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Feral

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## Chapter One

There was a baby on his doorstep.

What Kyn warrior Feral knew about babies would have fit on the back of a postage stamp with room to spare, but even he was sure doorsteps weren't their natural habitat. Which begged the question, why was there one on his, and where were the people who were supposed to be looking after it?

"Well hello little... actually, what the hell are you?" he murmured, unable to work out what sex the baby was from the non gender specific yellow blanket. It was the sort of colour he knew women had a multitude of names for and God help a guy if he got it wrong.

"So how did you get out here?" He squatted down to pick it up. It took three attempts. His large hands just didn't seem to be the right shape to pick up something so tiny. He lifted the squirming bundle carefully and glanced up and down the corridor, trying to catch a glimpse of a loiterer waiting to see if the baby was picked up.

Nothing, zip, nada. Not surprising. Even if someone had been lurking in the shadows then, the near six and a half feet of solid, pseudo-tattooed, bare-chested Kyn male who opened the door would have scared them off for sure.

Then the smell hit him.

Pungent and forceful. It stripped several layers off the inside of his nose with an ease paint stripper would have admired. He recoiled and wrinkled his nose in disgust. He had never smelled anything so god awful in his life!

"Jee...zuz Christ, are you supposed to smell that bad?" He looked at the bundle in surprise, settling it into the crook of his arm. He didn't really want it so close, not smelling as it did. But there wasn't anyone else around, and the big scary Kyn warrior he might be, he couldn't leave it alone on the floor. Anything could happen to it. It could get cold or wild dogs could get it or something. Although the smell might have warned even the latter off.

"Ok, let's see who you are then," He reached out to move the edge of the blanket, which had fallen over the baby's face, his fingers gentle as he pulled it free. He froze in surprise as his eyes locked on the baby's hair.

It was bright pink.

Which meant two things. One, the baby was male and two, even worse, it was a Pixie. They were the only species Feral knew of with weird hair colours. Of course he could be way off track here but he seriously doubted anyone had taken a bleach bottle to a baby's head to get that sort of colour.

"You just *had* to be a Pixie, didn't you?" He glared up and down the corridor again. Still no one. He sighed heavily, no point standing out here on the doorstep like a spare prick at an orgy. A chill ran up the corridor and he shivered. Besides, it was cold out here and babies needed to be kept warm, didn't they?

He stepped back into his apartment, hooked a bare foot around the door and kicked it shut before wandering into the main room. He came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the room and frowned. *Ok, what the hell did he do now?*

It was one of his rare nights off so he wasn't dressed for company. A pair of ripped, faded jeans hung off his hips and his feet were bare. Alone as he was, he hadn't bothered with a shirt, the dark marks across one side of his body and up his neck that marked him as a Kyn warrior clearly visible. Added to the dress problem he'd already had a couple of beers, so he couldn't drive. Which left him with a problem. A small, baby-shaped one that smelled.

He looked down, a smile tugged at the corners of his lips as the baby opened its eyes

and blinked at him. It's wide, dark eyes were peacock blue. A colour which seemed odd next to the bright colour of its... his, Feral corrected himself... which seemed odd next to the bright colour of *his* hair.

"I don't suppose you've any suggestions on what we should do, eh little man?" he asked, the low rumble of his voice the only sound in the large living room, speaking as much to reassure himself he wasn't mad as to verbalise his thoughts. After all, the baby couldn't answer him, could it?

The baby just looked back and smiled. The toothless, gummy smile of the very young. Feral had to admit, even for a Pixie, it was cute. The sort of cute that women went gaga over. It was also more placid than he'd been led to believe babies were. But even as he thought it, the baby's face started to crumple. A slow motion movement which had the big Kyn Warrior riveted in fascinated horror.

"WwwwwwwuuuuuaahhhHHHHHHHHH!"

The cry started off low, like an old fashioned air raid warning. Feral had only ever heard them in films, but now he had an appreciation of what it must have been like in London during the blitz as the noise developed into a full bodied wail. It seemed impossible someone so small could make so much noise. But it was and it was carrying on doing it, threatening to pierce Feral's ear drums with the sheer volume.

"Shhshhshh, it's fine. Everything's fine!" Feral jiggled the baby a little, trying to calm it down. A movement which only released fresh waves of the foul stench emanating from the diaper. It wasn't fine. It was so far *from* fine it beggared belief. He must really have pissed the fates off at some point for them to dump a baby on him, a Pixie baby no less, when his dislike... no, his *hatred* of Pixies was well known. *Perhaps he kicked kittens or something in a former life?*

Out of ideas he strode across the room to the breakfast counter. The apartments in his block were open plan living with kitchen and diner leading into the main living space. Bathrooms and bedrooms separated off by the narrow excuse for an entrance hall.

He located his cell phone behind a couple of empty beer bottles and flicked it open. Vixen would know what to do. His partner of several years and a mother herself, she'd know what to do with a baby. If he was lucky, she might even offer to look after it for him.

*Here's hoping*, he thought, hitting speed dial and lifting it to his ear.

"Hi, you've reached Vixen's phone..."

"Crap!" Feral swore as his patrol partner's voice mail cut in. He'd forgotten Vixen's mate, Kalen, had taken her out of town this weekend. A second 'honeymoon' since Vix had been eight months pregnant and the size of a house during their first.

"Buggar, buggar and shit!" he cursed, flicking the phone shut and tapping the edge of it against his teeth. Then he realised the terrible wail had stopped and he looked down in surprise. Peacock blue eyes were fixed on his phone.

"Oh, you like this, huh?" he smiled and waggled the phone. The baby watched it, tracking the movement. Feral frowned, he didn't think they could do that. He remembered reading somewhere babies couldn't focus on stuff until they were like months old. He shrugged to himself; he must have heard it wrong because little man here was tracking the phone like a damn hawk!

Pudgy fists emerged from the blanket and made a grab for the sleek silver case, fastening around it and wrenching it from Feral's grasp. He chuckled, an expression which turned to horror the next instant.

"Ok, ok... oh no, not in the mouth! Not good, not food!" He exclaimed as his new phone was used as a teething ring, an expensive teething ring, gleefully being gummed and slobbered on by the Pixie baby.

"Give the phone back to Feral, there's a good little baby," he coaxed and tried to get a

finger between the baby's mouth and the phone. But it had formed an unbreakable seal and he couldn't even get his little finger in. He hissed in frustration, looking at the baby in confusion as he tried several different angles to try and get the phone back. But it was no good. His hands were too big for this, more used to battling rogue vampires than dealing with wee babies.

Then, he managed it, sliding his finger down the side and popping the phone free. He grimaced as his finger and the phone came away covered in baby slobber, holding the phone up in triumph. He wasn't prepared for what happened next. A furious squeal tore through Feral, attacking his ear drums as little fists struggled and pummelled the air.

“WWWWWWAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!”

Feral stuffed the phone back in the baby's mouth, silencing the squeal as quick as it had started. Great, so what did he do now? He had no clue how to take care of a baby, and he had no time to learn. He needed to do something about the smell pretty soon. It was getting worse.

Diapers, he knew he needed diapers. But what sort, and where did you get them from? Disposable ones would be fine, he wasn't all earth-momma like the woman two units down. He often saw her outside, pinning out row upon row of white diapers.

Realisation hit him at light speed. Woman with children! Even better, she had Pixie blood. Glamour was easy for a Kyn as old as Feral to see through. Which meant he wouldn't have to explain why the baby was sporting what looked like a bad dye job.

Grinning, he did an about face and headed back into the corridor. Not bothering with anything more than sliding his feet into a pair of heavy boots he trudged out the door in search of salvation.

The tub of Ben & Jerry's in the freezer was calling Tessa's name. Chocolate Fudge Brownie, her favourite comfort food and after the crap day at work she had, had necessitated a stop on the way home. Fresh from the shower and swaddled in one of her sister's huge towelling robes she padded back through into the kitchen to collect the tub and a spoon. She didn't bother with a bowl, just pulled the lid off and dug the spoon in right there in front of the freezer.

“Hmmmmm,” she moaned in pleasure as the first taste of the chocolaty, gooey treat hit her tongue. The stresses of the day melted away, aided by the long hot shower and the taste of the ice cream, a little taste of her childhood. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the freezer.

Today had been the day from hell. Working in a busy logistics office meant everything had been put on hold when the trunk shipments had been late, throwing the whole day into disarray which meant Tessa didn't get to leave until late. Considering she had been on duty since 6am, it hadn't impressed her any.

Finally she had been able to escape, a long weekend ahead of her. But even then she hadn't been finished. No, she agreed to house sit for her older sister Lisa, who was off tripping the light fantastic in Vegas with her hubby and the twins. So it had been a mad dash home to throw whatever she needed into a weekend bag, then a breakneck drive over here to catch Lisa before she left and get the usual *'remember to feed the fish'* chat. Lisa was only a couple of years older than Tessa but anyone would think she was Methuselah the way she carried on at times.

Now though, all was calm. She had waved Lisa and James off, twins already asleep and packed up in the back of the car, a little over an hour ago. Just enough time to unwind over a glass of wine as she watched the evening news and then take a long hot shower. She just *loved* the shower here. A power shower, it had a setting that felt like needles bombarding

her skin, thousands of tiny dull pinpricks which took her breath away and felt absolutely wonderful after the day she had. She stood there for a full five minutes under the spray before even reaching for the shower gel.

Tessa opened her eyes and dug the spoon into the ice-cream again, and tucked the pot into the crook of her arm as she headed through to the main room. She flopped down in the middle of the comfortable sofa, rooted around for the remote, spoon in mouth. She was sure it was here somewhere, she just needed to find it and she was all set. The player was loaded with tonight's choice of a weepy chick flick movie, a movie she had been looking forward to watching for weeks but just hadn't found the time to. Well, now she did have time. This weekend was all about her, and relaxation. LOTS of relaxation.

"Ahh, there you are!" She recovered the missing remote from under one of the many scattered cushions. Her sister seemed obsessed with the things. Either that or they were breeding in here. Tessa wasn't quite sure which it was, or which was the scarier option.

Sighing in satisfaction she spooned more ice-cream into her mouth as she flicked the player on, she curled her legs up under her and settled herself into a more comfortable position on the sofa. Life didn't get much better than this, she decided with a contented sigh as the opening credits started to roll.

RAP RAP RAP!

"Dammit," She looked over her shoulder as there was a knock at the front door. *Who on earth could that be?* Had to be a cold caller, she decided. Lisa would have let all her friends know she was going to be away, she was a control freak like that, so it had to be someone who didn't know her sister or James. And if it wasn't, perhaps they would go away if she ignored them.

RAP RAP RAP!

No such luck, the hammering got worse. Tessa sighed as she contemplated moving, flicking pause on the remote and freezing the scrolling text on the TV screen.

"This had better be good," she grumbled under her breath as she put the tub on the floor, and drove the spoon into the melting ice-cream with a vicious stab as she got to her feet. It *had* better be good... and quick, she had a major fan girl crush on the actor in this movie so the quicker she got back to ogle his toned and sculptured bod, the happier she would be.

She grumbled under her breath all the way to the door, her bare feet silent on the wooden floor. Ever security conscious, she threw the chain over before she opened it a crack.

"Hello?" That was as far as she got, the sight which met her eyes stopped any further comment right there in her throat.

On her doorstep was *the* most handsome, ripped guy she had ever seen. Her startled eyes started at the middle of the broad chest, noted the heavily toned muscles as they moved outwards. A *long* way outwards, the guy was huge! And tall. Her eyes flicked upwards, he had to be well over six foot. Made her feel kind of dainty, which wasn't something Tessa got to feel very often.

He was also carrying a baby.

She blinked in surprise. Ok, this was one situation she was used to facing. Drop dead gorgeous men did not appear on her doorstep with a baby. Actually they didn't appear on her doorstep at all, with or without a baby.

"Sorry, can I help you?"

"You might just be my salvation." His voice was a low rumble that took Tessa's breath away. The sound did things to her insides on a very primitive level. *Oh for god's sake Tessa, get yourself together! It's just a voice!*

"Uhm, ok?" she managed, dark eyes flicking to the bundle he was carrying. Then a slight breeze in the corridor, someone must have opened a door down the way, carried the

unmistakeable smell of dirty diaper to her.

"Hmm, not being funny... but you might want to change the baby before you take it out visiting?" she suggested. *And maybe put a shirt on...* she added mentally, although she was enjoying the view a lot at the moment. But what kind of a father was he, bringing his baby out with a dirty diaper?

"That would be the problem," He shifted the baby in his arms and smoothed the edge of the blanket down. Tessa caught her breath at the colour of its hair.

Bright Pixie pink, a colour she'd only seen in the full blooded members of her mother's family. He looked at her and smiled, the merest hint of fang showing. "As you can see, it's not mine. Someone just left it on my doorstep and I haven't a *clue* what to do with it!"

He was Kyn.

The knowledge stunned Tessa for a moment, almost as much as his appearance on the doorstep had. But then he shifted on his feet a fraction and the light fell across the marks across the left side of his face and body. Her breath left her lungs in a rush.

"You're a Kyn Warrior," she exclaimed in relief, glad she hadn't opened her door to a Rogue vampire. Even though the small amount of Pixie blood flowing in her veins protected her from being turned into a vampire, Rogue's were more interested in the high from a kill than turning their victims. Although, to be fair, she had not heard of them using a baby as a decoy to get people to open their doors. They were more into breaking the doors down to get at their victims and a baby would be little more than a macabre snack.

"Live and kicking... name's Feral," he introduced himself, grinning a little. The small expression curved his full lips, transformed his rather cruel features, features made starker by the shaved hairstyle and turned him from mere gorgeous to devastating.

"Tessa, pleased to meet you," she replied on automatic, silence stretching between them.

"So," Feral continued. "You gonna help me out here? The little guy, he's really beginning to smell bad..." He trailed off, watching her, hope coiling in his chest. When she'd first opened the door, his heart had sunk. She wasn't the woman he remembered pinning out the diapers.

However, she was a Pixie, he could see the slight glamour clinging to her which made her appear more human than she was. And on second inspection there was a family resemblance to the woman with the diapers. Younger sister maybe? He tried that route.

"I remembered your ... sister?" he smiled, a cautious edge in his voice as he hoped he'd gotten it right. Women could be funny about ages and what stated relationships to other women said about their ages. Relief shot through him as she nodded.

"I remembered your sister had kids so when I found him, I came round to beg mercy... and a couple of diapers," he grinned as he tried his hardest to be charming and personable. *Come on sweetheart, you have to say yes. Look at me, I'm not a baby sorta guy! Practising for getting' the babies yes... dealing with the babies, definitely no!*

His silent plea seemed to work, her coffee-cream eyes flicked over him again. Feral shivered, the look almost seeming like a caress over his skin, his nipples tightening a little as a thrill went through him. Then she stepped back, released the chain.

"Come on, bring him in and we'll get him cleaned up," she ordered, her voice brusque. Feral stalled, not used to being ordered around... no that was a lie. He *was* used to being ordered around. Vixen did regularly, as did their boss Marak, the current Kyn monarch. But both Vixen and Marak weren't people you wanted to piss off in a hurry and this woman was, well tiny. And curvy to boot, the figure the shapeless towelling robe was hinting at was enough to make his mouth water.

He followed her into the living room, looked around the plush interior and dismissed it as quickly. It had all the hallmarks of expensive interior design and was about as interesting

as the back of a cereal packet.

“Come on, let's have him down here then.” She dragged out a changing mat from its hiding place behind a sofa, plopped it on the floor as she glanced at him. “The diapers will be a bit big but it's better than leaving him dirty. Can you take his diaper off while I get a fresh one?” She arched an eyebrow, obviously doubting his ability to carry out even that simple task.

“Of course!” he exclaimed, kneeling down to settle the baby in the middle of the changing mat. For such a small, little thing, it took virtually every part of Feral's body to make sure he was placed carefully on the mat.

Tessa shook her head as she headed out the room to fetch changing supplies. If he'd ever held a baby before she'd be surprised. He had that 'on eggshells' manner men tended to get when presented with an infant for the first time. Women didn't get it so much. Must be some maternal instinct she mused, rifling through the changing unit in the twins bedroom. Ignoring the washables Tessa went straight for the disposables, an addition she insisted on if she was expected to baby sit. There was no way she was scraping shit off a diaper for anyone, not even her sister!

“Too big, all too big,” she murmured as she rifled through the wicker basket Lisa kept these things in. “Damn, this is no good,” She leaned down and peered into the darkness of the cupboard. There! At the back. She grinned in triumph as she leaned down and retrieved a wad of diapers from the back, left over from when the twins were small. She checked the size and nodded. Just perfect.

“Look mate, you aren't making this easy you know!” Feral muttered, trying to get his nose as far away from his hands as he could without either turning his head or being on the other side of the room. He managed to remove the diaper but he hadn't been prepared for what was in it.

He grimaced as he considered the contents, not sure what he was supposed to do now. He had watched Vixen change her little daughter, Marianne, more times than he could remember and she always made it look easy.

He was quickly finding out it wasn't as easy as it looked.

