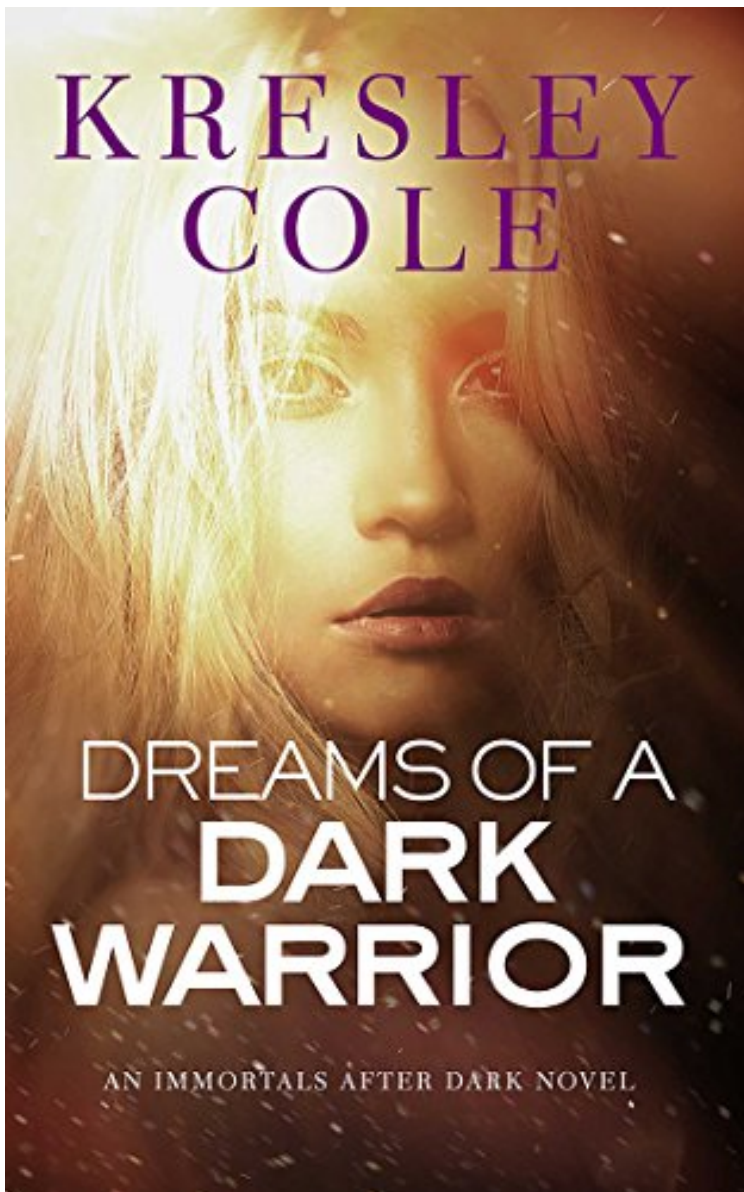


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Dreams of a Dark Warrior



Par Kresley Cole
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurHE VOWED HED COME FOR HER . . . Murdered before he could wed Regin the Radiant, warlord Aidan the Fierce seeks his beloved through eternity, reborn again and again into new identities, yet with no memory of his past lives. SHE AWAITS HIS RETURN . . . When Regin encounters Declan Chase, a brutal Celtic soldier, she recognizes her proud warlord reincarnated. But Declan takes her captive, intending retribution against all immortalsunaware that he belongs to their world. TO SATE A DESIRE MORE POWERFUL THAN DEATH . . . Yet every reincarnation comes with a price, for Aidan is doomed to die when he remembers his past. To save herself from Declans torments, will Regin rekindle

memories of the passion they once shared even if it means once again losing the only man she could ever love? Extrait Dreams of a Dark Warrior ONE Outside of New Orleans Present day Declan Chase eased his Humvee down a winding bayou drive leading to Val Hall, the estate where a notorious coven of Valkyrie lived. My target will be within. Regin the Radiant. Though his head was splitting from lack of sleep and his usual tension plagued him, he felt a measure of excitement about his mission. Ever since he received her dossier two weeks ago, Declan had been impatient to seize this female. Perhaps because no other magister had ever captured a Valkyrie? Yet he reminded himself that tonight's target would be merely another capture, yet another prisoner he delivered to the Order the mortal army to which he pledged his life. When he spied lightning in the distance, he pulled off into the thick brush, deep enough to conceal his truck. After turning off the ignition, he readied for the night with a swift efficiency born of years of combat. He strapped his sword to his side, then checked the pistols in his dual holster and the extra cartridges in his dark flak jacket. More cartridges filled the pockets of his camo pants. He was well aware that a gun couldn't kill an immortal, but an armor-piercing round between the eyes at close range could bring one to the ground. He opened a briefcase filled with sensitive electronics, retrieving a minuscule GPS beacon/listening device. After carefully stowing the bug in another pocket, he tested his radio earpiece. Despite the lateness of the hour, the bayou heat was intense, assailing the truck's cab. With the jacket, his customary gloves and high-necked shirt, he began to sweat. Drops of perspiration trickled down his chest, over the countless scars covering his torso. His never-ending reminders of a time spent in hell... Tamping down those memories, he focused on the mission. Tonight was one of only two remaining. Then he could return to his island, to his sanctum. To my medicine... With that thought in mind, he stepped out into the humid air, then began jogging along the dirt driveway. Under a canopy of oaks, he ran through muddy ruts until he reached the estate's open entranceway: a pair of battered stone columns, each with a rusted gate clinging by a hinge. He turned a corner and slowed, taken aback by the sight before him. The Valkyrie's antebellum mansion was draped in a dense fog that didn't stir, not even with the breeze. Lightning struck all around the building; the grounds bristled with metal lightning rods. Spectral wraiths flew around the manor, defending it against intruders. An incongruous row of luxury cars lined the drive. Inside, loud music boomed and raucous women's laughter sounded. Intermittent Valkyrie shrieks pierced the night. So this was where Regin the Radiant lived. Though the Order possessed much information about other species of immortals such as the vampires and demons they had acquired only basic facts about her kind. Valkyrie had little need for sleep and didn't eat or drink, instead taking nourishment from some unknown mystical source. Though they varied in looks and abilities, they all possessed superhuman strength, speed, and regenerative powers. Declan knew of only one way to destroy her kind: beheading. The Order had garnered a few specific details