alejandro got to the door just before Deryn did. He pushed her behind him and tossed it open. A six foot one inch man with shoulder length dark blond hair stood there glaring at him.

Deryn weaseled her way around him and put herself directly between him and the blond guy. Alejandro took another look at the man and realized he was wearing a fur loincloth. Tiny scars were scattered about his upper body and a band of Avatarian symbols stretched around one bicep.

"Who the fuck is this? Tarzan?"

Deryn gave him a hard look. "Enough. Alejandro, give me a minute with him. Please?"

"Who the hell is he?"

The look on Deryn's face told Alejandro that he wouldn't like the answer. He drew in a deep breath. "Vonni was right, you moved on."

"What?" Deryn asked, looking as if she'd been slapped.

"How dare you bring up a woman's name who kept you from me for a year? She denied you the chance to be there for your son's birth and she left me without a mate. And you dare to bring her name up in my house?"

"Go back to whatever rock you crawled out from," the man said, his accent one Alejandro couldn't place. "She was ready to move on. She was finally...."

"Ellery, no," Deryn said, going to the man and touching his cheek. "Don't do this. You have been with me every step of the way. You know how much I wanted this—how much I wanted Alejandro back in my life. Please be happy for me. For us."

Ellery cupped Deryn's face. "The others told me what he did. They told me he was ruthless with you and with as weak as you had been, they said that you could put up little fight. I rushed back. I thought you were dead. Ondrea caught me and told me he healed you. Still, he hurt you. How could he not know you? You told me that you gave him your blood—your scent and that he was your true mate. He should have known it was you." The man drew in a deep breath and turned. He took off down the hall with a speed that was anything but human.

"Ellery, what is it?" Deryn ran after him. "Stop!"

Alejandro followed close, wanting to gut the bastard for pointing out everything he hated himself for. As they rounded a corner, he found Ellery staring Fulk down. Fulk had Alex cradled to his chest and a clawed hand out.

"Who are you?"

Ellery let out a soft laugh. "I should have let you drink that water."

"Water?"

The realization of what Ellery was saying sunk in. Alejandro's stomach cramped as he thought about how he'd laughed off the idea of being jealous over a monkey. "Che?"

Ellery glanced over his shoulder. "What?"

Fulk gasped. "It's the fucking monkey?"

"Fulk," Deryn said sternly, pointing to a sleeping Alex. "Not around the baby."

"Give me the child. Quickly." Ellery put his arms out.

Taking a step back, Fulk shook his head. "Colonel?"

Amador and Nava appeared in the doorway. Amador glared at Ellery. "They approach. Do what you do. Protect the child."

"The shape shifting dog will not allow me to," Ellery said evenly.

"Coyote, you mangy excuse for a monkey." Fulk held Alex's tiny body to his large chest. "And I won't let anything happen to my nephew, umm, I mean Deryn's son."

Nava clapped her hands together and brought them to her lips. "This is the one you shared your power with?"

"Yes, grandma. His name is Fulk but just about everyone calls him Rodriquez."

Nava smiled. "But you, Deryn, you can call him something else now can't you?"

"Huh?" Fulk asked.

Alejandro growled. "If you even...."

Deryn pushed him in the chest. "Stop it. You're acting insane. I didn't realize when I shared my power with Rodriquez that I was sharing a piece of myself—the line of magic I come from, my family with him."

"What are you saying?"

Nave stepped forward. "She is saying that Fulk's slip of tongue in referring to himself as Alex's uncle is more than accurate. In the mystical and Avatarian sense of the word, he is her brother now. Her family. As is he mine since he shares blood and power from me as well. Welcome, Fulk Rodriguez. I am Grandma Nava."

Fulk beamed. "Bookworm, you adopted me. Ah, I told you that you're good people. Do I have to put the baby down now? He makes the cutest little noises when he sleeps. And he purrs when you rub his back. And he does this little...."

Laughing, Deryn went to Fulk and eased Alex out of his arms. "I know, Fulk. He's adorable. I love him, too." She kissed Alex's almost bald head and gave him a tight squeeze. "Ellery, give me one second to let Alex meet his father before you take him."

"They are close. Hurry," Ellery said, glaring at Alejandro.

"Take him? He's not taking my son away. I just found him. I'm not letting...."

Deryn handed Alex to Alejandro, not giving him a choice but to take him. The second he looked down into his son's tiny, tan face, he felt his heart melting. "He's so little," he whispered. "Why is he so little?"

"Because he's just a baby, honey," she said, stepping in close to him. "He's only three months old. He doesn't do much beyond eat, sleep and mess his pants but when he does look at you and smiles you know how very smart he is."

As if on cue, Alex blinked and stared up at Alejandro through emerald green eyes. They flickered with multiple

shades as he yawned, stretching his entire body and purring at the same time.

Alejandro let out a choked gasp as he stared at Deryn. "He sounds like me. His eyes. His hair is black."

She snorted. "Honey, I don't need you rubbing it in that our son looks exactly like you and nothing like me. I already know. Naming him Alejandro Vargas after his father was very fitting."

Unable to help himself, Alejandro pulled on the back of Deryn's head, bringing her closer to him. He pressed his lips to her forehead. "*Eu te amo.*"

A burning on his upper arms started. Alejandro hissed and stepped back, still holding Alex close to him. He glanced down at his arms and stood in shock as he watched Avatarian symbols appear in the form of bands, just below his tee shirt sleeves. They wrapped all the way around his upper arms.

Deryn's brow furrowed as he looked at them. Suddenly, she let out a cry and covered her mouth. "Amador, look."

His grandfather approached, staring at his arms. He smiled wide. "Ah, it would appear that Alex knows exactly who his father is and that you would come. He has branded you as you once did his mother. You are his father. A warrior of the night and son of the gods. Now, hand him to Ellery so he can do what he did with you and your brothers when you were little—keep you safe while we fight the bad guys."

Alejandro gave Amador a puzzled look. "Wait? That thing used to protect me?"

Warriors of the Darkness
by Mandy M. Roth

"Used to?" Deryn snorted. "Correct me if I'm wrong but wasn't he pegging you in the head with fruit to let you know danger was coming while you were an adult, too?"

Ellery smiled. "Sorry about that."

"No you're not."

"You are right. I'm not."

"Guys, fight later. Protect my son now." Deryn took Alex from Alejandro and handed him to Ellery.

Alejandro took a deep breath in and leveled his gaze on Ellery. "Is it possible for you to take Deryn, too?"

"Yes but she never goes."

"Deryn, for me, just this once, will you please go to safety? I will be here when you get back. I promise you."

She winked. "Just this once, Colonel. And if you dare dream of leaving me again, I will hunt you down. Your son has tagged you now. Good luck getting away. I love you. Be careful."

THE END

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