Tessa stifled a giggle as she came back into the room to find the Kyn Warrior on his knees trying to clean the baby's bottom with hesitant movements. All he was doing was spreading the mess even further.

“Just where I like to see a man,” she quipped. “On his knees. Come out of the way, you're just making it worse,” She shooed him over to kneel down in front of the baby, who was taking advantage of the moment to attempt to flip himself over. Tessa made a grab for him just before he managed it, tapping his nose playfully.

“Ohh no you don't, handsome,” she chuckled and caught his ankles in her hand to clean him up with the other. She was used to changing babies, had spent a lot of time over here when Lisa first had the twins, and it showed in her efficient movements.

“There we go, all clean and dry, aren't you a clever little man?” She fastened his baby grow as he wriggled again, doing his best to escape. She grinned and caught him mid-escape, his chortles filling the room as she tickled his sides.

Smiles wreathed her face; he really was the cutest little thing. A pang of longing filled her, she always wanted kids of her own. For that she had to meet a man first, something she seemed singularly incapable of. She tickled again, running her fingers along the soles of his bare feet as she reached for his trousers.

“He's a gorgeous little thing,” she commented, very aware of the large Kyn watching her like a hawk. “So, he was just left on your doorstep?”

“Yeah, about half an hour ago. Was a bit of a surprise... usually I just get pizza



delivery,” he chuckled, shrugging a shoulder. “Not the domestic type.”

“Pizza? I didn't think vampires ate?” Her eyes held confusion as she flicked a glance up at him as she finished dressing the baby. She picked him up easily and handed him over. “Here, hold him for a moment whilst I clear this lot up. Hey... what's this?”

Her eyes fell on a folded piece of paper which had somehow gotten trapped in the yellow blanket, and fell loose as she folded it. Tessa reached down and picked it up. It was a piece of paper torn out of a reporter's notebook, crumpled and flooded into quarters. She smoothed it out and frowned at the words scrawled of it in a hasty hand.

“What's it say?” He shifted closer and peered over her shoulder. The scent of aftershave and warm man enveloped her; a shiver ran down her spine. *God, she really needed to get laid if a man just looking over her shoulder got a reaction like that!*

She shook her head to bring herself back to reality. “I don't know, it's an old Fae script I think... this is more Lisa's kettle of fish than mine. Some of it I recognise,”

She pointed out a word in the middle, her fingernail tapped the paper lightly, “This is the word for Morrigan,” Her eyes scanned the rest of the writing. Then it hit her, the half remembered lessons in her youth coming back all at once as she scanned the page.

“Shit!” she breathed, looking up at him, her eyes wide.

“What? What is it?” Feral frowned, picking up on her surprise.

“He... the baby... he's a Morrigan. There's a Fae prophecy about a male Morrigan...” Tessa swallowed, hardly believing what she was saying. “... when he grows up, I think he's going to be a God.”

## Chapter Two

Feral blinked, not quite believing his ears.

“Ok, you want to run that one by me again? A God? As in smiting and godly powers... the whole shebang?” He looked down at the baby in his arms in surprise, trying to see something of the divine there. All he saw was cute. A whole *lot* of cute.

She nodded, “The whole lot. The legend of the Winter King...” She trailed off, looking at him as though the name should mean something to him. It didn't.

“Sorry doll, not up on Fae legends. It's not compulsory reading for us Kyn, got enough of our own,” he apologised with a shrug and wondered why he was getting pulled into this. The baby was a Pixie, he found a Pixie to look after it so he should be high-tailing it out of here.

He really didn't like Pixies, like *really* didn't like Pixies. Last year they kidnapped the woman he was in love with, or thought he was at any rate, and beat the living snot out of him. It didn't incline him to think favourably of them.

But *female* pixies, Feral was discovering, were something else entirely. Tessa really was rather enchanting as she gathered things up, her movements quick and graceful.

“The Winter King legend is an old one. You've heard of the Morrigan right?” she checked, not even waiting for his answering nod before she continued. Everyone knew the legend of the Morrigan.

Originally a triple Goddess dedicated to war the Morrigan had diminished into one form, currently that of Nemain, and become a fixture of the Unseelie Court, mostly riding with the Host. No one was really sure how much of her divine power she had retained.

What was known was the woman was batty... even by Fae standards. Madness ran in the line and touched each new Morrigan as she came into her power. Not that anyone would dare say it to her face. There was still something about a former Goddess, especially a corpse Goddess, which sent chills down a person's spine.

“Well there's this old legend about the line. They're all female. No male children born in the line whatsoever, never has been. But they say when there *is* a male Morrigan born, he'll be the Winter King.”

“O...k, this is a bad thing, right?” Feral asked carefully and grimaced as the little guy they were discussing decided to slobber all over his shoulder.

She shrugged, “It could really upset the balance of power in the Fae courts for starters. The rest I'm not so sure on, the legends are vague. Apparently the Morrigan knows more about it... there's a book, an old one, on it. But she has never let anyone read it, doesn't like to talk about it.”

“Ok, so not end of the world type stuff... but imbalance is probably bad, right? And if he's Fae, not a Pixie, what's with the fluorescent 'do?”

“Well Pixies *are* actually Fae,” Her lips quirked in amusement. “We just don't like to admit it too loudly. And imbalance bad, yes. You can pop him down on the floor to roll around, this place is kiddie-proof.”

Feral did as he was told, a quick glance around reassured him she was telling the truth. Soft carpets and furnishings, all hard edges on the furniture had little cushioned pads. Amazing what you missed when you weren't looking properly. He had been convinced this place was an interior design showpiece but when you looked you could see care had been taken to make it suitable for children. Not sure why he cared that much, especially with a kid he just had dumped on his doorstep. Feral put the baby on the floor carefully, leaving him giggling and playing with a soft toy Tessa had waved in front of him

Like his place, the kitchen was just off the living area, a large breakfast counter

separated the two. He leaned against the counter, his arms folded over his broad chest as he watched her bustle around the small space. Now the baby had been sorted and didn't smell so bad he could finally appreciate the way she looked.

She was small, barely grazed his shoulder and wrapped in a terry towel robe designed for someone far larger than she was. The voluminous fabric buried her, cinched in tight around a wasp waist.

"I'll make him up a bottle," She was saying, not realising Feral's attention was elsewhere at the moment. Like on the deep vee at her neckline which kept gaping a little, teasing his imagination with fascinating glimpses of the creamy skin underneath. "We don't know when he last ate so better be safe than sorry... uhm, do vampires drink coffee?" She queried, looking up to catch him looking at her.

They locked eyes for a moment before she blushed and looked away, leaving a little smile on Feral's face. He read the interest there, the awareness of him as a man, and it pleased him on levels he didn't realise existed.

"Yeah, we drink coffee," he rumbled, his voice low in the sudden silence.

"Actually most of us can eat and drink... we just don't most of the time. Some prefer not to at all. Myself, I'm partial to a beer and a pizza," he offered with a smile, as he realised having a vampire in your apartment (or your sisters at any rate) must be a little worrying. After all, he wasn't the smallest of Kyn and compared to your average Pixie or Human, he was huge.

She flashed him a grin, "Sounds like the perfect date," Her voice was light as she opened a cupboard to put two mugs on the side. "Pepperoni pizza with all the trimmings?"

Feral grinned. "Why? You angling for a date, Tessa?"

She arched an eyebrow as she poured the bottling water into the bottle, measured out and mixed the formula with an experienced hand. She popped the bottle into a jug of cold water to cool and looked at him. "Hmm, depends... Pixies are better kissers than vamps," she replied, a hint of mischief in her eyes.

This time it was Feral's eyebrow winging its way up to his shaven hairline. "Is that so little Pixie?" he asked, a dangerous edge in his voice belied by the twinkle in his eyes.

"Yup!" She pushed a mug towards him, leaned her hips back against the side as she lifted her own to her lips, blowing the steam on the top. Her wide, dark eyes glanced at him over the rim, laughter dancing in them. Pixies liked to live dangerously, seemed it was true of the women as well as the men. But where the men liked to get into fights, Tessa was playing a whole different sort of game. One Feral was more than happy to play.

"Well I can't let this slur to the Kyn go unpunished," He pushed off from the counter and sauntered towards her step by slow step. He could move faster than the eye could see, mortal or Pixie, but this wasn't about speed. It was about the awareness tingling between them, about feeding it to see where it would lead. And about getting a taste of those full, pouting lips. Lips that held a soft smile of invitation.

He reached her and took the mug from her unresisting hands. "I figure I'm going to have to do something about it," He put the mug on the counter behind her and boxed her in with a hand on the counter either side of her hips as he lowered his head.

The softness of her lips took him by surprise, warm, and pliant under his. There was no coyness in her response, her lips yielded under his gentle coaxing and her arms lifted to wrap around his shoulders. He groaned as she stroked her tongue along his playfully, shifting to wrap her in his arms as he deepened the kiss.

By the time he lifted his head both their breathing was ragged and high bands of colour highlighted her cheeks. Feral rested his forehead against hers for a moment and then smiled. "I agree," He breathed, "Pixies are *great* kissers."

Two hours later Tessa escaped to the solitude of the bathroom, closing the door and leaning back against it. He was *gorgeous*! She pinched herself to make sure she wasn't just imagining what was going on. She fully expected to wake up on the sofa to find her film over and her ice-cream melted and dribbling all over the floor.

"Ouch!" She rubbed the sore spot on her arm. Ok, so she was awake and this was really happening. She couldn't believe it; these sorts of things didn't happen to her. In her world Feral would have just dumped the baby and disappeared. But he hadn't, insisting on sticking around in case they 'needed anything'.

Tessa sighed and ran a hand over her still tingling lips. Then there was the kiss. She had *never* been kissed that way before, not ever. Slow and thorough, it had been a devastating kiss which had left her weak at the knees and breathless. Breathless. Anyone would have thought she had been out running the hundred metres. No one had kissed her and made her breathless before!

She moved over to the sink, splashed water on her face before looking into the mirror. God, she looked awful!! No makeup, her hair scraped back.

"Ick," she muttered under her breath, closed her eyes and concentrated a moment. She was half pixie, on her mother's side, so low level glamour was all she could achieve. Luckily that was all she needed to tone down the more exotic elements of her appearance, making her almond shaped eyes slant a little less, dull the colour of her eyes a little and alter the shape of her cheeks so she appeared just like the dull looking humans she lived among. It was easier for female pixies, without the peacock like colouring of their male counterparts.

But with a man like Feral in the next room, a vampire who knew all about the world she couldn't talk about, Tessa gave into vanity and relaxed the glamour a little. She smiled and pulled the tie from her hair, releasing the gold flecked waves. Without the glamour covering it, thin strands of pure gold wove through the dark mass. Her one claim to beauty.

Her lips quirked as she shook her head at her own silliness. She would never be a supermodel that's for sure, she was more curvy than the usual stick insect not to mention at least a foot too short for the job. Besides, what woman looked glamorous when looking after a baby? Already she had baby drool on one shoulder of the t-shirt she had thrown on with a pair of jeans earlier, and spilled formula decorated her thigh.

Ahh well, she was used to babysitting she thought, washing her hands, and it was no hardship. The baby was a cute little thing, more developed than she'd have expected, making her and Feral laugh earlier as they chatted on the sofa.

It wouldn't be for long though, she left voice-mail messages for just about everyone she could think of. Someone, somewhere, had to know if there was a baby missing. In fact, she was surprised someone wasn't knocking the door down already, he really was a cute little thing. Then there was the weird note. She couldn't make out more than a few words about the Morrigan and him being the Winter King but she didn't believe that. Did she?

She shook her head as she headed out of the bathroom. No, it was too old a legend to pay much credence to. No doubt the work of fanatics, the Fae seemed to collect them like other species collected knick-knacks.

"So how's he doing?" she checked as she walked back into the main room. The scene which met her, the half naked man sprawled across the sofa, almost dwarfing it, and the baby crawling around the floor, made her pause for a second. A strange feeling buzzed in her head, her vision swimming in and out as the edges blackened. *Dejá-vu, she'd seen this before... or she would.*

"Hey there... you ok?" Feral's concerned voice brought her back to the present and she blinked to clear her vision.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just felt a bit... odd there for a moment. Is he ok?" She smiled in

reassurance and walked around the sofa to check on the baby.

“Yeah, he's a happy little bunny down here... chewin' on my phone. You know, we should decide on a name for him. We can't keep calling him 'the baby'... was there anything about his name on that note?” Feral sat forward and rested his forearms on his knees to look down at the object under discussion.

Tessa glanced at the note on the counter and shook her head. “Not that I can work out. I flunked ancient Fae I'm afraid,” Her lips quirked a little. “I never was what you could call academic.”

She settled back on the sofa next to him. “Without knowing what his parents, whoever they are, called him it's difficult. Calling him something else might confuse him, but he seems bright to me and if just for a little while... What do you reckon, what do you think we should call him?”

They settled on 'Spud' for some reason. But, like so much this evening, the reason why had bypassed Feral completely. He'd never met a woman who could shift his attention and divert him like she could. It was a new sensation for the large Kyn Warrior.

She was beautiful. When she had come back from the bathroom with her glamour stripped away, her true features, only hinted at before, had been revealed. Exotic, feline cast features which had taken his breath away. He thought he could see through Pixie glamour, a talent granted by his own paranormal blood. But now he realised the truth, he could see the glamour itself and the *potential* of what lay beyond but nothing more. A realisation which was a little levelling to say the least.

Left alone in the kitchen whilst Tessa put the newly named Spud down for the evening Feral smoothed a large hand over his head, rubbing at the thick stubble there. Like most Kyn he had a full head of hair, baldness wasn't something the species as a whole suffered from, but he preferred to shave it short. There was nothing an opponent could grab hold of, a preference he developed after a rogue vamp had ripped a chunk of it out by the roots. Damn that had hurt! Now, the frequent use of a razor kept it in check, but the five o'clock shadow could be a bitch.

Leaning back against the counter the large Kyn wondered what the hell he was still doing here. It was the sort of cosy scene he normally cut off an arm or a leg to avoid, beating a hasty retreat if he chanced across it down at the compound. Which was getting harder and harder.

The compound, once the reserve of the mostly male Warriors, each with a higher testosterone count than a squad of marines, had been over-run with cooing couples. It was as if the recent marriage of their King, Marak, had opened the floodgates. Now all the warriors were pairing off, his patrol partner Vix, amongst them.

They may as well rename the place the 'Happy Kyn Night Nursery' and have done with it. It was the main reason he and several of the other guys, all die-hard commitment-phobes, had beat a hasty retreat and moved out to bachelor pads.

Feral rubbed his head again. He didn't have an answer, although he suspected it had a lot more to do with Tessa than he wanted to think about. His hand moved down, rubbed absently at the sticky patch across his naked shoulder. He grimaced and pushed away from the counter and headed for the bathroom, he could do with a wash whilst Tessa was busy with the baby.

Tessa however, had already finished with the baby. He had gone down like a dream, nestled in one of the twin's cots. She shook her head in disbelief, they hadn't even left a toy or comfort blanket with him. No wonder he latched onto the blue fluffy elephant, one of the twin's abandoned toys, she waved in front of him. She wandered back through the main

bedroom, and opened her overnight bag. She had a shower earlier but thanks to Spud there throwing up on her she felt sticky.

She padded through to the main bathroom, her feet silent on the thick carpet. Although the small apartment only had one bathroom, the architects had created the illusion of luxury and an en-suite by giving the bathroom two doors, one in the apartment's main corridor and one from the master bedroom.

She draped her towel over the rail and stripped off. Her dirty clothes hit the deck, kicked into the corner as she snapped on the shower. Reaching up she twisted her hair on top of her head and clipped it into place as she stepped into the shower. Since she showered earlier the needle pressure of the water lacked the same 'ooooh' relief factor. She just needed a quick wash to get rid of the funky baby-sick odour.

Her hands lathered up the shower gel, the haunting fragrance of Rose and Vetiver surrounding her as she smoothed the lather over her skin. She drew in a deep breath, the scent of the oils and the needle spray of the shower prickled over her sensitised skin having its effect.

Her hands slowed down, sliding over her skin to cup her breasts, feeling their feminine weight. She slicked her thumbs over her nipples, already pebbled under the sensual onslaught. One hand slid down her ribcage, headed south over her smooth stomach.

She shouldn't, not with company in the apartment, but she'd been sexually frustrated before tall, dark, and fangy out there had treated her to such an erotic and explosive kiss. Not that it could go anywhere. She was half Pixie yes, but she was still mortal whereas Feral was a vampire, immortal Lord of the Night, and all that. Any relationship between them was a non starter. Even if he was ok with her wanting the left side of the bed and light off during sex she was going to age and he wasn't.

*Oh god, there she was... thinking about sex again.*

Aided by the soap over her skin her fingers sank between her thighs, parting the folds of her sex in search of the sensitive nub of her clit. She drew a ragged breath in over her teeth as her fingers found their goal, a thrill of arousal shot through her as her sex starved body responded like a flower opening in the sunlight. *How long had it been since she'd had sex? Nearly a year?*

She bit her lip to contain her moans, eyes closed as her finger slid against her clit, working her body towards the shattering climax which hovered just out of reach...