about Regin. History: Thought to be over one millennium in age. Description: Five foot three, slight build with small claws and fangs. Pointed ears. Waist-length blond hair and amber eyes. But her most notable feature was her skin. She'd been named the Radiant One because she purportedly had skin that glowed. The file had contained no clear photos of her. The exposure would show only a bright light where she was supposed to be. Glowing skin. Another freak of nature. Yet she went out freely among civilians. She customarily wore two short swords crisscrossed over her back even in public and was rumored to be an exceptional swordswoman. That skill wouldn't save her tonight. If Declan had been put in charge of this immortal's capture, then she was a priority to the Order. He'd never failed to bring in a target. He had backup troops awaiting in the city, ready to mobilize in an instant. Initially, he'd considered storming this place, inflicting as much damage and destruction as possible. But there were other Valkyrie inside, and though their species was uniformly female, they were among the strongest and most vicious in the Lore. Regin might be slight, but she could likely lift a car by herself. To bring in a team would risk his soldiers' lives unnecessarily, and he'd already lost men at a recent capture. A powerful, older vampire had put up a fight as few others ever had. Plus, Declan had no idea how to battle those wraiths guarding the house. No, he'd wait until Regin the Radiant was separated from her kindred. Then he'd strike. He approached the row of cars, pulling the bug from his jacket. Determining which one was hers proved simple enough. The RegRad license plate on a red Aston Martin was a dead giveaway. The field notes in his dossier had described her as ostentatious, prone to flaunting her uniqueness in public. No wonder she'd been targeted. One of the Order's objectives was to prevent civilians from ever discovering the deathless beings living in their midst. He eased open the door and affixed the bug under the driver's side headrest. After testing the sound with his earpiece, he gingerly shut the door and turned to leave. Out of the corner of his eye, he spied a light, turned to it. Through one of the mansion's front windows, he spotted her, or at least the radiance she emanated. She does truly glow.... He silently moved in,

camouflaged behind a tree about two hundred feet from the front porch. He couldn't see her face, but from the back, her figure was curvaceous. She wore a pair of indecently low-cut hip-hugger jeans and a cropped red T-shirt that revealed her midriff. Indeed, two swords in black leather sheaths crisscrossed her back. Her blond hair cascaded all the way to her waist, except where it was braided into haphazard plaits that jutted out all over the top and sides of her head. Declan suspected she would be as attractive from the front; Lorean females often were. He detested all immortals but especially the females. They used their seductive looks as a weapon, a tool to rob mortal men of their senses. They will separate you from your purpose, lure you to your doom. How many times had his superior told him that? A row of bushes between him and the house rustled. Another enemy lying in wait? The Valkyrie had plenty of adversaries. And they had no idea danger lurked so close. The front doors burst open; a woman stormed outside. Regin. He released a sharp breath. Those wild braids held her hair back from her face, revealing all her delicate features. Her cheekbones were high and defined, her nose pert. Blond brows drew together over her vivid amber eyes, and her full lips were parted. She radiated a pure golden light. A feeling of recognition swept over him. At once, the near crippling tension he'd endured for decades began to ebb. Why? How? She wasn't the first unearthly beauty they'd tracked. The Order's island compound was filled with them so he would've thought himself prepared for her comeliness. But he feared she might be the most beautiful. At least to me. Make a hole, bitches! she yelled to the wraiths, tossing one of them... a braid of hair? When the red-robed beings parted, she strode down the steps, her thick-heeled boots clicking. Out on the