



Dark Protector (Paladins of Darkness, Book 1)

By Alexis Morgan

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Devlin Bane: Born a Paladin, he is a member of an ancient band of warriors locked in a centuries-old war against evil.

His destiny: To die over and over again to protect mankind from the Others, only to be revived each time by his mortal Handler.

But his fierce strength and courage cannot save him from gradually becoming one of the monsters he was born to destroy.

Dr. Laurel Young, who has spent years training to become a Handler, must remain detached from her patients. But each time she revives the darkly compelling Devlin Bane, he claims a little more of her soul and incites in her desires that grow wilder and wilder -- even as he inches closer to losing his humanity. As the war against the Others grows more desperate, Laurel and Devlin can't help but give in to the fierce hunger that's sizzled between them for so long. Now they'll face the ultimate battle together -- to save a dark, passionate love that goes against every rule as they join forces to fight an enemy who is closer than they ever imagined....

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Editorial Review

Review

"This is so hot!"

-- *USA Today* bestselling author Susan Sizemore

About the Author

Alexis Morgan has always been an avid reader, and she loves spending her days with hunky heroes and gutsy heroines. She's published more than forty books, novellas, and short stories, including contemporary romances, American West historicals, and paranormal romances. She has been nominated for numerous industry awards, including the RITA© from the Romance Writers of America, the top award in the romance genre.

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Chapter One

He fought free of the mists, drawing in painful gulps of precious air, vanquishing the last fetid vestiges of death. Slowly his heart began to beat again, taking its own sweet time to fall back into a remembered rhythm. Breathing in, breathing out, each sip of oxygen reluctantly sending life back into his limbs.

Damn, he hated this. He'd already died too many times -- sometimes for a worthy cause, and sometimes for no good reason at all. Every time he came back from the edge was an agonizing process. And every time he brought back a little less of his humanity, until he barely remembered what it felt like to simply be a man. Over the decades, the shadows death had left on his soul made him stronger, but hard and edgy and angry.

"He's back." The familiar voice was not a welcome one.

"He needs to rest before you order him out again, Colonel," a female voice stated.

"He's needed now." The words had the clipped cadence of a man used to barking out orders and having them obeyed without question.

"Speaking as his Handler, I must protest your even being here. Sir." That last word was clearly a reluctant afterthought. "The transition is difficult enough for him without an audience. If you don't leave, I will have to register a complaint with my superiors."

Devlin smiled in his mind. *That's it, honey, give him hell.* Her protests would fall on deaf ears, but it would aggravate the man from Ordnance.

"Miss Young, I'm sorry," the colonel lied smoothly, "but as I said, he's needed as soon as he's up and about."

An unladylike snort followed. "It's *Doctor* Young. And according to Ordnance, he's always needed somewhere. If you keep putting him in these deadly situations without the proper care, you'll lose him altogether."

Despite her calm tone, there was a powerful undercurrent to her words, one Devlin couldn't quite decipher.

Colonel Kincade's voice took on an edge. "How I use him is none of your business, Dr. Young. He belongs to us."

The old bastard never could stand to be second-guessed, especially by a woman. The Handler had better tread softly.

"You may decide how best to use Devlin Bane's talents, Colonel, but I decide when -- and if -- he is ready for reassignment."

She stepped close enough to Dev's bed for him to feel the heat radiating off her. The normally calm Laurel Young's emotions were certainly running high today.

"You might as well take your papers and leave, Colonel. I'm not signing anything today, tomorrow, or maybe even the day after."

She'd grown some claws since he'd last been reborn, but the men from Ordnance had decades of experience in getting their way. When Devlin could speak, he would have to warn her to watch her back. He didn't need or even want her defending him.

He listened to the angry staccato steps of the colonel leaving the ward. Kincade would regroup and be back, but for the moment, he was gone. Already the air seemed fresher, more potent.

Cool fingers settled on his wrist, checking his pulse. He wondered why she didn't just accept the readings on the machines that beeped and whined and knew more about him than he did.

"You can come out of hiding now, Mr. Bane. He's gone."

Damn, he'd thought he'd done a better job of disguising his resurgence than that.

His eyelashes felt heavy as he struggled to open his eyes as ordered. It took several attempts and a considerable amount of effort before he could do more than squint up at his Handler. Her pixie face hovered over his, looking worried as she muttered under her breath. Laurel's face was more interesting than truly pretty, with wide-set, brown eyes the color of rich, dark chocolate. Looking up into that thickly lashed gaze had become his favorite part of reviving.

"I'm alive. Again." He wasn't sure he wanted to be. Not with the colonel and his friends already sniffing around.

"It took longer this time." Laurel frowned. "Almost too long."