The sound of running water warned Feral a moment before he pushed the bathroom door open and embarrassed both of them. Well, embarrass Tessa anyway; he was fairly sure a woman like her wouldn't be too impressed at being caught in the shower by a guy she only just met. Himself, he would just enjoy the view until he got things thrown at him.

He paused, his hand on the smooth wood of the door. He should walk away and wait until she was finished. It was the gentlemanly thing to do. But after their earlier kiss Feral wasn't feeling particularly gentlemanly, his body hard and heavy with unfulfilled desire. Then the sirens call of female musk, the scent of a woman's arousal... Tessa's arousal... hit his nostrils and drew him on.

Feeling guilty but unable to stop himself Feral reached out and pushed the door, already ajar, open a little further. What he saw had his eyes widening.

*Holy shit! She was going for it right there in the shower!*

### Chapter Three

Feral stood frozen in place, unable to move from his position at the door. His eyes were locked on the scene in the shower, on the vision that stood there. The beautiful gold flecked hair he noticed earlier was piled up, exposing the gentle arch of her neck. But it wasn't her neck, graceful or not, which was holding him spellbound.

It was her hands and her body. Ok, he admitted, her knock-out body got first dibs on his attention.

She was a *real* woman, not a stick insect. A woman with the sort of curves he wanted to run his hands over and he wouldn't have to worry about breaking if he so much as breathed without warning. She had curves to make a man's mouth water, an hourglass figure with a tiny waist he just ached to slide his hands around.

But then her killer body had to take second place, his attention turned to her hands. One cupped her full breast, tweaking and pulling on the engorged nipple. A soft moan slipped from her throat whilst the other... Oh god, the other hand was buried between her thighs, fingers moving at a fast pace. Sliding against flesh hot and slick with her need, the scent of her passion hanging on the air like expensive perfume.

Like a starving man gazing through a baker's window Feral watched through the crack in the door. Her fingers picked up the pace as her other hand abandoned her breast, bracing against the glass shower screen. She lifted her foot, propping it against the tiles as she opened her thighs more. Baring more to his intent gaze.

Feral bit his lip, trying to stay as silent as possible as he shifted his position and tried to ease the raging hard-on in his pants. But the increased moans from the bathroom made it impossible. They weren't loud; if the door had been closed he wouldn't have heard them over the shower. But the door was open, he could hear them, and the sound of her pleasuring herself was driving him insane!

*Sqqqueak!*

He froze, eyes widening as the floorboard beneath his foot squeaked loudly. *Oh shit, she had to have heard that!* He looked up, straight through the crack in the door, to meet her startled eyes. But, as he watched, the sultry look returned, her fingers moved again. Emboldened and feeling as though he had been given permission, Feral pushed the door wider, leaned in the doorway to watch.

Tessa couldn't believe she was actually doing this! She was standing in the shower, naked and pleasuring herself in front of a guy. Not just any guy but the hottest guy she'd ever met, no matter what the species. Leaning back against the tiles she spread her thighs a little more, revelling in the flash of dark heat in his eyes. *Oh god, am I really doing this?* Or was this some kind of sensual spell cast by the Kyn... Vampires could do things like that couldn't they?

But even as she watched him, her fingers sliding and circling her clit again, Tessa knew it wasn't a spell. He didn't have the sensual aura she always associated with vampires from books and films. He just oozed danger, right from the top of his shaved head to the bottoms of his booted feet. The sort of guy you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. Except Tessa did, he had that bad boy aura she always found attractive.

She held his eyes with hers. Lifting the hand on her breast she slid one finger into her mouth, sliding it slowly between her lips. His eyes bulged a little, his nostrils flared as she suckled on it for a moment, hollowing her cheeks. She slid the finger in and out of her mouth suggestively, the fantasy getting to her as well.

Giving a guy a blow job was one of her favourite things to do, she loved the feel of a

hard cock in her mouth. Her eyes fluttered closed for a second as she imagined stepping out of the shower and strutting over to him in the doorway. Opening his pants and taking the hard erection she could see straining the fabric into her hands, into her mouth.

She shivered, the idea pushing her closer to the edge. If only he could hear what she was thinking! She didn't think she'd be alone in the shower for long. Almost as though her thought had triggered it, he started to step forward. She shook her head, pulled her finger out of her mouth. Her look warning him if he did anything until she said, until she was ready, then the game was over.

He stopped instantly, getting the message and settling back into his former position. Tessa nodded approval, her hand starting to trail downwards. Her thumb traced along her delicate collarbone before one finger slid around the curve of her breast, her eyes on him all the time. He obviously liked what she was doing, his attention riveted on the path of her fingers, expression eager. She smiled and gave him what he was waiting for, rolling her nipple in her fingers, the wet pads creating a delicious friction.

Her eyes rolled back in her head at the dual assaults of her fingers on her sensitised nipple and circling her clit. The ache between her thighs hardened. Just a little more, a little further... She closed her eyes, unable to look at him as she did this. She'd go up in flames if he kept looking at her with a dark, intense gaze.

With her back against the cool tile the warm water cascaded over her, stinging her sensitive breasts and making her catch her breath. Her circling finger drove the tension in her petite frame higher, her heart hammering as she got closer to the end. Through it all she could feel his dark eyes on her, devouring everything. Every move she made. Watching her make herself come.

She cried out as the tension reached breaking point. Her body stiffened as her finger swept over her clit one last time, sending her over the edge. Intense pleasure poured through her body, spiralling outwards from her core in delicious waves. She bit her lip as her fingers moved again, prolonging the pleasure for a moment. Then they slowed, stopped.

Tessa opened her eyes to find him watching her, dark desire swirling in their satin depths. The game wasn't over yet. She smiled a siren's smile as she stepped from the shower, the water sleeting off her naked body like Aphrodite rising from the waves.

Feral's breath caught in his throat at the look in her eyes. Dark and sultry, they held a sensual promise which stilled the heart in his chest then set it hammering again. She sauntered across the small room, her hips swaying, until she was stood in front of him. Steam rose in delicate coils from her warm, wet skin, bringing him the scent of honeysuckle... a scent unique to her. He breathed in, drawing it over his tongue, tasting, and savouring it. Like a tracker dog, he'd be able to track her anywhere now. An ability granted by his race and enhanced if he took her blood.

A shiver ran through his heavyset body at the thought, his fangs leaped forth in his mouth. As hard and aching as his body, as she smiled at him, sliding gracefully to her knees.

"Oh my god," he breathed as she reached for the buttons on his jeans, knowing what was coming next. His cock jerked in anticipation, strained against the denim. Her eyes held his as her clever fingers worked on the buttons, snapping each free with deliberate slowness. *She was going to do it, she really was.* Feral couldn't believe his luck, leaning back against the door frame and holding his breath in case she changed her mind.

The last button snapped open and she reached for him, freeing him from the confines of his jeans. He sucked a breath in as her hands closed around his throbbing cock, already rock hard and ready for action. She leaned forwards, her lips opening to take him into her mouth...

**CRASH!!**



The sound of wood splintering and glass shattering froze them both in their tracks, paused in the middle of an erotic still life.

“Shit!” Feral hissed. He tucked himself back in his jeans in a flash and hauled Tessa to her feet. “Get the baby and get dressed,” He shoved her towards the bedroom door.

He turned to the other, his amorous mood disappeared into cool professionalism now that there was a threat. His fingers fastened the buttons on the front of his jeans at light speed as he extended his senses past the door and into the apartment beyond.

There were three of them, heartbeats loud in the sudden stillness of the apartment. Feral's eyes glinted with anger and determination. He had no idea who these goons were or what they wanted. Chances were it wasn't to borrow a cup of sugar. No, whatever it was, it was dodgy. Regular visitors waited until you opened the door, they didn't break it down.

On automatic, his hands reached for the small of his back, for the heavy blades usually tucked into the back of his belt. They closed on empty air. He left his weapons back in his own apartment. *Great going, Feral, rookie mistake.* Then he smiled. A nasty little expression which had nothing to do with humour. It would have to be fists then. Good, he hadn't had a decent punch up in a while.

There were two in the corridor outside, still unaware of his presence on the other side of the door. They wouldn't be for long. The fact they forced entry meant bad things for anyone in the apartment, so the sound of the running shower would draw them like a magnet. Straight towards a pissed off Kyn warrior.

Reaching out he snapped off the light. The Kyn were a nocturnal race so he could see perfectly well, if not better, in the darkness. A fact which might give him a half second advantage in a fight. And Feral was experienced enough to know sometimes everything hung on the first half second.

Then they were there, bracketing the door, one on either side. Feral drew in a silent breath, rolling the air over his tongue and tasting it. Male, he decided, the air tainted with almost the tang of male sweat and something chemically sweet. Hair gel or something.

He paused for a moment, waited for some sign of movement from outside the door, his large hand reached out towards the handle. There it was, the scuff of a boot over the carpet. A tiny noise but enough warning. Feral moved like lightening, exploding out of the room like a whirlwind. Hand on the door he slammed it wide, hearing the satisfying crunch of bone as it connected with a nose on the other side. The scent of blood blossomed on the air, heavy and fragrant to the Vampire's senses.

He ignored the dull slide and thump from behind the door and rounded on the other guy in the corridor, dodging a punch as he got his first good look at the intruders. Then the smell of hair gel made sense.

“Bloody pixies!” Feral snarled, blocking another heavy punch and throwing a few of his own, driving the hoody-clad pixie back towards the main room. “When will you wankers get the message?”

The pixie was equally surprised, blocking Feral's lightening fast punches with an agility Feral grudgingly admired. “Crap! Where did you come from? There was only supposed to be a woman and a human in here!” he exclaimed, his eyes widened as they burst into the lit main room.

“Just not your lucky day, was it then sunshine?” Feral grinned maniacally, the expression making the marks across one side of his face appear even more menacing as he advanced. “Serves you right, sending four of you against normal people!” he added, angered beyond measure. He'd always known Pixies were damn cowards, this just proved it.

The fight continued, the Pixie bounced off the kitchen counter. As he re-bounded he grabbed one of the bar stools. Feral sucked his breath in, raising his arms as the stool whistled through the air towards his head. This was going to hurt.

It did.

Pain lanced through his arm and ribcage as the stool shattered across his block, skittering a little down his side. He hissed and shook himself, shedding bits of wood like a dog that shook water from its coat.

The Pixie looked at the end of the stool leg he still had in one hand and back at Feral, a stunned look on his face. Feral didn't blame him, the blow would have put most men down. Trouble was Feral wasn't most men. He was Kyn, and that was a whole different ball game.

"You're beginning to piss me off now," he growled as he grabbed the Pixie by the scruff of the neck, he wrenched the broken leg away from him and threw it aside.

Stakes might be the traditional method of dealing with a Vampire but the Kyn weren't your traditional sort of Vampire. They were demon born. A stake through the heart didn't kill them. It just bloody hurt and made them mad. Well, madder than usual. But then, a piece of wood stuck out your chest would piss anyone off.

A scream from the direction of the bedrooms snapped Feral's head up. *Tessa and the baby!* With a roar of fury he twirled the Pixie in his grip, half pushing, half throwing him towards the breakfast counter and slammed the guy's face into the polished counter-top.

He rebounded with a dull groan of pain, nose spread across his face. Blood splattered the pristine side. Damn it, he was still conscious! Feral knew better than to leave a conscious opponent behind, the last thing you needed in a fight was a guy you thought you put down creeping up behind you and stabbing you in the back.

His spread hand caught the back of the Pixie's head like a basketball, slamming it back down. This time his face got up close and personal with the side and didn't rebound. Just slid boneless to the floor leaving a smeared crimson trail.

"I fucking *hate* Pixies!" Feral muttered, flicking blood splatter off his chest and opening a knife drawer. Selecting the heaviest blade in the drawer, he turned and headed for the bedrooms.

Tessa hadn't argued at the hard shove towards the door, launching herself through it with speed born of fear. Someone was in the apartment! And the only thing, the only reason she could think of, was the baby. She raced through the master bedroom, grabbing and pulling on her robe as she sped through like a small tornado.

She hit the door at top speed, screaming as it slammed open and into something solid the other side. Something solid which swore as the hard wood of the door slammed open unexpectedly. Desperate and using the only weapon she had at the moment, she pulled the door back and rammed it into him again. Silently she thanked God the main bedroom door opened outwards and the nursery door inwards as she barrelled through it, slamming it behind her.

Acting on pure instinct she grappled with the wardrobe behind the door, pulling it until it toppled over. It crashed across the door diagonally, blocking it. Not a moment too soon. Heavy thuds and curses erupted from the other side.

Running high on adrenalin Tessa whirled around, checking the cot which held Spud. Startled blue eyes stared back at her, then watered as he wailed, scared by the sudden noises.

"Shhhh, shhhh, it's gonna be ok, I promise," she whispered, already looking around the room for something she could use as a weapon. She blocked the door but there was no way she could block the window.

She gathered Spud into her arms and tried to soothe him. "Shh, shh little man. I need you to be quiet, ok?" she murmured, backing up and looking for somewhere to hide him. There! Under the changing unit!

"Sorry about this," she whispered as she knelt down and shoved him as far to the back as she could.

Just in time.

As she straightened up, the door crashed inwards. The wood of the wardrobe, a nursery sized one rather than full size, groaned in protest as it was pushed along the carpeted floor.

“GET OUT! HELP!! HELP!! SOMEONE HELP US!!” Tessa started to shriek like a banshee, hoping beyond hope to wake someone up in the surrounding units, and throwing things at the Pixie clambering over the wardrobe. Changing baskets, trailing nappies, flew through the air and obscured his vision but the bottles were far more effective, heavy with baby oil and lotion.

“Lisa, I’ll never call your stockpiling again!” Tessa promised in an undertone as she hurled bottle after bottle with bruising accuracy, grinning as the Pixie yelped and tried to cover his head with his arms. She had always been a good pitcher as a kid. But time was running out and she knew it. Soon she was going to run out of ammunition and then she had no clue what she was going to do. She was half Pixie yes, but she was female and small, for either species. Her grasp on magic wasn’t going to help much either, she could manage low level glamour, appearance, and perhaps some ‘fairy lights’ but that was about it.

Fairy lights. That was it! Tessa threw the last bottle, managing a clear strike on the guy’s forehead which rocked his head back. Could she do it? She had nothing to lose by trying. She closed her eyes and reached deep down inside herself. It was wonderful how the imminent threat aided her concentration, delving into the part of her which was pure Pixie. She smiled as she opened her eyes, feeling the familiar tingle in her fingers as the Witching, the magical layer in everything, surrounded everything, reacted to her.

She raised her hands and spread them out as tiny balls of light appeared in her palms. Fairy lights, a charm to amuse children and considered a party trick, nothing more. The Pixie didn’t seem impressed, rubbing his head as he straightened and looked at her.

“Pretty, but it ain’t going to help you one bit bitch! Hand over the kid!” He ordered as he advanced menacingly. This was it, now or never. She tested her hold on the Witching, finding it firm, then flicked her wrists. The lights, normally benign orbs of light which fluttered around like fireflies, made more like wasps.

The soft buzzing around them increased to fever pitch. One broke away, the Pixie’s eyes followed it, hovering higher than the rest for a moment. Then it dive-bombed, heading right for the intruder’s eyes.

“Holy *shit! Getitoff me!!*” he demanded, flapping his hands and arms as he tried to fend off the attacking ball of light which had acquired the tenacity of a terrier. Ignoring the flailing hands it dodged and darted in, attacking repeatedly.

That seemed to be the signal, the floodgates opened and the rest attacked like a horde, diving and circling, completely blinding the Pixie. As he fumbled around the room, trying to shake them off, Tessa looked around for something to knock him out with.

“Fluffy toys, fluffy toys... Christ isn’t there anything harder than a damn *marshmallow* in here?” she exclaimed in frustration, running out of options ... and time. The glamour she had cast wouldn’t last forever and she wouldn’t be able to cast again for at least an hour.

Then her gaze fell down the side of the shelves. There, tucked away in the corner, was James’s prize possession. A baseball bat signed by someone or other. Tessa grabbed it like it was a lifeline, dragging it out from the tiny gap. Palms sweaty and heart pounding she padded towards the Pixie. Could she do it? Could she actually swing the bat and hit another living creature? She wasn’t a violent person... not really, she was all mouth and bluster.

“Arrggh, you wait bitch! When I get these damn things off me, I’ll fucking gut you!” The Pixie’s bellowed threat made up Tessa’s mind for her. She drew the bat back, closed her eyes and, wincing, she swung it with all her might.

It hit with a meaty crunch, the Pixie's threats and complaints falling silent along with the dull thud as something large hit the floor. Tessa opened her eyes in surprise, looking down at the prone form of the Pixie. She'd done it! She'd actually done it!

"*Strrrrrrike!*"

Tessa swung around at the voice from the doorway, drew the bat back again. An automatic reaction, ready to swing for anyone who wanted to take the baby. But it was Feral's dark eyes that met hers, amusement in them, as he started to clear the ruins of the nursery wardrobe out of the way.