lawn, she stopped and cocked her head, drawing those swords with a lethal grace. One of her pointed ears was visible and clearly twitching as she scanned the night. She would see Declan... would sense him. He was about to slip back when the bushes nearby rustled once more. Without a second's thought she dove into them, pouncing on whatever skulked there. A moment later, a ghoul's severed head came flying out. When she bounded from the shrubs, her swords were already sheathed and twigs protruded from those haphazard braids. She reached up, felt them, then left them there with a shrug. When a trio of other women staggered out onto the front porch, Regin held up the head and made an exaggerated curtsy. They cheered drunkenly. Witches, no doubt. They were the Valkyries' allies and notorious drunks. One laughed, tripped over her own feet into a pratfall, then laughed again. Regin turned back to face his direction. With her skin glowing brighter and her expression animated, she punted the ghoul's head like a football, then shaded her eyes melodramatically. As it sailed far above him toward a nearby swamp, she cried, It. Might. Go. All. The.... Way! She cannot be one thousand years old. The witches cheered again. That task completed, she plucked a sat-phone from a holster on her belt. She texted something, her fingers so fast they were a blur, then strolled over to her car and hopped inside. The engine purred when she started it. She pulled up in front of the house, honking the horn and rolling down the windows. Nx! she called. Get your ass out here! She said something to the witches in a lower voice, and they howled with laughter. But when Regin turned from them, her easy grin faltered, her demeanor preoccupied. Another Valkyrie sauntered from that madhouse, a black-haired one with vacant eyes, cradling what looked like a paralyzed bat in one arm like a babe. She had to be Nx the Ever-Knowing, a powerful soothsayer. Though she looked to be in her mid-twenties, she was one of the oldest and most crazed immortals on record. She wore a long, flowing skirt, cowboy boots, and a T-shirt that read VALKYRIE in big block letters with an arrow pointing up at her face. Flaunting themselves. The arrogance. Christ, how he hated them. She too proffered a braid to the wraiths a toll of some sort? then joined Regin in the car, blowing a kiss to the witches. The two Valkyries pulled out, some asinine song blaring from the car stereo; the only lyrics were Da-da-da. They bobbed their heads in unison to the music. As they passed, he drew back into the brush, his heart thundering. But the dark-haired one turned, looking directly at him with eerie golden eyes. Just as the hair on the back of his neck stood up, the soothsayer mouthed, You're late. *** Regin the Radiant sensed some enemy was hot on her ass as she sped down dark country roads. But she simply didn't have time for a fight to the death just now. Regin had to reach Lucia before it was too late. She adjusted the rearview mirror. Are we being followed? Nx nodded happily. Usually. She tapped her chin with her free hand. You know, you think you don't like it, but actually you'll miss it when it's gone. Regin scowled at her sister, doing her damndest to ignore Bertil the bat Nx carried. It'd been a gift from a secret admirer. Seeing as we're on our way to the Loreport, you probably should tell me where I'm flying out to tonight. Nx's last report on Lucia had her in the , of all places. Hmm. Should I remember? Me. Meeting up with Lucia. Who's gearing up to slay Cruach, her worst nightmare. Crom Cruach was the ancient horned god of human sacrifices and cannibalism and the monster who'd tricked Lucia into leaving Valhalla. Every five hundred years, he tried to escape his prison. For the last two times, Lucia with Regin as her trusty wingman had forcibly denied his parole. Any of this