Was that fear in her voice? He wished his hands weren't bound, so that he could offer her the comfort of his touch. The unexpected impulse shocked him. He'd jettisoned most of the softer emotions two Handlers ago, leaving him cold and detached.

Fighting against the Others made him that way. His nightmares were bad enough already, especially the one where he became one of them. That particular horror would become reality soon enough.

"Take off the straps," he demanded.

Regret shadowed her expression. "You know I can't. Not yet." She glanced past him to the clock on the wall. "We have to wait another hour at least. You ought to know the routine by now, Mr. Bane."

Yeah, but that didn't mean he had to like it. There were tests to be run, reflexes to test, various bodily specimens to collect and evaluate -- all of it a waste of time, something he had precious little of. Besides, if he had turned Other, she would have known it the second he opened his eyes. Since she hadn't called for help, there must be enough humanity left in him to pass all the tests they threw at him.

He clenched his fists and tested the strength of the bonds. There was some give in the straps, but not enough for him to break free without risking further injury to himself. His body was still utilizing all of its resources to repair the damage from the other night. It would only delay his recovery further if he insisted on tearing himself loose from the bonds, even if he could muster enough strength to pull it off. He drew a breath deep enough to hurt and forced himself to relax, concentrating on easing the tension that left him irritated and angry.

"Good choice, Mr. Bane. Fighting it won't help either of us get our job done." Laurel stood a short distance away, her ever-present clipboard clutched to her chest. Her dark eyes flickered down the length of his body. "Would you like another blanket?"

"No."

He wasn't cold, especially not with that delectable female body so close by. One of the side effects of revival for him had always been the immediate and intense hunger to satisfy all of his body's basic needs -- food and sex being at the top of the list. When he was younger, he'd usually given in to that impulse with the first obliging woman he encountered. Lately, though, he'd been less willing to be some nameless stranger's good time.

His senses, always sensitive but especially so after the journey back from death, were screaming with awareness of Laurel's feminine scent, despite the strong medicinal smells that permeated the laboratory.

He deliberately turned away from her to stare at the ceiling overhead, noticing that she'd changed the posters she kept up there for her clients' entertainment.

The buxom blondes frolicking on a beach wearing not much more than their smiles were a vast improvement over the kittens and puppies from last time.

"Nice artwork."

A smile tugged at Laurel's mouth as she glanced up. "One of your friends sent those to me after he got out. I didn't have the heart to throw them away without giving them a fair showing."

"Looks like something D.J. would have done."

She scrunched up her nose. "Right on the first guess. Personally, I preferred the kittens."

"You're not the one strapped to this damned table like some lab animal waiting to be dissected."

The brutal honesty of his words made her flinch, but it was the truth. If, in those first seconds after he came back, she had seen an Other instead of a Paladin looking up at her through his eyes, she wouldn't have hesitated to reach for the drugs that would end it all for him. For now, neither of them had had to face that little problem.

But eventually they would. Those were the roles they'd been assigned in this tragedy. Rather than talk anymore, he closed his eyes and pretended to sleep. She was too smart to be fooled, but she allowed him the small deception. A few seconds later, the lights dimmed and he slept for real.

Laurel wondered if Devlin knew he snored. She drew pleasure from listening to the rough, rumbling noise as she worked at the computer. It was such a homey sound, making Devlin Bane a little less frightening, a little more human. He wasn't -- not completely, anyway -- but she wanted him to hold on to whatever bit of humanity he had left as long as possible.

A small electronic *ping* announced that his waiting time was up, but she decided not to wake Devlin immediately. Since he'd actually fallen asleep on that steel slab, he probably needed the rest. She glanced back toward the dimly lit lab. No one had ever been able to explain to her why the table had to be so uncomfortable. Surely a little padding wouldn't compromise the strength of the steel. In her opinion, the Paladins deserved any possible comforts in their lives.

Not that any of them would admit it; they prided themselves on being the toughest sons of bitches around. And it was true. They all started off big and strong and added mean to the mix as time went on. Even the heavily armed guards posted outside her door moved carefully when a Paladin was in-house.

Especially Devlin Bane.

She sighed. Hardly a week went by that she didn't have one of the Paladins back in her care for at least a day or two. They fought, they died, and they came back to her to be repaired and replenished. Some were easier to deal with than others, but none of them was exactly easy to be around.

Even so, Devlin Bane was different.

His mere presence made her spacious laboratory feel cluttered and cramped, as if he took up too much of the air and most of the space. She turned again to study him.

His profile was strong and rather handsome, although his nose had been broken a time or two. His brows were two dark slashes across his face, one of them marred by a scar from some long ago battle. Her gaze lingered on his mouth. It was surprisingly sensual looking, almost out of place among his other features. Could he kiss as well as he did everything else he set his mind to?

Before she could mentally catalog anything else, she realized that his green eyes ...

Users Review

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