"Oh my god, Feral!" She half squeaked, half gasped. She'd never been so pleased to see anyone in her *life*, throwing herself across the short distance and into his arms; the bat fell unheeded to the carpet. "Are you ok? You're not hurt?" she demanded, all but throttling him in her relief.

He chuckled, a deep rumble from low in his chest as he hugged her back, his hands smoothed down her back soothingly. "I'm ok. Takes more than a bunch of half-assed Pixies to bother me," he grinned, letting her go to continue clearing the doorway.

"Just remind me not to piss you off, ok?" he chuckled, nodding towards the bat on the floor and the still form of the Pixie. "Where's the baby? We need to get out of here, like yesterday. Whoever sent this lot... well, they're playing hardball."

## Chapter Four

The Fae Court was the eighth wonder of the world. Or perhaps the first would be more accurate since it had formed before even Fae memory began, which was well before human memory and certainly before any of the structures on the traditional list had been constructed.

The Court was a law unto itself. It worked to an agenda none living, or possibly sane, could figure out. Most of the time it appeared at the archetype of a romantic court. High vaulted ceilings and walls of smooth, veined marble, the veins sparkling silver as they caught the light. Light cast from glow orbs set in brackets on the walls or from willow-the-wisps twisted into the glorious crystal chandeliers. It was the sort of place you expected a fairytale princess to turn the next corner, brushing her hair and waiting for her prince charming to arrive. But occasionally, when the Court was stressed, it appeared in different forms. A gothic castle or even, when it was really stressed, the rough hewn dirt walls of the barrow it had been originally.

But at the moment, it was a glorious sight to rival any Mortal King's palace and one very few would ever get to see. It was also completely ignored by the woman who swept through the massive doorway. Slender and almost childlike in form she had the delicate fragility of a full blooded Fae. One of the old blood, not the new generations whose blood had been filtered by Elven or other blood. There weren't many left these days. The old lines had died out, leaving just the seven sisters and Mab. With this generation they would be gone. Hard to worry too much about that though when a generation could span thousands of years.

She stormed into the large, high-ceilinged hall, her face like thunder. With an imperious wave she ordered the door closed, ignoring the servant who scurried to do her bidding.

"So you failed. Why am I not surprised?" Although her appearance was ethereally beautiful, the aura that surrounded her invoking feelings of goodness and awe, the voice that issued from the perfect cupid's bow of her lips was as sharp as a whip. And twice as venomous.

She stalked in front of the three Pixies sent to recover the Morrigan child, forced to their knees in front of her by her guards. All three trembled as she approached. A small smile curved her perfect lips as she switched the hem of her white gown away from their knees, as though worried about marking the pristine hem.

Fearful, just the way she liked them. Closing her eyes for a moment she savoured the fear that oozed from their skin. She shivered, such a delicious treat!

"Do you *know* how much energy it cost me to get that brat separated from its parents?" she demanded, her voice sharpening as the initial hit from their fear wore off and she recalled their failure.

To a man, Pixie or Fae, everyone in the room avoided the gaze of the Princess. The Pixies held before her, the guards doing the holding and the gaggle of Pixies huddled in the corner. Her Pixies, to do with as she wished after their fool of a Warlord tried to put one over on her in a deal and ended up trapped by Fae law. She'd taken his pack and his flesh for the insult, and she gloried in it. Pixie flesh and blood were powerful. She hadn't needed to feed for weeks after the Pixie Warlord had shared her bed.

A mutter from one of the kneeling Pixies drew her attention and she leaned forwards. "What was that?" she demanded, her voice sharp.

"It wasn't our fault!" The 'leader' of the trio complained, daring a look up. His bravado didn't last long and he looked down again, visibly quaking at the look in her storm-grey eyes.

"There was a Kyn guy there, a Warrior," he muttered. "We were only expecting a

woman and a human,” he added, flinching as though expecting a blow.

“Excuses, excuses! Always bloody excuses!” She exploded, seething in anger. If it wasn't the bloody nanny suddenly developing a conscience and dropping the brat off on the first Pixie doorstep she could find, it was this bunch of incompetents. A bloody Kyn indeed. Like she believed that!

“Do I have to do *everything* around here myself? Do *not* answer that Talven!!” she ordered sharply as her Guard Captain looked up, a frown on his handsome face.

That was the trouble with some of these half breeds. Pretty to look at but it was very much a case of 'lights are on but no one was home'. Talven, a Sidhe half-breed, fit that description to a T. The hopeful expression in his eyes bolstered her feminine ego at the same time as irritating the hell out of her. If she kicked him she was sure he'd thank her!

She tutted under her breath. “Get these idiots out of my sight,” she ordered with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Get them cleaned up and sent to my chambers, I'll deal with them later,”

The low moan from one of the trio as they were hauled to their feet got her attention. But not as much as the fresh wave of terror that rolled towards her. She held her hand out, an unspoken order to stop as she stepped forwards.

The sound had come from the youngest. Barely in his twenties with smooth, handsome features and a strong, well muscled body. He had the sort of looks that fired her interest, her body awakening as it felt the pull of attraction.

“Oh, don't worry,” Her voice was a soft croon as she moved closer to fit against him, nestling her slender body against his. He flinched, trying to move away, but the hard hold of the guards held him immobile in front of her. “There, there,” she murmured, her voice soft and lover-like as she stroked the side of his jaw. A fine tremor racked his body as she leaned in to lay a gentle kiss on his lips.

“It's all going to be fine, I'll be gentle with you, I promise,” she assured him, a promise which didn't seem to have much of a reassuring effect on the young Pixie. Faced with one of his worst nightmare's wrapped up in a breathtakingly beautiful package his breathing was panicked, his eyes wild, as he tried desperately not to look at her.

Growing tired of this game she reached out and pulled his jaw around. He struggled but she was far stronger than her delicate appearance should allow, even for a Fae. She caught his forest green eyes with her own dark gaze. “We'll have ourselves a good night you and I,” she whispered.

His terrified moan, more animalistic than anything, echoed around the chamber at the same time a hot acrid smell assaulted her sensitive nostrils. She leapt away, pushing off from his broad chest, her nose wrinkling in distaste as a dark stain spread over the front of his trousers.

“Oh for heavens sake! Get them out of my sight!” she hissed in annoyance. What was it with men these days? She longed to find a real man, not one that lost control of his bodily functions when she so much as looked at him. One who would stand up to her...

“Right, the rest of you,” She turned on her heel and glared at the huddled group in the corner as the three who failed were dragged away. “Get out there and get that damn baby, I don't care how you do it. Just *do* it!” she ordered, a warning in her voice about their fate should they fail her again. The atmosphere in the room grew cold, as though the very building were affected by her mood.

“Now *go*!” She snapped, turning in a flurry of skirt to stalk up the length of the hall. Movement broke out behind her as the Pixies made their escape, followed by the measured tread of her guard. A small sigh escaped her as she approached the dais at the end of the large hall. She paused at the bottom of the steps and looked at the throne sat atop it.

Made of stone it was one of seven, each sat in a hall of its own around the Court. Or,

when required, pulled by the Court itself into the Queen's hall to sit flanked around Mab. One throne for each of the Seven Sisters. The seven Fae Princesses. Beloved by the land, all powerful amongst the Fae and all that crap... but she wanted to be *more* powerful. She wanted, needed...

"What are you, some sort of one man army?" Tessa asked as she leaned in the doorway of the main bedroom and watched Feral pull a multitude of weapons from a case. Ten minutes had seen a rapid exit from her sister's now trashed apartment, Feral only allowed enough of a delay for her to grab her weekend bag and one for the baby. She knew her sister was going to *kill* her for the state of the place but right at the moment Tessa couldn't bring herself to worry about it.

She shrugged the skinny fit t-shirt she pulled on into place, smoothing it automatically over her now denim-clad hips as she watched him with interest. She had known he was dangerous from the moment she'd seen him on her doorstep. She knew enough about Kyn to know the heavy tattoo-like marks across one side of his body and down his arm marked him as a Kyn Warrior. Baddest of the bad type dude. But it was one thing to know that intellectually and quite another to see him kitting up.

Gone were the well washed jeans hanging low on his hips, the slight vee of hair on his washboard stomach that disappeared into his waistband teasing her beyond belief. They were replaced by near identical pair in black denim over heavy black boots, teamed with a polo that clung lovingly to the heavy muscles of his chest and shoulders. The clothing, combined with the 'bad ass' attitude that surrounded him, were enough to make old ladies cross the street to avoid him. And that was before you considered the weaponry.

His lips quirked as he carried on arming up.

"Yup, pretty much so. Have to be fighting the Rogue. We patrol in pairs but there's always the chance your partner could fall, then you're on your own," he said shortly, his face tight.

A brief flash of anger, a rage so complete it took Tessa's breath away, crossed his face. She didn't need him to spell it out to tell something bad had happened sometime in the past, that a partner had gone down. Curiosity filled her but the forbidding look on his face warned her off asking.

His movements were deft, moving with the ease of long experience as he strapped knives and blades over what seemed like every available body surface. Sheaths on the inside of his wrists, more in the heavy boots.

"You need *all* that for what you do?" she asked, her curiosity about him increasing. He moved with a grace she found fascinating, retrieving a heavy belt from across the back of a chair in the corner and buckling it around his lean hips. This was a different man from the one she'd been laughing and joking with back in her sister's apartment.

"Not really no, they're mostly backup," Feral replied, wondering idly if she ever stopped talking. Not that it was bothering him as it usually would. He liked working with his patrol partner Vixen for one reason, she wasn't into idle chatter. Women had a reputation for gossiping but they had nothing on men when they got together. Some of his previous partners had chattered so much he had given serious consideration to killing them and hiding their bodies in a dumpster somewhere. But Tessa's questions didn't bother him at all.

"These are my main weapons," He shifted the heavy belt on his hips and reached to the small of his back. Without thinking his fingers sought and found the guards of the blades in the sheaths fitted inside the back. The next second the blades were in his hands and he doubled his fists, moving easily into a guard position for her. Flexing his muscles and showing off in a way he hadn't done since he was a teenager and started to bulk up to Warrior weight.

The blades weren't knives, daggers, or anything that resembled a human weapon. More like heavy knuckle dusters they fit across his hands, the razor sharp blades across his knuckles glinted in the light cast from the hallway light. They were ancient weapons. Kyn weapons that had come with the race when they crossed from their home dimension.

"Hmm, those little things?" Tessa's frown and the slight smile on her lips were both sceptical.

"That's it, just diss the blades! Typical woman!" he huffed, pretending to be insulted as he slid the blades away with a flourish.

"Ohh no, after earlier, believe me I'm more than happy with whatever you're packing sweetheart," she said, the tone in her voice honest. Feral grinned as his mind made a dive for the gutter. This was just too easy.

"Whatever I'm packing huh? You sure you can handle it honey?"

The smile that curved her lips fired his blood, but not as much as the look of challenge in her eyes as she fell easily into the game. "Ohh you'd better believe it... and if we didn't need to get out of here like pronto mister boss man, I'd be proving it to you," she threw back, reminding him they needed to move.

His chest expanded in a sigh of frustration. "Ok, I'm done. Grab the kid and let's get gone."

"Mikal, it's Feral. Oh fuck it! I hate these damn things," he muttered as he slid out of the seat of his truck, phone against his ear. He waited impatiently until the bleep and started again. "Mikal, Feral. Got a bit of a situation, bunch of Pixies broke in and trashed my neighbours place. I got her out and we're at the Grey Lady. Give me a call when you're free would ya mate? Catch you later,"

He flipped the phone shut and reached for the bags Tessa held out for him. "You sure we're going to be able to get a room?" he asked, eyeing the front of the building dubiously. *Didn't these places need bookings or something?*

She looked up at him as she slid from the passenger seat, Spud in her arms. She hadn't been too happy about travelling without a proper baby-seat. She had still been arguing halfway there, and then subsided into glares for the rest of the way. Feral hid his smile, she was even prettier mad. He'd have to wind her up more often.

"We're lucky to be here at all! What would have happened if the cops had stopped us?" she demanded, "You'd have gotten a ticket or something and they'd have taken Spud off us... we're not his parents, they'd find that out straight away and then where would we be?"

Feral shrugged, the handles of both bags caught easily in one large hand, the other free just in case they got jumped again. "I'm Kyn remember? I'd just have pulled a Jedi mind trick on them... 'these aren't the droids you're looking for'," He grinned as he waved his hand a la Obi Wan Kenobi.

Her lips quirked a little, behind the glare she tried to reinforce. "I see my subtle charm is working as planned. So, what about it? You reckon we'll get a room here? Not that many paranormal places..." And there weren't. Feral could count the number of paranormal friendly hotels in the city on the fingers of one hand.

Tessa shrugged, setting off towards the door, winking at him over her shoulder. "Bet you dinner I can get us a room."

He walked with her to the door, his stride shortened to match hers, where he held it open for her before stepping through himself. As he did, he felt a distinctive shiver down his back, like someone had dumped a bucket of cold water over him. The place was warded. He'd know that feeling anywhere.

"Wards, protection spells, daylight shutters. You name it, we got it," A voice at his side announced, almost as though she read his thoughts. He turned swiftly, his hand already



halfway to the small of his back, to find a woman watching him with a smile on her lips.

A woman that looked so much like Tessa, he had to check that she was still on the other side of him. Short and slender, she was nearly identical, the same height, build, and facial features. She only differed in her dress sense. Whereas Tessa was casually dressed in jeans and a tee, this woman could have stepped right out of an Audrey Hepburn film.

He shot Tessa a look, "No bet missy, *you* get to buy dinner," he muttered in a low voice before turning to the other woman. She held out her hand.

"Jane Grey, owner of the Grey Lady and Tessa's aunt," she said with a bright smile.

A few minutes later Feral nudged open the door to their room with his shoulder, since opening it required a fairly complex procedure that involved both hands, twisting the key one way and the doorknob the other.

"Should have had these fitted at your sister's place. Pixie's would have been there for months working it out," he winked over his shoulder as he walked into the room.

"Oi, watch it you! Pixie in the room, remember?" She threw him a 'look' as she followed him in. It was a decent sized room, a family room, with a double bed in the middle and a single set to the side. Not luxurious by any stretch of the imagination, it was nevertheless clean and functional.

"Yeah, but you're not just a Pixie are you?" he said quickly, digging himself out of the hole he could see looming over him with the ease of long practise. Such skills were necessary when your patrol partner was the psychotic vamp bitch from hell at certain times of the month.

On automatic he did a sweep of the room. As promised the curtains concealed full daylight shutters, a necessity for your vampire traveller, and a quick swipe of his hand over the windowsill had the wards there flaring to life for a second. His eyebrow flitted up for a second. Daylight shutters and heavy duty wards? Someone had sunk some money into this place.

"What do you mean, not just a Pixie?" Tessa settled Spud in the middle of the double bed, her voice light. Too light, the slight pause before she answered like a neon sign lighting up. Feral opened the door to the bathroom, paused to look inside before he answered. Like the bedroom it was plain, simple. A fresh lemon scent assaulted his sensitive nostrils. And so clean he could probably have eaten a meal off the floor.

"Well, your Aunt there... Jane," Satisfied the shutter in there was the same high quality as the one in the bedroom he shut the door and turned to her. "If she's a day under a hundred I'll eat Spud's hat," He flicked a finger towards the blue fleecy cap covering the baby's day-glo locks. He leaned back, shoulder against the wall, arms folded as he considered her.

She didn't look at him, tickling Spud and making him giggle. A delaying tactic if ever he saw one. Finally she looked his way, not directly at him, but towards him. "Don't be silly, Pixie's don't live that long."

"I'm Kyn Tessa, not an idiot. I can sense an expanded lifespan when it's looking me in the face," He told her firmly. What was it with women and not giving straight answers? Vixen was *just* like this when she didn't want to talk. It was like getting blood out of a damn stone!

She chucked Spud under the chin and sat back on the bed, deep in thought. The tension stretched between them, an air of expectancy as Feral waited for her to say something. That was the trick. Not filling the silence with something and giving them an out. That way they *had* to say something, and more often than not the pressure of the silence prompted them into revealing things they might not otherwise.

She sighed, "Ok, Jane's a little... special," she admitted and bowed her head for a moment. Swivelling on the bed she looked at him, her dark eyes earnest. "You have to keep

this to yourself, ok? My family has been keeping this secret for generations,” She searched his eyes, looking for confirmation in his face.

Slowly Feral nodded, intrigued. What secret were they keeping? What secret could be so important that a family of Pixies, not the most reliable beings in the world, would keep it for generations? “Ok, I promise... cross my heart and hope to die,” he replied, drawing his forefinger across his chest.

Tessa frowned, a little line forming between her brows that he thought was cute, and shook her head. “But you're a vampire anyway...”

“And?”

“Well, aren't you like, the living dead and all that?”

Feral laughed. Again, she caught him off guard.

“Now, now. You're a Pixie, you know better than that!” he chided her. Kyn were demonic, not cursed. Well not exactly. Some would say their demonic blood cursed them but Feral and most other Kyn begged to differ. They were just different, that was all.

She wrinkled her nose at him, a teasing light in her eyes that reminded him they hadn't finished what they'd started in that bathroom. A bolt of desire hit him broadside, bringing a low rumble to his throat.