ringing a bell, Nx? Blankness. Gods, I dont have time for this! Lucia was out there alone; Cruach was rising nowish. And Nx was spacing? Dont shriek, Nx chided. Youll hurt Bertils ears, and he needs them for echolocation. As she stroked her new pet in a love-him-and-pet-him-and-call-him-George kind of way, her eyes were even more vacant than usual. Her visions of the future had been hitting her rapid-fire lately, and they were taking a toll. Assholes were laying odds in the Lore betting book that Nucking Futs Nx wouldnt make it through this Accession with any remaining sanity intact. And there wasnt a whole lot remaining. Dont fret, love, Nx said reassuringly. How can I not fret... Regin trailed off. Youre talking to the freaking bat! She tickled its belly with a claw. Coochy-coo. Regin swore the bat smacked its lips with contentment, snuggling into her arm. Had Nx been feeding that little winged rat her blood? Dont you know that those things spread Cujos? Damn, Nxie, youre getting worse. Even more cray-cray than usual. She briefly glanced up. Thats fair. Uh-huh. Regin downshifted, tires squealing as she swerved to dodge a roadkill-bound possum. But what about your own cray-crayness, Regin? Youve been behaving very badly of late. Getting high on intoxispells and picking fights. You are acting out, and it simply must stop unless you invite me to join in. Also fair. But what else was Regin supposed to do? A year ago, she and Lucia had undertaken a badass mission to discover a way to defeat the unkillable Cruach forever. Instead of merely imprisoning him. Theyd traveled all over the world together, risking their lives. In other words, good times. But then Prince Garreth MacRieve, Lucias werewolf admirer, had started following her everywhere, sticking his nose where it didnt belong. Regins solution? Euthanasia. Lucias solution to Regins solution? Leave her behind when she was nursing a hangover. Abandoned me like last years wardrobe. Regins claws dug into the steering wheel. After a millennium of never leaving each others side. But last years wardrobe is determined to make a comeback. Nx, you promised youd tell me where Luce is if I did everything you asked me. I cleaned your room. I took your Bentley to the shop after you went off-roading again. And I put in hours at the Lore foundling house with those little punks. Regin had begun to call it the Lorphanage and predicted itd stick. I need to keep moving anyway. You know hes returning soon. Aidan. With his heart-stopping smile and big, possessive hands. Though she longed to see her Viking in any reincarnation, shed decided that he might actually live a full life if he never found her. Nx sighed. Have you truly given up all hope of finding a way to be with him? Regin glanced over at her, trying not to feel even a sliver of hope. Any reason not to give up? I believe my advice to you was Go find and bang your berserker. Huh. Well, see, I tried that, and it didnt quite work out for me. The last four times! I just cant... Im not doing it again. The guilt got worse with each reincarnation. She was his doom, might as well deal the deathblow herself. Aidan had been sword-struck in his first life, poisoned in his second, crushed during a shipwreck in his third. In his fourth, hed been shot. All directly after she and his reincarnation had made love for the first time. Unless you can tell me things might be different this time? Regin added. Damn, could she sound more desperate? But Nx helped other immortals with things like this. Why not me? What would you do to be with him, hmm? What would you sacrifice? To break this curse, I would do just about anything. Just about? After long, tense moments, Nx said, I have no resolution to tell you. She couldnt foresee everything, wasnt all-knowing. Instead, shed been dubbed the Ever-Knowing, because her visions had appeared without fail for three millennia. No resolution? She hadnt expected Nx to pony up the answer to a thousand-year-old curse before Regin ran her next red light, but a crumb of hope wouldve been nice. No matter, Nx said. You must find something to occupy yourself. Theres more to life than destroying vampires. Right. Like destroying evil cannibal gods with Lucia, Regin said, proud of her segue. Always back to Lucia. Youre exceedingly loyal to all your friendseven to your own detriment. Whatever. Loyaltys not a bad thing. It is when you leave heaven for it. It is when you have nothing to show for it. For instance, your some-some meter is reading empty. What about that nice leopard-shifter pack that wanted to date you? The benefits of a