“And don't try and change the subject missy!” He warned her, folding his arms across his broad chest again. “You were telling me about Jane.”

“Oh buggarit... well a gal's gotta give these things a try! Ok... we're not just Pixies. There's something odd mixed into the bloodline. You know much about English Royalty?”

Feral laughed, “What, you mean as in Human English Royalty? Hell, I have enough trouble remembering who's President now! You can't expect me to know history as well, not when these humans die off every eighty years or so... uhm, no offence,” He added in haste as two pairs of eyes swivelled to look at him accusingly, Spud adding the weight of his baby stare.

She wrinkled her nose at him, the mock glare fading. “Nah, you're okay. I'm not *that* easily offended. Okay, long story short. Jane was once Queen of England. Until they chopped her head off.”

Feral nodded slowly. “I wondered what the scarf was for.”

## Chapter Five

“But did you see the ass on him? Like two walnuts in a sock!” Jane grinned as she leaned back against the scatter cushions that lined the sofa, her eyes twinkled over the rim of her wineglass.

Tessa suppressed a giggle, or tried to. The two glasses of wine, two *large* glasses of wine, she had ensured she didn’t quite manage it; some of the giggles escaped her, sneaking around the edges of her lips.

“You, madam, are *far* too old for thoughts like that! Why I’m absolutely scandalised!” she exclaimed in mock indignation, wagging her finger at her aunt.

Although, technically Jane wasn’t her aunt. She was Tessa’s great, great, great something aunt. As Feral had instinctively known, she had a bit of a long lifespan for a Pixie. Which she wasn’t. Quite what Jane was Tessa didn’t know, none of the family did. She wasn’t even sure Jane herself knew.

Jane leaned forwards to put her wineglass on the coffee table. Here in her own apartments at the back of the hotel she relaxed somewhat. The scarf she usually wore looped around her throat was lying discarded across the back of the chair Tessa was curled up in.

She had grown up seeing the horrendous scars across Jane’s throat, knew the story but always the sight of them took her breath away. Tessa swallowed, resisting the urge to rub her throat in sympathy. How the hell did you survive your own beheading?

“Don’t think about it,” Jane said, her voice quieter than usual, “I don’t. Not really something I want to remember.”

Tessa blinked, colour flaring over her cheeks at being caught staring, covering her surprise with a downward sweep of her lashes. “I’m sorry, how did you know?”

Jane shrugged as a sad smile curved her full lips. “You get used to it. The little looks, then the careful look away. The way you can just tell they’re dying to ask. People never look at me properly unless I’ve got my neck covered. Polo necks are possibly the best invention on the planet in my eyes,” she smiled, trying to make a joke of it but it fell flat, the sad tone plucked at Tessa’s heartstrings.

She hadn’t realised it was so bad for Jane but hearing the other woman talk about it and seeing the sadness there, it brought the realisation home for her. “What about healing spells or using glamour?” she asked, “Surely something would work?”

Jane shook her head. “I’m not Fae or Pixie so I can’t cast glamour. Even then, most paranormals would see right through it. And healing spells don’t work. Whatever made me this way... it means to keep me this way,” She sighed and shook herself, as though throwing off bad memories. “Ok, enough about me. Let’s talk about you, sex on legs, and the punk baby for a while shall we?”

Tessa smiled in response, glad to be moving onto another topic. She hadn’t meant to upset Jane or anything, she really should have realised the scars bothered her aunt. After all, most people were offered counselling these days for things like scars and the incidents that lead to them weren’t they? So why should Jane be any different? Tessa had just assumed that because she had them for so long, they stopped bothering her.

*Idiot*, she berated herself as she wriggled in the chair, reaching inside her back pocket for the note that had been left with Spud.

“Are you ok for time?” Jane asked as she took the folded paper from Tessa’s outstretched hand. “I’m sorry, I should have asked you that earlier.”

“What, before you decided to get me drunk? As a role model ... hate to break it to you... but you’re crap!” Tessa teased as she reached for the wine bottle on the table to refill her glass.

“Pffft! Role models, who needs ‘em!” Jane dismissed with a wave of her hand, wrinkling her nose and crossing her eyes.

Tessa laughed. “Yeah, I’m fine,” she admitted. “I fed him before I came out and left them watching a game on TV. All boys together!”

“Now the question would be, fed who?” Jane waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“Oh behave you! The *baby*, I fed the baby!” Tessa retorted quickly. Although... what would it be like to feed Feral? He was a vampire and she heard that, in the right circumstances, a Vampire’s bite could be pleasurable.

In fact, some of the girls she worked with hung out at one of the paranormal joints in town, Moonlight and Magic, just for that reason. Hoping to catch the eye of a local vamp for a ... well, it gave a *whole* new meaning to the word necking! They often asked if Tessa fancied joining them but the thought of a guy biting her neck just turned her right off.

Until she met Feral.

She shivered slightly, the thought of the large vamp back in her room getting all up close and personal enough to bite her neck... and everything else that came with it... sent shivers down her spine. Yeah, she could quite happily get all up close and personal with fang-boy. Preferably the sooner the better!

“Heeeellllloo? Can I bring you back to the land of the living for a moment?” She blinked as Jane clicked her fingers in front of her face to get her attention. She had been staring into space, lost in her own erotic daydreams.

“Huh. Sorry, zoned out there or a moment. Been a long day,” she apologised, trying to ignore the heat in her cheeks. “I was expecting a quiet night in with a movie and a tub of Ben and Jerry’s.”

Jane nodded sympathetically as she opened the note. “Then tall, dark and handsome showed up?”

“Uh-huh, carrying small and cute, complete with dirty diaper,”

“Niiice... *holy shit!!*”

Jane’s voice was shocked enough to bring Tessa half out of her seat, looking around to see where the fire was. Then she realised Jane was staring in shock at the note she’d given her.

“What? What is it? What’s it say?” she demanded, realising whatever it was it had her normally talkative aunt speechless.

Jane looked up. Her eyes held a stunned expression. “I think you might have brought world war three to my hotel!”

She’d been right. Tessa walked back to their hotel room sometime later, deep in thought. The baby *was* a Morrigan, that much she managed to read for herself but Jane knew the language far better than Tessa. More years to study as well as having the advantage of dealing with all sorts of Fae on a daily basis.

The note had been brief and to the point. Explaining that the baby had been stolen from his family because his mother was a Morrigan, the note maker said she regretted what she had done but hadn’t had time to return him as she was being tracked. There were vague references of what ‘they’ wanted to do to him. She, whoever she was, had asked forgiveness for what she’d done and that they keep the baby safe.

What was puzzling Tessa though was, why the baby had been left on Feral’s doorstep in the first place? She could understand leaving him there for protection. After all, there weren’t many beings that could take on an adult Kyn Warrior and live to brag about it. But the note had been written in High Fae, not something you’d expect your average Vampire to read. Hell, she couldn’t read it and thanks to her Pixie side, she had Fae blood!

She turned the corner and headed down the stairs. The place was like a damn rabbit

warren!! Then there was the fact they hit her sister's apartment rather than Feral's. It was rare for Pixies, even as arrogant as they were, to break in like that. With brute force rather than employing glamour, and Feral had said they'd been expecting a human and a woman, not a Kyn.

Realisation hit her and she smacked her palm into her forehead. She was obviously far more tired than she thought. The baby had been left on Feral's doorstep by mistake. All the doors looked alike in that block, it would have been quite easy to get them mixed up if you had never been there before and you were in a hurry.

She reached their corridor, doing a quick, automatic check on the numbered plaque on the wall. Last thing she wanted to do was walk into someone else's room! She passed her excitement level by nine o'clock this evening. All she wanted to do now was relax and get some sleep.

Oh well, the intrigue would all be over tomorrow. In the afternoon Jane was taking them to the Fae Court so they could get Spud back to his parents, or at the very least to the Morrigan who was bound to know who his parents were.

She nibbled her lip as she walked. The poor things must be going out of their minds with worry and she didn't like the idea that she was contributing to their distress. She didn't know them but she was sure any parent whose child was missing must be going through hell, wondering where their baby was... whether they were okay, who had them, whether they were being looked after, fed enough, kept warm enough... the list went on.

She'd been all for going to the Courts straight away, getting the baby back as soon as possible. Until Jane pointed out that Fae, especially temperamental ones like Mab and the Morrigan, were not people you knocked up out of their beds nor did they need Feral ending up as crispy critter. Reluctantly she conceded that Jane had a point, agreeing to get some sleep so they could leave as soon as the sun faded.

She reached the door to their room, opened it easily. Her lips quirked in a smile as she remembered Feral's earlier grumbling. Honestly, all it took was a light touch, not going at it like a bull at a gate. She pushed the door open and slipped in on silent feet. It closed behind her with softest click. Her eyes flew to the inhabitants of the room to make sure she hadn't woken them. She knew only too well how grouchy babies could be if they were woken before they were ready.

Her eyes fell on the bed and she smiled, all but melted inside. Stretched out full length across the bed was the large form of her Vampire Warrior, and curled up trustingly on the broad expanse of his chest was Spud, his pink hair a bright halo against the darkness of Feral's skin. She itched to rush over to her bag and grab her phone. She *so* needed to take a picture of this, it was just too cute for words; big, scary looking thug but so gentle with the baby he was cradling.

But then her attention was diverted by the lean form of the man himself. Shirtless again. He seemed to have real issues keeping a shirt on for any length of time, he just wore jeans. Jeans that clung to his lean hips and powerful thighs, the top button undone revealing the slight vee of hair that disappeared under the denim. *Oh my god, he was commando under there!*

She swallowed convulsively. There wasn't a spare ounce of fat on him, he was all hard muscle and satin skin. And even relaxed as he was, that charisma shrouded by sleep, she was still fascinated; still felt that pull towards him she had earlier. The desire to run her hands over those ripped muscles. Explore that scar she could just see on his abdomen with her tongue...

*Ok, she was definitely a pervert!* Her hands flew to her cheeks as heat flooded them. It was one thing to lust after a guy when he was conscious and asking for it but quite another to still do it when he was sleeping and holding a baby. Just how low could you get?

She shook her head, crossed the room to get to her bag. A quick search through the organised chaos of the contents and she located her phone by touch, drawing it out of the bag and flipped it open as she turned. Only to find Feral watching her, his dark eyes unreadable.

"That won't work, Kyn don't pick up on camera's well," His voice was barely more than a whisper so he didn't wake the sleeping baby. "Like not at all,"

Tessa frowned, pouting slightly in her disappointment. It would have made *such* a cute picture as well! She flipped the phone shut and slid it back into her bag, saying the first thing that came to mind. "So how do you get a driver's license then?"

"Who said I had a license?"

"What?" Tessa squawked, the shrill sound making Spud jump a little. Feral glared at her warningly, soothing him back into sleep. If he wasn't a Vampire, he'd make a great dad Tessa thought to herself absently, before her indignation at being driven by someone without a license got the better of her again. "You don't have a license? You shouldn't be driving at all then! What if you got caught?"

Feral just shrugged, rocking the baby in his arms on automatic. "Jedi mind tricks remember? What else am I supposed to do? We don't photograph and I don't have a birth certificate. Not easy to get a license without those,"

She nibbled her lip, caught out once again making assumptions. She hadn't had a lot to do with Kyn before. In fact Feral was pretty much the only one she'd done more than nod at.

"He's gone back," Feral's deep voice was still quieter than normal as he levered himself up from the bed, his posture rigid as he kept the little boy held in his arms in the same position as he'd fallen asleep, a look of contentment on his tiny face. She watched as Feral carefully placed him in the travel cot Jane had sent up to them, making sure he was tucked in nice and tight.

Her heart melted again, a sense of amazement filled her again at the gentleness he showed towards the baby. She knew he had issues with Pixies. There was an edge in his voice at times; a flash of anger in his eyes, when he spoke about them that tipped her off. It wasn't surprising, the Pixie race as a whole weren't a nice one. It was one of the reasons the women were peeling off, choosing to live and marry among the humans. It was a better life.

Feral straightened up, watched Spud for a moment then turned to her. "He's asleep," he announced with pride, a smile spreading over his face.

The smile hit Tessa like a speeding bullet, her heart fluttered in her chest. Feral was dangerous, not just physically in that 'mess with me and I'll rip your limbs off' sort of way, but dangerous in other ways too. Something deep inside her, something inherently feminine, told her he was dangerous emotionally as well. Without much effort she could fall for him and fall badly.

She tried to ignore the feeling as they settled in on the double bed to watch an old film Feral found on one of the channels. It was strange but, despite the day she had, followed by all the excitement of the evening, she wasn't tired yet. But it didn't matter, they could sleep in late in the morning. Until the sun went down they were pretty much trapped here so they might as well make the most of it.

"This is terrible," she commented, indicating the screen. "And I'm bored,"

He slid her a sideways glance, arching an eyebrow. "Bored? You can't be... this is a classic!" he said, his voice aghast even as his eyes twinkled with laughter. Tessa studied the screen again, which showed some kind of car chase which never seemed to end.

"Yeah, right," she muttered. "Classic my ass..."

"Oooh! That's it, you can't diss Bullitt, it's just not done!"

Tessa giggled, their conversation conducted in whispers as they tried to avoid waking the sleeping baby, "Not done huh? Seems to me I just did... so what you going to do about it

fang-boy?" she challenged, grabbing a pillow to defend herself and scooted to the edge of the bed.

"Fang-boy? Well aren't you queen of the original insults?!" Feral demanded, arming himself and advancing on her. Trouble was, the fierce expression on his face was completely ruined by the pale lavender pillow he was brandishing threateningly. "You have insulted my honour! Prepare to... get battered!!"

With that he launched his attack, battering her with the feather pillow as she frantically tried to defend herself with her own. Queen of the pillow fights when she was a kid, she was pleased to discover she'd lost none of her skill, easily holding him off as she made a move for his pillow. Then she had both, rising to her knees to hit him back, forcing him to block with lightening quick movements, both of them laughing so hard she was surprised the noise didn't disturb Spud.

Her half second glance that way cost her dearly. In a sneaky move Feral flicked both pillows out of her hands and rolled over, pinning her under him in a lightening quick movement. She giggled and tried to wriggle from under him, her fingers strained for the pillow teetering on the edge of the bed to whack him over the head again.

Then she caught his gaze and the amusement drained from her face. The mood between them flipped from light and teasing to aware and fraught with sexual tension in a heartbeat. Holding her gaze he moved, sliding a hand into her hair, strong fingers caressed the nape of her neck.

She swallowed, realising she was very effectively pinned on the bed under him. His large, muscled body covered hers, blocking her view of the rest of the room. Trapping the two of them in their own little world. One heavy leg covered hers, his broad chest pressed against the softness of her breasts. And pressed against her stomach was the hard evidence of his mood.

She caught her breath, a thrill shot through her as he leaned forward. "I've wanted to do this since we left off earlier," he confessed as his lips claimed hers, hot and hard. Full of need as, without preamble, he coaxed her lips apart. Her body turned to jelly as his tongue swept in, exploring the silken depths of her mouth relentlessly. Endlessly. By the time he lifted his head a lifetime later they were both breathing raggedly.

"Don't turn me away, Tess," He kissed her between the words, hard kisses that transmitted the need surging through his large body. "Please don't turn me away."

"Don't worry, I don't intend to," Her hand smoothed over the nape of his neck, brushing against the stubble there. A silky pelt that teased her fingers. He moaned, his head dropped again to devour her lips as he moved over her, the movement of his hips against hers mimicked what they both wanted to happen... what was going to happen shortly.

She parted her thighs, cradled him with the softness of her body as his hand smoothed down her side. He pulled her t-shirt up, his movements hurried, desperate almost. As though he couldn't wait to touch her, as though he needed, *craved*, the touch of her skin. As he did, his large hand fitting into the curve of her waist, a sigh escaped him. A sigh she could swear was a sigh of relief as his lips trailed fire down her neck.

Tessa's breath caught in her throat. *Did he really feel that way about her? Desperate to touch her?* She could understand it if he did, a similar desperation was crawling through her, settling deep inside her and taking up residence. She ran her hands over his shoulders and down his back, feeling the hard muscle that rippled under his skin until she had a handful of the hard ass Jane had admired earlier.

Almost as though thinking of her had conjured her up, there was a rapid knock on the door, Jane's panicked voice filtering through the wood. "You've got to wake up guys! The Pixies are here!"

## Chapter Six

Feral closed his eyes, dropped his head down to rest against Tessa's shoulder. Frustration and disappointment surged through him, fighting a battle for dominance. He couldn't believe this! Not again!

"I fucking hate Pixies!" he breathed vehemently. His fist bunched instinctively under the pillow with the need to hit something. Take a little of his frustration out somehow.

"Tell me about it," Disappointment and frustration coloured Tessa's voice as she pushed at his shoulders. He rolled away, already looking for his boots as she headed for the door. "And I bloody *am* one!"

Feral didn't answer, just nodded his head as he jammed his feet into his boots and grabbed his shirt. Behind him Jane barrelled through the door as soon as Tessa opened it, her sharp eyes sweeping the room and latching onto his semi-nakedness immediately. It was something Feral was used to, sometimes Kyn Warriors had that effect on other races, particularly women... something about their demon blood. The fact that most of them were over six foot and ripped as all hell didn't hurt one bit.

"Oh put it away lover boy, we don't have the time!" Jane told him as he pulled the shirt over his head, the fabric stretching over his broad shoulders. He pulled it down, emerging from the fabric to give her a look, but didn't reply. From the pale look on her face she already had one hell of a shock, worry etched into the features that were so similar to Tessa's. Must be where she got the attitude from as well, he mused as he grabbed his weapons belt and buckled it quickly around his hips.

"Grab your bags," she ordered as she headed over to the cot to pick up the sleeping Spud. Wrapping him tightly in the blanket she cradled him against her and headed back over to the door.

"We've got Pixies downstairs looking for you and they aren't taking no for an answer. You need to get out of here and now!"

Neither of them needed to be told twice, they grabbed their belongings and stuffed them into the bags as quickly as they possibly could.

"How the hell did they find us so quickly?" Feral demanded. He zipped his bag up with a quick flick of his wrist and held it out to Tessa. Who glared back at him, a 'carry your own damn bag buddy!' look on her face. It wasn't until he pulled one of the heavy blades from the back of his belt that her expression cleared. Nodding, she took the bag, looping the strap across her body, the strap sitting diagonally between her breasts as she picked up the other two.

Feral wrestled his attention from her delectable body, one he had so nearly had his hands on. And was having trouble with even now, as images of what she look like naked flashed across his minds eye causing a very predictable response lower down in his body. He shook his head. If the Pixies caught up with them he needed a clear mind as well as his hands free to deal with them, and rampant erotic fantasies of Tessa were just going to distract him. Well, distract him even more than her presence did, and that delicate scent that was all hers. A scent which had wound itself around him, crept into his nostrils and crawled under his skin until it was a part of him.

A dark, dangerous look spread over his face and hardened his features as he settled his blades more comfortably on his hands. Any Pixies stupid, or unlucky, enough to catch up with them now were *really* going to wish they'd never been born. They'd interrupted twice now. Not once, but, count them, *twice*... right as he'd been about to get some action! Which was not something he was forgiving lightly, not with his body as hard and aching as it was, reminding him of exactly what he was missing out on!



He nodded he was ready to the two women, both watched him with that wide eyed look which women sometimes got around him. A look which said they half expected violence to just occur all around him without him needing to lift a finger. Well, civilian women got that look anyway. Vixen would just have slapped him upside the head for showing off like he was, flexing his muscles because Tessa was watching, and demanded to know why he wasn't out in that corridor yet.

Casting a quick glance about the room to make sure they had everything he moved past the two women to the door. With control hard won over the years and even more so now he blocked out all other distractions and concentrated on the corridor outside.

It was empty, his keen senses picking up nothing. No breathing, no heartbeat, nothing. He heard of some people holding their breath to avoid detection when they were lying in wait for someone. But he had yet to meet anyone that could shield a heartbeat from a Kyn. Especially one that hadn't fed yet tonight.

"Ok, we're all clear," He pulled the door open and headed out into the corridor.

Progress through the hotel corridors was quick, Feral hurrying the two women along as quickly as he could. He didn't even have to remind them to keep quiet, which was a minor miracle considering how they'd been chattering away down in reception earlier. Even Spud was down with the deal, watching proceedings wide-eyed and silent as he picked up on the sense of urgency shrouding the adults.

The corridors were deserted, it being an odd sort of time in the morning. The one where clock watching insomniacs had finally succumbed to exhaustion and the average early bird's alarm clock had yet to spring to life. Even so, dawn was approaching, the tell tale heaviness settling into Feral's limbs as Jane led them down further into the depths of the hotel. Down through the kitchens and beyond, into the darkness of the basement.

Feral breathed a sigh of relief, feeling the shielding comfort of the ground closing around him, shielding him from the worst effects of the approaching sunrise. Of all the facts humanity had picked up or made up about Vampires their habit of seeking the earth was the most accurate. The human books and films each gave their own reasons of course but the reason was simple. The layers of dirt between him and the soon to rise sun lifted some of the heaviness trying to settle into his muscles and hold him paralysed, crushing him. But the earth stopped that, a bizarre form of sun block. He chuckled to himself; amusement filled him at the thought. Good old dirt, factor billion.

"Well, here we are," Jane announced as the two women stood at the bottom of the stairs, Feral joined them a moment or so later. The barred door at the top of the stairs might not stall a determined Pixie for long – hell, by the looks of it, it might not stop a determined *Chihuahua* for long – but sometimes you had to make do with that you could get. At the moment Feral was taking every half second he could lay his hands on.

The basement wasn't what he was expecting, the fusty odours of age and mildew combining to attack his sensitive nostrils. On the one hand it was your average, clutter filled basement with the random cast of paraphernalia of running a hotel lining the walls. Like the dining room chair to his left, resplendent in all its faded glory, seat ripped to spill its fabric guts out onto the floor. Next to it sat a cot with three broken slats filled with what looked like ripped up old sheets, and so on... half formed shapes in the shadows cast by the single bare bulb overhead. All pretty standard basement type stuff.

Except that was, for the freaking huge magic circle painted across the floor and continuing in a sprawl across the wall. As though the painter had realised halfway through he'd run out of space and had just carried on along the next available surface. Feral followed the design, half expecting it to continue over the clutter, painted across more broken chairs and the like. But it didn't, that area of the basement completely clear to allow the circle to continue unbroken. In the middle, there was a door. Well, it looked like a door. If doors didn't

actually have doors and lead to raw dirt instead. Absently he wondered how the dirt was being held up and why it hadn't just fallen into the room.

"Err, silly question but aren't magic circles supposed to be drawn on the floor?" he ventured, noting that not only was the floor space the circle was drawn onto clear of clutter but that someone had swept it recently as well. Apparently though, their housekeeping efforts only extended as far as the circle, leaving a ridge of dirt and dust around the clean area. Not randomly, as though the brush wielder couldn't be bothered, but very precisely. Deliberately done. A circle within a circle he realised with a start. Old, old magic. So old most people didn't realise it *was* actually magic.

"Well aren't we mister picky? Do you *see* enough floor space in here to go for a proper circle?" Jane demanded, "No, we had to adapt things slightly, use what we had," She handed the baby over to Tessa, who was beginning to resemble a pack horse by now. An amused quirk of her lips told Feral she was thinking exactly the same thing, a look passing between the two.

A little startled by how in sync they appeared to be, how it almost seemed as though she could read his mind, Feral went back to studying the circle.

Painted with what appeared to be a domestic decorating brush and leftover emulsion the designs seemed crude at first. But then his attention was drawn inwards, following the lines and he realised they really weren't crude after all. Yes, they'd been done with crude equipment and that had thrown him at first. It was like giving a concert pianist a child's keyboard. But something beautiful had been created despite it all. The lines drawn confidently and with a flourish. A labour of skill and love he'd not seen for a long time.

"This was done by a Warden. A good one," he breathed as he opened his hand and passed his palm over the nearest marks.

The witching flared violet, the symbols etching themselves into the air itself, hanging there shimmering for a second before falling away like purple fairy dust. The colour of the Warden's magic who had cast them. He frowned for a moment, he didn't know of any Warden families that cast in the purples. Not in the local area anyway. Jane must have shipped someone in.

Jane chuckled, "Someone give the boy a prize!" She cast a look at Tessa, "You sure can pick the bright ones, can't you, hun?"

Feral coloured a little, unsure why he'd become the butt of the jokes around here. He noticed that about women before. Get one on her own and she was fine but get them in packs of two or more and suddenly everything a guy said or did was wrong!

He caught Spud's eye, looking for some moral support from the only other male in the room. Spud just blinked back at him, a look that plainly said, 'you're on your own buddy. I'm cute and milking it for all it's worth!'

Sighing he turned back to the matter at hand, ignoring Jane's comment. "Ok, what I don't understand is why you got a Warden to recreate a Fairy gate? Why not just apply to them for a licensed one? I hear they relaxed the rules, even Nightclubs are getting them now..."

Jane arched an eyebrow, turned to look at him fully, her expression clearly saying she didn't think he was all there.

"Err, perhaps because I *don't want them to know it's here??* You know, like ... keep it a secret?" she replied scathingly. "Not exactly a secret anymore is it? If half the court admin know about it! And there's no sense in expecting a Brownie to keep its mouth shut when there's some gossip to share!"

He had to admit she had a point. Brownies had to be the worst gossips out, often making things up if the real news wasn't spicy enough. And you could guarantee, you said something in earshot of one, the rest would know by lunchtime.

He shuddered. Brownies had always given him the creeps. Because of his own paranormal blood he could see through the weak glamour they cast to fool human minds. A glamour that made them appear to be small, neat men of interminable middle age. Underneath though they were wizened, spindly creatures with bulbous eyes and over long fingers. They reminded him of spiders, with their quick movements and thin limbs.

"I see your point," he conceded, curious as to why an aunt of Tessa's needed a secret back door into the Fae realm. He didn't get to ask that question however as at the next moment a heavy thud sounded against the door at the top of the stairs.

"I suggest you do whatever it is you're planning," Feral said quickly, moving over to the piles of broken furniture and other clutter and starting to throw it into the stairwell. That way, if they got through the door, they'd still have a fight to get down the stairs.

Jane nodded, flashed Tessa a brief reassuring smile as she started to chant, moving around the circle as she did and triggering wards on its perimeter.

Tessa watching in amazement, Spud cuddled up tight in her arms. Her worry at the pursuers momentarily forgotten as she watched the beautiful symbols flare brightly in the air for a few seconds before they started to fade to nothing again.

Her own magic wasn't particularly strong, just enough for will-o-wisps and personal glamour. In fact, the stunt she pulled in the nursery, getting will-o-wisps to attack that Pixie had been the most magic she pulled since her teens. Attempting to become more human and blend in, she just stopped using it.

But now, seeing Jane using it, albeit by extension as she was using 'pre-recorded magic' set up by the maker of the circle, Tessa wondered whether that had been the right choice. Whether she'd been right to turn away from that side of her heritage. Perhaps that was why she didn't feel like she fit in her own skin sometimes?

Finally Jane stopped moving, she held her hand motionless over one symbol. Expectation built up in the room like pressure in an airplane cabin as she carried on chanting. Her voice rose steadily until she reached the end of the incantation, saying the last words with a flourish of her fingers.

Something hit the air in the room, not a sound precisely, more like a sound wave or the ripples in a pond after a stone had been dropped into the water. She shivered as it hit her, reverberating through her body before it passed on, rippling outwards.

As Tessa watched, the dirt 'door' changed, a shimmer passing over it like quicksilver, filling the frame until it looked like the surface of a mirror. One that reflected nothing, only the pale swirl of opaque mist that curled and moved within its rectangular confines.

Behind her the door cracked, startling a squeak from Tessa. She ducked instinctively, expecting hordes of Pixie Warriors to pour down the stairs at any moment. She clutched Spud tighter to her as Jane shoved her bodily towards the strange door.

"You need to go, now!" She shoved a folded parchment into Tessa's hands. "This'll show you which way to go."

Feral caught up with them, barely even breathing heavy at the exertion of hauling furniture about. "That door's not going to hold them up much longer," he announced, his voice urgent. Even as he spoke, the heavy thud filtering down changed in quality. A different note as though it wasn't just a shoulder or a heavily applied boot hitting the door anymore but something else. "Crap, someone got a brain and decided to use the fire extinguisher," Feral muttered, grabbing Tessa's arm.

"You're not coming?" He asked, as Jane held back.

She shook her head, "This is your journey," she replied cryptically. "And I have my orders. This is as much help as I can give you. Other than that, I wish you good luck!"

Worry speared Tessa's heart. If these Pixies were anything like the ones that had broken into her sister's apartment then they could hurt her aunt. Despite the fact that Jane was

hundreds of years old, definitely old enough to look after herself, Tessa still worried.

"You have to come with us," she insisted, trying to grab her aunt's hand. Feral stopped her, lacing his fingers with hers.

"Leave it be love, if she says she can't then she can't," His voice was gentle. He recognised the look in Jane's eyes. It was the same as the one Vixen's mate Kalen had had an encounter with a Goddess.

"Will you be okay?"

Jane pulled herself up to her full height. "Young man, I'll have you know I was Queen of England at one point," she said imperiously, "I think I can handle some bloody Pixies. Now will you two damn well *go!!*"

The bloody fools were in the wilds. Talven shook his head unsure whether to applaud the Kyn Warriors audacity or call him insane for putting the woman and child in danger like that. Not that they'd be any better off if Talven and his men got hold of them but still... the Night Plains?

He looked out into the darkness of the plains, studying the shadows. It wasn't a comfortable study but he made himself carry on, certain that he was being watched in turn. The lights strung along the road kept the shadows at bay, which he was grateful for. There were things out there he sure as hell didn't want to get all up close and personal with.

The Night Plains were the home territory of the Host. The Night Host, the Wild Hunt, they had many names but they all meant the same thing. Creatures more nightmare than Fae, they completely freaked Talven out, and those were the ones the Host themselves considered fit to be seen by the rest of the Fae.

The massive Sidhe warhorse under him moved, Talven shifted in his saddle to settle the horse even as a shudder went through his own lean frame. There were things out there the Host *didn't* consider fit to be seen by anyone else and nothing, no amount of money nor threats of physical violence, would have persuaded Talven to set foot off this road and go in there.

But the Kyn had done just that, deliberately taken an unlicensed gate right into the heart of the darkness. Talven shook his head again, an expression of begrudging respect crossing his handsome features. That took some fucking guts, it really did.

Ilia, of course, was incandescent with rage. Talven really didn't want to think of what the Pixies who had failed the second time were going through now. Taking the bodies of the first three out of her chambers had been bad enough. His eyes shadowed as he rested against the high pommel of his saddle.

She was getting worse, and more dangerous. At first it had just been the odd one or two, drifters no one would miss from the mortal world. He hadn't liked it but he helped clean up, removed the bodies and dumped them out here where the shadows could take them.

But that was before the Pixie deal had gone bad. Ilia had tasted paranormal flesh and it had basically gone tits up since then. Every night he was finding one less Pixie and one more corpse to be dealt with, if you could call the pitiful remains he found corpses. Stripped of their flesh... *desecrated*.

He shuddered and cleared his thoughts, deliberately closing off that portion of his mind. He didn't need to think about it. She was his Lady, he was sworn to do her bidding since he'd been strong enough to wield a sword and he would do so until the day he died.

"Right you lot, partner up and let's start this patrol," he ordered as he wheeled his mount around. "They've got to come out of the darkness onto a road at some point, if only to cross it. I want them grabbed as soon as they do."

Tessa screwed her eyes up as Feral propelled the three of them bodily through the strange door, the sharp crack of wood sounding as the door above them gave in. The sounds of triumph cut off instantly as they hit the quicksilver barrier, a cold chill passed over Tessa's skin and made her shiver.

It didn't splash or stick to them as she expected, her hand over Spud's face just in case. Instead there was an odd sound, like the pop in your ears as they equalised in a plane. She stumbled forward a little, a fresh breeze hitting her face. The smell of the outdoors and rain hit her nostrils and she instantly knew they were outdoors now. The question was, where?

Her eyes snapped open, looking around. They stood in a small clearing in what looked like a wood. Leaves and other debris wet underfoot, the shine of the moon overhead glinting off the moist surfaces. Tessa wasn't afraid of the dark particularly, or of being places at night but there was an unsavoury feel about the shadows around them that had her shrinking closer to the large form of the Vampire next to her.

Feral moved in front of her, his face purposeful and his blades back on his hands. He stood still, every line of his body alert for danger as he checked their surroundings. She knew without asking that he was ready for anything this place might throw at them, the look in his eyes told her he was ready to react violently and without mercy. Despite her worry at the situation they were in, chased into the Fae realm by homicidal Pixies, the sight still took Tessa's breath away; like that he was quite literally the stuff of her erotic fantasies.

She shivered, half imagining a future with him. What it would be like to have him around all the time. She already knew he could be sweet and gentle; his behaviour with Spud was evidence of that. Right now though, he was channelling 'Bad Ass' with a vengeance. To have that 'tame me if you can' bad boy attitude and that body, which was to die for, on tap? Oh God, it would be like all her Christmases rolled into one!

Determined, she tried to concentrate, although her eyes kept sliding to check out his ass as he stood in front of her. It was a nice ass, hard and firm, and she just ached to grab a handful.

"Mind on the job, Tessa honey," His voice barely reached her in the darkness. "I can't concentrate if you do that,"

A flush covered her cheeks as he went back to his scan, standing so still she was sure he'd become a living statue. She heard Vampires could do that but she had never seen it herself. *How had he known she was checking him out though? He wasn't even looking her way!*

Finally he moved, blinking and coming back to life again to smile at her.

"Okay, so how did you know I was checking you out?" she demanded. She had to know, it was going to drive her mad otherwise! "If you're reading my mind fang-boy, I don't care if you're the god-damn Vampire king himself... I'll kick your ass into next week!" she promised, her eyes flashing fire.