variety pack of males cannot be overstated. If the rest of her sistersor, gods forbid, her witch buddiesfound out Regin hadnt been laid in nearly two hundred years, shed never live it down. But like some stupid, sappy tool, she stayed faithful to Aidan and his reincarnates. Are you happy, Regin? She gave Nx the look her question deserved. Im the prankster, remember? The happy-go-lucky one. Ask anyonetheyll tell you Im the cheeriest Valkyrie. She studied Nxs expression, this time noticing the shadows under her sisters eyes. Why? Are you happy? You seem tired all the time. She didnt mention Nxs shrieking fits or disappearances, the bizarre eccentricities that only grew worse. Im actively involved in steering the lives of thousands of beings. Which directly affects hundreds of thousands, which indirectly affects millions, with a ripple effect reaching billions. If someone said, It aint easy being Nxie, I wouldnt call him a liar. Regin never really thought about the pressure Nx might be under. If the bat made her happy and calmed her, then... Welcome to the family, Bertil. In a prickly tone, Nx said, And yet all

anyone talks about is how the Enemy of Old is making power plays in the Lore. His power plays are childs play compared to mine. Like Nx, Lothaire the Enemy of Old was one of the oldest and most powerful beings in the Lore. But the vampire was pure evil. Nx sniffed, Lothaires no saner than I am. As Regin opened her mouth to correct her, Nx amended, Not much saner. There, now. Regin reached over to pat Nxs shoulder, but that bat hissed at her. Why dont you hook up with someone, cozy away with a male for a few weeks? Werent you seeing Mike Rowe? I do miss that baritone-voiced rapsCALLION. Nx sighed. But above all else, Im a career woman. Ive no time to dally. You could take just a short vacay, you know? See some sights. This might be one of the most lucid conversations Ive ever had with Nx. Im three thousand and three years old. Nx turned her vacant gaze out the window. Ive seen everything She sat up, eyes wild. Squirrel! Strike lucid. Hey, I know, you could come with me to find Lucia! Maybe she doesnt want to be found just yet. You know shell call you before the final showcase showdown with Cruach. For now, Ive told you shes with MacRieve. With with? Cause I refuse to believe that yet another Valkyrie is making time with a werewolf. Much less the prim and proper Lucia. The earthy Lykae revered sex and matehood; Lucias magical skill with a bow was celibacy-based. If she got horizontal with a guy, shed get kicked out of the Skathians, losing her archery forever. Which she needed to fight Cruach. Hence the fleeing from MacRieve and all. Refuse or accept, I call em like I see em, Nx said. Now, I have just one final task for you in the Quarter. I need you to go take out some adversaries. Make it an example killing. Example killing? Must be Tuesday. And youre not going to get in on the action? Nx blinked at her, aghast. Who will sit Bertil? Regin groaned. Besides, Im going to visit Loas voodoo shop. Shes having an Accession sale. Everything must go. She snickered. If I do this, will you finally tell me how to find Lucia? Another pet of the bat. Dont worry, dearling. Youll fly out tonight. I promise. Are you talking to me or Bertil? Oh, me? Then, fine. She gunned the car even faster, speeding toward the Quarter. Lucia, Im on my way... just hold tight. Tell me where my victims are. Presentation de l'diteurHE VOWED HED COME FOR HER . . . Murdered before he could wed Regin the Radiant, warlord Aidan the Fierce seeks his beloved through eternity, reborn again and again into new identities, yet with no memory of his past lives. SHE AWAITS HIS RETURN . . . When Regin encounters Declan Chase, a brutal Celtic soldier, she recognizes her proud warlord reincarnated. But Declan takes her captive, intending retribution against all immortalsunaware that he belongs to their world. TO SATE A DESIRE MORE POWERFUL THAN DEATH . . . Yet every reincarnation comes with a price, for Aidan is doomed to die when he remembers his past. To save herself from Declans torments, will Regin rekindle memories of the passion they once shareeven if it means once again losing the only man she could ever love?