Feral laughed and held his hands up in surrender. For such a small woman she sure was feisty. Belligerence and attitude all wrapped up in a small package with that curvy body which was driving him mad. "Well, it's lucky I'm not... Marak's too busy getting his own ass kicked by his new wife Maria. She's just as damn awkward as you are. I really feel for the guy!"

Tessa grinned broadly. "Good on her! Can't let you men get away with anything. Give you an inch and you take a damn mile. So are you going to answer the question or what?"

Feral slid her a sideways glance, moving past her to get a look at the door they'd come through. His deep chocolate eyes were warm and teasing. "Maybe, or maybe I should go for the 'or what'..."

“I’ll give you or what...”

Feral hid his grin as he turned to study the doorway. An honest to goodness ordinary doorframe just stood there in the middle of the clearing. Unlike the complicated wards and markings around the one on the other side in the basement of the hotel, this side was completely unadorned.

“One way gate,” he murmured, half to himself. “Smart. Don’t want anything from this side getting through.” He smoothed his hand over the wood, the prickle of active wards warning him of heavy duty protection spells buried in the flimsy wood. “Some fancy Warden work here I’d say, your aunt must have paid a pretty penny for this lot.”

Tessa shrugged and shivered as she cuddled the baby closer, breathing in his familiar scent as she looked around. All babies smelled the same, like warm baby powder and well... pure baby. If anyone could bottle the stuff, they’d make a fortune! It was the ultimate ‘comfort smell’.

Feral’s comment about not wanting anything from this side to get through had caused a chill to run down her spine. That didn’t sound good, not good at all! Her teasing mood, which had been clinging on despite the odds, disappeared as a new thought occurred to her. A very unwelcome thought.

“We’re on the Night Plains, aren’t we?” Her voice was quiet, wary. She’d heard of the place. Who hadn’t? It featured in every scary story told to any child with Fae blood. But she never thought her aunt meant this when she talked about travelling to the Fae Court!

“I’m afraid so,” Feral pushed away from the door and held his hand out to take a couple of the bags. Without a death squad of Pixies breathing down their necks he didn’t need to be on such a constant alert. His finely honed senses would him if anything even thought about getting within spitting distance and if they kept on the move... they should make it through this.

“Come on, we need to get going.”

## Chapter Seven

Feral shifted position, a grimace on his face as he tried to ease some life into his leg. Not an easy task considering Tessa was half lying across it, Spud in her arms. Both were fast asleep. They'd walked for a couple of hours through the endless night, following the parchment map Tessa had been given. Eager to get through the Plains, Feral would have pushed on, but Tessa had begun to stumble, her weariness showing in the droop of her shoulders and the heaviness of her steps.

He called a stop, knowing they weren't going any further when she'd run into his back for the third time. Half mortal she didn't have the reserves he did. So now they were settled into a clearing off the crude path, a fire blazing in front of them. Feral had taken watch, since he didn't actually need to sleep and Tessa was all but dead on her feet, his back against a broad tree trunk and his senses on high alert.

So far though, nothing. The combination of the fire and the scent of Vampire was enough to keep most of the local wildlife away so Feral let his attention wander a little. His hearing was acute enough to pick up and track anything with a heartbeat, which left him free to study the woman in his arms.

*What was it about her he found so fascinating?* He'd seen plenty of human/paranormal half breeds but none had affected him the way she did. And she was a damn Pixie to boot!

He didn't like Pixies. It was a long standing dislike, one that had intensified last year. A bunch of Pixies had kidnapped his patrol partner, Vixen, one of them had damn near killed her and he'd gotten a right good pasting to boot. These days it was a sorry Pixie that crossed Feral's path!

He reached down to brush a stray lock of hair from her face. His fingers felt too big, too clumsy somehow for such a delicate task as he tucked it gently behind her ear. His whole body ached, keyed into every movement of the soft, feminine body curled trustingly into his. His earlier frustration had leached away, replaced for now by a need to protect. A feeling that was new to him, at least a feeling this intense and specific.

He was used to the whole protection thing. Warriors patrolled the streets in small groups keeping them clear of Rogue vampires. Rogue's always posed a threat, to anyone, regardless of race. Blood was blood to the blood-crazed, regardless of who donated it, and it was never willingly when a Rogue was involved.

But that was an impersonal sort of protection, just like a police officer patrolling the streets. What he felt for Tessa and the baby went far deeper. He needed to be around her, around them, see with his own eyes that they were ok. Protect them with his own hands, his own body, when necessary. Not hand that responsibility over to anyone else.

He frowned, considered that feeling. Was it love? He didn't really believe in love. He *thought* he was in love before, with Vixen. For years he had waited for her to notice him. Trouble was, she only ever had eyes for Kalen. She never noticed him. Actually he never garnered the same amount of female attention as some of the other guys.

Warriors like Mikal, or that new guy Zarett, one of last year's rookies. Both of them looked that good they could double as models if they wanted; in fact Zarett was known as 'pretty boy' after an agent tried to recruit him right in the middle of a Rogue take-down. The guy had lived, just. He needed a couple of bags of O positive shoved into his veins and a mind-wipe but he was still breathing; which was more than could be said for the Rogue and Zee's reputation.

Feral, by contrast, didn't wear the fancy threads, couldn't have told you the difference between one designer and the next and his hair, usually a source of vanity for the Kyn, was

kept skin short with the aid of a razor. If ever there was a Kyn ugly duckling, he was definitely it!

He leaned his head back against the bark and closed his eyes with a sigh. Love was too big an emotion to think about at the moment, what with mad Pixie's chasing them and being right in the middle of Fae bandit country. It was the sort of internal debate that needed copious amounts of alcohol and possibly a pizza or two.

The warmth of the fire played across his face, his big body starting to relax, sliding into sleep.

*Shit! What was he doing?* He came too with a start, his instincts screaming at him as he fought his way back out of sleep. A deep, drugging sleep that was nowhere near natural. Adrenalin burned the fog from his brain as he blinked, his hand smoothing down Tessa's back as she murmured and turned to him. The movement was so natural, so trusting, it tugged at the big man's heart strings.

They weren't alone.

Feral registered the new presence instantly, looking up to meet the eyes of a small figure standing the other side of the fire. It hadn't been there a moment ago, nor was he picking up a heartbeat. Which played to the illusion of a small girl the creature was projecting. The glamour was near perfect. But for that one telltale fact Feral might have believed there was a human child standing looking at him. Then the wind changed slightly, and the stench of rotting flesh drifted over the fire towards him. His stomach turned over.

He met the creature's look, his expression dangerous and forbidding. His dark eyes plainly saying 'You want to dance? Come on, let's dance then sweetheart, you just name the tune'. He had no idea what particular flavour of Fae nastiness this was, but there were nastier things that went bump in the night than a Fae.

Feral was one of them.

He curled back his lips, flashed his fangs in a silent warning. Fully extended now in anticipation of a good fight, they were impressive, filling his mouth so much that speech would be a tad difficult at present. Which wasn't really a problem since he intended to rip the creature's throat out if it made a move towards them, not engage it in conversation!

With a soft growl of disappointment the creature turned and disappeared into the darkness, it was clear these travellers weren't going to be the easy pickings they'd at first appeared. Feral shook his head. *Never judge a book by its cover*, he thought as he leaned down to wake Tessa. "Come on sweetheart, we need to get moving again."

It was too early. Way too early. Tessa grumbled under her breath as she trudged along after Feral, missing her nice warm duvet and her comfortable mattress. A feeling which wasn't helped at all by Feral, who looked as bright and breezy as though he'd had a full night's sleep and just hopped out the shower.

*It just wasn't fair!* How the hell could he look so good when she *knew* he'd been awake the entire night leaning against that tree trunk? She ran a hand through her tousled hair, making a face. She looked and felt like she slept in her clothes, which she had, and she had the nagging feeling something unpleasant had crawled up under her jeans leg, leaving an itchy trail over her skin. All feelings that were contributing to her grumpy mood. Not to mention the fact she had less than her eight hours and hadn't inhaled at least three cups of coffee yet, which she needed to feel at least halfway human. Or Pixie.

"So how long before we get there?" she asked, hoisting the still sleeping Spud higher in her arms, grateful she thought to grab one of the twins sling carriers on her way out of her sister's trashed apartment. Without it, he'd be getting awfully heavy right about now and it meant he could sleep on undisturbed as they carried on walking. A stab of envy hit her, one she immediately felt guilty about. It wasn't his fault. Whatever had happened that led to him



being left on Feral's doorstep, no one could blame a baby for it.

He made a contented little sound and nuzzled closer into Tessa, his tiny hand splaying over her collar bone. She smiled, her heart melting in that instant, snuggling him closer. There was just something about baby cuddles that made you forget everything that was bothering you. Maybe just for a second or two, but sometimes that was all you needed.

*Now what had that little smile been all about?* Feral wondered silently as he folded out the parchment map, checking their location. Like everything else that surrounded Tessa and her frankly odd aunt it hadn't exactly been what he'd been expecting. The old fashioned parchment and script handwriting hadn't been a surprise but the little smiley faces and flowers along the border had been. Guess young girls weren't much different, no matter what century they were born in.

"I think we're either here, or here," he said, tapping the map.

Tessa looked over his arm, a frown creasing the centre of her brow. "Here or here? You mean you don't know?" she asked, her voice incredulous. "Well, isn't that *just* like a man?"

Feral caught the teasing look in her eyes but he bit anyway, the edge of unease he'd been feeling for the last hour or so eating away at him.

"Well, it's not like we can stop and ask a local, is it?" He threw back, eyebrow arching. "Stop anything around here and it'd be more interested in stripping your flesh to the bones than giving you directions!"

Tessa gave him 'the look', but he was right. All they had was the hand drawn map and it wasn't the most accurate of documents. It had no scale, no compass, or even easily discernible features. Which wasn't a problem since there *were* no landmarks in this damn place, just endless plains of ratty scrub lands and dank little woods. She snorted to herself. Hell, stick a couple 'here be dragons' and a red X on this thing and it could double as a kids pirate treasure map!

She carried on studying it, trying to make out where they were along the marked trail, then shrugged. "I can't make head or tail of it either..."

"Sssh!" He held his hand up in warning, silencing her instantly. Had a guy done that to her normally, his ears would be ringing from the tongue lashing she gave him for being arrogant. But not Feral, especially not when he was doing the whole living statue thing again, his eyes unfocused as he concentrated on their surroundings. She tried as well, listening out for anything out of the ordinary, scanning their surroundings for things likely to leap out and attack them at any moment.

But nothing, she couldn't see or hear anything odd. For all she knew he could have smelled something dangerous. She wouldn't have had a clue on that angle, her sense of smell had packed in a few minutes after they'd come through the door in defence against the funky smell which seemed to surround everything here.

*Thump, thump, thump...*

The sound of heavy footsteps formed out of the silence, heading towards them, accompanied by a thrashing sound. Like a kid thrashing at weeds with a stick. A large stick. Tessa's eyes widened as the ground behind their feet quaked. "God, how *big* is that?"

"I have no clue but ten to one it ain't gonna be friendly. Here have these, get behind those rocks," He handed her the bags he'd been carrying and nodded towards an outcrop just off the path. Large enough to use as cover in case of flying debris, they might even be large enough to conceal her if this went bad. And it was quite likely to go bad. His Kyn instincts were screaming at him, the skin between his shoulder blades crawling, all his senses telling him this wasn't going to be pretty.

As Tessa scurried to the safety of the rocks Feral stood in the middle of the path, blocking it. He only had his blades on him but that would have to do. Whatever was coming

down that path was going to have to get through him before it got to Tessa and the baby.

His jaw clenched, eyes dark with determination, and there was no way he was making that easy!

Feral rolled his neck, easing the big muscles in his shoulders. Moving slowly, with a deliberation that was unique to the big Warrior, he reached into the small of his back. His fingers slid into the leather wrapped grips of his blades, pulling them free with a practised movement.

He settled them more comfortably over his knuckles, eyes on the turn in the path, the light glinting off the lethally sharp blades across the backs of his hands. KDFH the lads at the compound called them. Knuckle Dusters from Hell.

He defended himself and others many times with these. His speed, accuracy and sheer energy made him the equal of Kalen and his twin blades and he could even land a point or two on Marak every now and then.

*Thump, thump, thump...*

Feral's eyes narrowed as the footsteps got closer. No matter how good and how fast he was, the fact remained that whatever that was, it sounded *big*. And the blades on his knuckles were looking smaller by the minute. He'd always taken the piss out of Mikal and the others for carrying modern weaponry but right about now he wished like hell he was packing heat!

He rolled his neck again, adrenalin raced through his veins as the footsteps and that odd thrashing noise drew closer and closer, until it was just around the corner.

Then it was there. The huge bulk of ... something filling the turn in the path. Something straight out of a nightmare.

"Holy... *crap*," Feral breathed as he looked up, then looked up some more. It wasn't a creature. It was a damn mountain range!

A mountain range covered in gnarled, wart dotted skin. Skin ingrained with dirt and slime and stretched over a roughly man shaped frame. One that was hunched over like an old man. But it wasn't the strength of an old man that was flailing the massive club it held in its hand about nonchalantly.

"Great, just fucking great," An Ogre. First it was bloody Pixies and now a damn Ogre! Feral sighed and re-adjusted his blades again. This was going to really hurt...

"Come on then handsome, let's dance."

Tessa headed over to the rocks, ducking behind them as her heart pounded so loudly she thought it was going to burst out her chest. Spud, picking up on her fear, started to fret.

"Shush, shush... its fine. It's all going to be fine," she whispered as she rocked his tiny form in reassurance. She moved slightly, trying to peer over the rocks to see what was happening.

Feral just stood there, studying the blades on his hands so calmly she wanted to scream. He didn't look at all bothered. That had to be a good sign, right? Her eyes flowed down the lines of his large body, noting the tension there. He rolled his neck again, eyes riveted on the turn in the path. She knew as soon as the creature appeared, even though she couldn't see it herself from here. If Feral had been alert before, his attention was complete now, his body virtually humming with awareness.

She stifled a scream when the creature came into view. An Ogre! She'd seen sketches of them in books. The sort of books carefully concealed in the houses of Pixies that lived outside Barrows, or that masqueraded as children's storybooks, just in case a human should catch sight of them.

It wouldn't do if they ever found out that certain childhood tales were real. Sure some, like the Watchers and some Slayer groups knew the truth, but that was limited and carefully

controlled. On average a single human was intelligent when confronted with the truth. It was humanity en-masse that was the problem. In a group they were fearful, intent on destroying anything they didn't understand.

Which wouldn't be a bad thing at the moment she decided, wincing as the creature spotted Feral and roared. It charged with a speed it shouldn't have had, not being that large and misshapen. Like someone had taken a play-dough man and mushed it about a bit, distorting the joints and limbs into a hideous parody of the human form.

But its face was perhaps the worst. Unlike Ogre's portrayed in films this creature wasn't the dumb, ambling, and 'fairly easily beaten if you had a modicum of intelligence' creature they were generally made out to be. No, its deep set eyes gleamed with a malevolence and intelligence that was marked, even from this distance.

Noticing the eyes though meant you had to tear your attention away from the teeth crammed into its mouth. Razor sharp and packed in like sardines, they glinted in the half-light as it roared. Tessa caught her breath as it bore down on Feral, imagining the damage those teeth would do if it got hold of him.

The Ogre swung the massive club at Feral, going for a full body blow. There wasn't anything else you could call it, given the size of the thing it wasn't a weapon designed for pinpoint accuracy. Or any sort of accuracy.

Feral ducked, sliding under the incoming blow and to the side with a feline grace. His fists flashed as he moved, blades glittered in the half light as he landed a solid blow on the Ogre. It bellowed again, swiping a heavily taloned hand at the Vampire that danced around it.

The fight was fast and furious and despite how quick Feral was, it was quickly apparent to Tessa that the few blows the creature was managing to land were taking their toll. But each time Feral was knocked to the ground, he bounced back up again, shaking his head and bringing his fists back into the fight.

Tessa winced with each blow. Closing her eyes was no better, she could still hear the sickening thud as flesh pounded into flesh. The heavy thumps as Feral hit the ground each time. She bit her lip, forced herself to watch as the Kyn Warrior tried everything to bring down the Ogre. He moved like lightening, a fearsome sight... she could see him on the streets, kicking ass and taking names. But here and now, he was out of his depth and struggling.

Tears filled her eyes as he got swiped to the ground again, grunting in pain. Each time it was taking him longer and longer to get up. He couldn't keep this up. Frustration and hopelessness filled Tessa. He couldn't beat the Ogre, and when it was done with him, it would come after her and the baby.

She should run, get out of here now and hope like hell she could outrun it, even though she knew that was unlikely. Despite the misshapen form Ogres were fast over ground, and could change direction on a dime. And her firefly trick? *That* wasn't going to work on a creature formed from the Witching.

She should run, but she couldn't move. She couldn't leave him here like this, leave him here to die alone in the Night Plains. She knew what Ogres were, they were well known as flesh eaters and she couldn't bear to think of the man she loved desecrated that way.

*Whoa, loved?* Where had *that* come from? She barely even knew him! She couldn't be in love with him... could she? She winced as he hit the floor again. She had to do something... he was getting killed out there.

Fear for him running through her veins Tessa released the straps holding Spud's sling. Quickly she placed him in a small hollow in the rock, a place he was almost hidden from view and protected from the flying debris being kicked up from the Ogre's club. His thin wail plucked at her heart strings but she hardened herself to it. If she didn't do something now, that Ogre would kill Feral and guess what would be next on its menu?

She crept out from behind the rocks, leaned down to pick up the sturdiest stick she

could see lying on the ground. Her heart pounded. She had no clue what she was doing. If Feral, a seasoned fighter, couldn't get the drop on this thing then what hope did she have? The worst thing she ever fought was the month end reports at work!

But regardless of that, she couldn't leave him to face this on his own. Perhaps she could distract it or something? Allow Feral to get the advantage and finish it off. Determination glittered in her eyes as she edged forward, looking for a gap in the fight she could get into without getting in Feral's way. Or in the path of those blades he was wielding so viciously.

There! Spotting the perfect gap Tessa shot forwards, jamming the stick in her hand upwards into the soft flesh under the Ogre's throat as it was busy fending off Feral's attack. It roared in pain, black ichor splattering over Tessa's hand and arm as it twisted violently, swiping out at her. She watched the vicious talons sweep towards her in slow motion, fascinated by the blood caked claws as they headed for her unprotected stomach. Fear froze the blood in her veins and her feet in place as she watched her own death sweep towards her.

Feral came out of nowhere, hitting her mid-stomach in a classic rugby tackle that had them both sprawling on the ground. The Ogre's claws sailed harmlessly overhead. They both scrambled to their feet, Feral shoved Tessa behind his body as they readied themselves for the next attack.

It was an attack that never came. The thunder of hooves surrounded them as suddenly the small path was crowded with horses. And, more importantly from Feral and Tessa's point of view, those horses came full equipped with some heavily armed knights.

The whistle of arrows cut through the air, followed by sickening thuds as they buried themselves in the Ogre's flesh. It screamed, a mingled sound of pain and fury as it swatted at the arrows that made it resemble a grotesque hedgehog. Screams that were silenced when one of the knights took aim with a heavy crossbow, death in his eyes. The arrow sprouted from the Ogre's left eye. It blinked slowly with the other. Once, twice. Then it slowly toppled backwards.

Feral looked around at the group of mounted knights surrounding them. "Well. At least it isn't Pixies again."

## Chapter Eight

The Fae Court was like, well something out of a fairy tale. Feral found himself wide eyed at the splendour as the little group were herded along the corridors towards the hall of the Lady their rescuing knights served.

Tessa noticed his amazement as he stared around, silently astounded at the beauty of the place and doing his best to hide it. Anyone would think he was some kind of country bumpkin the way he was going on, not a veteran warrior of the Kyn Court who'd attended more court functions and balls than most humans had had hot dinners.

"It's mainly all glamour," She whispered as they were ushered into a hall to wait. "The court itself is a sort of Fae. A proto-Fae I think they call it, what we would have been before we became us so to speak," she murmured, speaking of herself as Fae for the first time to him. "It's alive," she carried on. "Changes its look when it pleases, which can be a little disconcerting."

"You ain't kidding," He murmured back, his hand dropping to the small of her back as they walked through the door, a protective gesture he didn't register consciously. She'd been so brave against the Ogre, even if he did want to berate her soundly for putting herself in danger like that. His heart had almost stopped when she shot in front of him with that stick, attacking the creature like some sort of Pixie Amazon.

The knights retreated; a silent bunch if ever Feral had seen one, leaving just the two stationed either side of the huge doors. Feral eyed them with sympathy. He'd stood guard often enough to know it was as boring as hell. Their set positions and bored expressions told him that this wasn't their first time standing by that door and, undoubtedly, it wouldn't be their last.

"You shouldn't have attacked that Ogre," He turned his attention back to Tessa. Settled on one of the low couches that lined the long walls she was holding Spud up underneath his armpits so he could stand in her lap. Which he was loving, bouncing enthusiastically and grinning at everything. Feral grinned back, unable to resist such whole hearted enthusiasm and held out his finger for the baby to grasp.

Tessa shrugged, busying herself with amusing the baby. Feral hooked his finger under her chin and turned her face so he could look into her eyes.

"You could have been hurt Tessa, even killed," His bad-ass attitude slipped a little under his concern. "I was terrified I'd lose you..."

Now that was love, or at least what it was supposed to look like. Talven swept in through the double doors the other side of the hall, pausing a little as he took in the scene before him. The guy, the Vampire Warrior, was crouched, all his attention on the woman, a half breed Pixie. Talven had already noticed she was pretty, not his usual sort but there was just something... vital about her. But it was the protective set of the Vampire's body, the gentleness of his touch as he made her look at him that caught Talven's attention.

A pang of longing speared him, lanced through his heart with a bitterness that surprised him. That was how it should be between a man and a woman, the sort of relationship he wanted and a mate who looked at him as though he was everything. Not the barely concealed contempt and ridicule he currently got from the woman fate had cursed him to be bonded to.

"The Princess will see you now," he announced as he strode over, his hand holding the sword still on his thigh. Ilia didn't like the clink and chink of armour, or weaponry. Said it gave her a headache. *Bloody stupid woman, what did she expect when she insisted on her knights being battle ready all the time?*

Feral rose and turned in an economy and speed of movement that had Talven mentally taking stock. When he got these three into Ilia's chambers the shit was going to hit the fan and in a big way. He counted on having enough knights to take down this guy but looking at him now... the Vampire was *big*. Big and with that manner, a look in his eyes that said 'Wanna mess with me? Just try it buddy, it'll be the last thing you'll do'.

He hid his concern well, years of practise serving Ilia. He needed more man-power. Seriously needed more man-power. He knew what Ilia intended to do... well, no, he had a good *idea* what she intended to do.

She thought he was stupid, called him that in front of him on many occasions. But he watched, he listened. He'd have to be an idiot not to have figured it out by now. And when this Vampire did, there was going to be all kinds of hell to pay, mostly violent and all over the place. Because he seriously doubted either one of them, the Pixie or the Vamp were going to be happy about his Princess taking blood from a baby. It turned even his stomach.

Grimly he stopped thinking about it, locking parts of his mind off from what was happening. His own coping mechanism. The trouble was, it was getting harder and harder to do and each time he felt sick. Like a little piece of his soul died each time.

Disgusted with himself, he swept his arm wide in a courtly gesture towards the door. "If you'll just follow me?" he invited and forced himself to smile.

Feral held his hand out to Tessa, to help her to her feet.

"Come on Tess, we wouldn't want to keep the nice Captain's boss waiting, would we?" he said as he studied the tall Fae Knight directly. Feral rarely did circumspect; it just wasn't in his nature. He found a direct look was far easier, and it tended to rattle people more easily. Which shouldn't have been too much of a surprise. Most people got a little edgy when glared at by over two hundred pounds of mean attitude, sort of like the Kyn equivalent of a Pitt-Bull.

He was probably imagining it but, just for a moment there he thought he'd seen a flicker of something in the Fae Knight's eyes. Something that looked an awful lot like regret and perhaps sorrow. Maybe even disgust. *But why? What did a Fae Knight have to be disgusted about?*

His face set as they followed Talven out of the room, anger coiling low in his chest. It was because he was a Vampire. Had to be. Bloody Fae and their species-ism, like they were so great anyway! No doubt didn't like a filthy Kyn hanging around the place and lowering the tone. Well, buggar them!

His temper continued to simmer as they followed the Fae down the corridor. In fact he was surprised the guy's armour didn't superheat under his glare.

"Hey, the wind'll change and you'll get stuck like that," Tessa smiled at him, indicating his stormy expression. "You should be pleased! We did it! We got here, it's all going to be ok," she told him, a tired smile curving her lips.

"Yeah," He smoothed a hand down her back absently, as much to reassure himself as her. Perhaps more to reassure himself, even if he wouldn't admit it in as many words.

They *had* done it; evaded those damn Pixies, made it through the Night Plains, avoided getting killed or their souls sucked out or a multitude of other nasty fates. It had been a close call there with the Ogre. Closer than Feral wanted to admit. The near defeat didn't sit well with his Warrior's pride.

One thing was for sure, he was going to be hitting the gym and ramping up the training when he got back to the Compound. And he was definitely going to start packing heat, something big enough to take down even larger nasties like Fae monsters.

He sighed as her words sank in, a sigh of relief. She was right, he could relax now. They just needed to get the kid back to his parents, or this noble lady they were supposed to see next and then they could get gone. Perhaps he could persuade Tessa to come back to his

place, and they could finish what they'd started in that bathroom. He looped his arm over her shoulders protectively and slid her a small smile.

A smile that stopped Tessa in her tracks, his eyes full of warmth and a sensual promise that took her breath away. Her exhaustion disappeared, body coming alive as his thumb stroked over the front of her shoulder. Even fully clothed her skin tingled, a trail of fire in the wake of his thumb.

She managed to smile back, not quite sure what he could see in her at the moment. Her clothes were rumpled and torn in places and she was splattered with black Ogre blood. But something the smile in his eyes, the way he touched her, made her feel like the sexiest woman alive. Like the only woman alive for him.

A shiver ran up her spine as they approached yet another doorway, absently noting they'd moved further into the Court, into the private wings. Talven's mistress must be someone important to have a suite here. Which was good, she decided. The higher up the tree this lady was, the more chance they had of getting this sorted quickly.

"Nearly home little man, you'll see your mommy soon" she murmured in a reassuring voice, jiggling the little boy in her arms, much to his delight. He giggled as he patted her face with gentle hands. Tessa smiled, but it was a smile with a sadder edge now. He was a delightful little boy and she'd miss him, a pang of loss already forming deep in her chest. Perhaps she could ask his parents, whoever they were, if she could visit when this was all over.

The doors ahead of them swung open soundlessly, revealing yet another torch-lit hall. Relief and a sense of triumph filled Tessa anew as they walked in. Despite her words to Feral, she hadn't really believed it until they were here, about to meet this Noble-lady.

They had done it, actually made a difference! It was like something out of a Hollywood blockbuster. Beat the bad guys, save the world (or the baby in this case) and the good guy always got the girl.

She slid a covert glance sideways at Feral under her lashes. Or the girl got the guy, which she very much intended to be doing once they both showered to get this Ogre blood off. It bloody reeked, the stench rising from the black stains on her clothes and making her wrinkle her nose. She might not even wait until he was finished though. She might just join him in the shower and jump his bones then and there.

Lost in her own increasingly erotic daydreams, it took Tessa a moment to realise something was wrong. Feral's expression was tight, the look in his eyes one she recognised despite their brief acquaintance. It was the one he wore when the shit was about to hit the fan in a big way.

"Feral?" she murmured as she edged closer.

He was already dropping his arm as she spoke, freeing his hands up to go for his blades. As soon as they'd stepped through the door it had started to swing shut behind them, trapping them inside.

That had been when he'd felt it. The wrongness. Something that shouldn't have been here in the light and beauty of a place like this. Something that belonged in the darkness of the shadows. Something that was hiding itself, like rot buried in an apple's core.

His senses on high alert he scanned the room, eyes flitting from Fae to Fae, trying to isolate the feeling. He might not be able to see through Fae glamour as he'd previously thought but there were some things you just couldn't hide from a vampire. And the need for blood was one of them.

There was another blood drinker in the room.

His eyes narrowed as he assessed the feeling. No, it wasn't quite the same sort of feeling he got when he was around other Kyn. That was more a pleasant buzz against his mind. An awareness. This was harsher, more abrasive. Not awareness, a warning.

Like the feeling he got around the Rogue, the extra unpleasant edge added by their taste for not just blood but flesh as well. His face paled a little as he made the connections.

It wasn't just the Rogue that liked blood and flesh... so did Demonkind.

"Well, well. I suppose I should thank you for bringing the brat to me. Finally," A female voice broke the silence of the hall. A voice that should have been beautiful if not for the bitter note corrupting it. "However, you've caused me a lot of trouble so I don't think I will,"

The speaker rounded one of the Grecian columns flanking the walls, her eyes fixed on the three of them with venom. She was tiny, a slender wisp of a woman, with an almost childlike aura about her. But the expression on her face was very adult. Bitterness, lust, arrogance all combined into a look that made Tessa just uncomfortable looking at her ... she sucked in a breath, recognising one of the older Fae. Ilia, third of the fabled seven sisters, the seven princesses of the Fae.

"God no," The blood drained from her face as Pixies emerged from the columns as well, fanning out behind their mistress.

"It was you all along," Her heart lurched. This shouldn't be happening, not here! This was the Court, they were supposed to be safe here!

"Well, looks like the Pixie bitch *finally* worked it out! Not the sharpest tool in the box are you love?" Ilia commented scornfully. "Ok, I'm bored with this. Guards, seize them!"

Tessa screamed as the Fae surrounded them one side, swords drawn, and the Pixies the other, their weapons of choice various switchblades and daggers, all glinting menacingly in the flickering torch-light. She moved closer to Feral, instinctively looking to him for protection, even though she knew they were sunk. A sense of disgust filled her. She was supposed to be a modern woman, yet the first sign of trouble and she was relying on a guy to look out for her. Her spine straightened, a hard light entering her eyes as she shifted Spud more securely onto her hip. They were done for, there was no getting out of this one. Not just the two of them against dozens.

But that didn't mean she was going make it easy for them. She should have held onto that baseball bat.

"I could learn to hate Fae just as much as Pixies at this rate," Feral growled, his blades on his hands in the blink of an eye. He moved, easily sliding into a guard position as he eyed the grim faced men surrounding them.

"Ok, which one of you wants to bleed out on the floor first?" he snarled, "More than enough for everyone so if you'd like to form an orderly queue, Doctor Pain will begin morning surgery," He lifted his hand and beckoned to the nearest Pixie. A 'bring it on' gesture.

The Pixie spluttered with rage, his face flushed as he raised his arm and charged. Feral didn't move, waiting until he could practically smell the guy's breath. When he did move it was in an explosion of speed. He dropped to the floor and swept a hard leg around at his opponents. The Pixie hit the ground hard, all the wind knocked out of him. He never got the chance to regain his feet, Feral rolled and using his body as a ramp to launch himself to his feet. His bladed knuckles buried themselves nonchalantly in the Pixie's throat, shredding his windpipe beyond repair.

Then the fight was on in earnest, Feral spinned and whirled like a prima ballerina on crack as he fought off several opponents at once. There was nothing like several someone's seriously trying to put an end to your life to sharpen your senses and reaction times and Feral had trained on the best circuit there was. Fighting the Rogue a slow Kyn Warrior was a dead one. One as old as Feral was had to be fast, there was no other way around it. He dodged and weaved with all that speed, using his sheer size and the amount of damage he could suck up to his advantage.



He fought with everything, not just the blades on his hands but with his whole body. A rolling, moving, whirling dervish leaving violence in his wake; elbows rammed into throats hard enough to crush larynx's, feet slammed into kneecaps hard enough to shatter them or used to stomp on feet, fingers or any other body part unfortunate enough to end up on the floor or within range.

But quite possibly the worse weapon he had were his fangs. Fully extended in his rage they were a fearsome sight. Razor sharp and dripping with blood as he took chunks out of anything that came close enough.

Tessa fought like a madwoman not to get separated from either Feral or the baby, lashing out with her free hand and feet as two knights made out to grab her. She became a wildcat, slippery as an eel, heart pounding as she used all the self defence moves she could remember from the short course she'd done at work a couple of years ago.

Shifting her weight she drove an elbow into the ribs of the one behind her, stomping heavily on his foot at the same time. A satisfying 'oomph' sounded behind her. Mail might look pretty and be effective against sharp pointy things but when it came to determination and an expertly wielded elbow, it didn't stop the wearer getting winded.

Without thinking about it she reached for the hand at her throat, slender fingers dancing over the thick ones digging painfully into her flesh. Wincing she grasped the little finger firmly and ripped it up, back and away from the others in a quick movement.

It cracked, a sharp sound like a twig breaking underfoot echoing in her ears. A sound swiftly drowned out by the pain-filled bellow from behind as he snatched his hands away from her, cradling the damaged one. Wasting no time Tess spun around, snapping her knee up sharply to connect heavily with his groin. She might not be a martial arts expert but there were some moves a woman knew instinctively. She smiled in satisfaction as he crumpled to the floor in his own world of pain.

Her triumph didn't last long. Something sharp and cold kissed the side of her neck gently. She froze. Despite never having felt the sensation before, she knew that was the business edge of a sword against her delicate skin.

Things went from bad to worse from that point on. Spud was ripped from her arms, crying as he reached out for her, terrified by the rough treatment he was being subjected to. Tessa was hauled over the floor, kicking and screaming towards the woman who should have been their saviour, their journey's end.

"Why?" Tessa asked as Ilia sauntered around her, an oasis of calm next to the bloody fight being waged mere feet away.

Ilia cocked an eyebrow, eyes glittering with malice. "Why? Because I can. Because I'm fed up with all this fucking 'harm none' goody two-shoes crap. Why should *I* miss out because someone else says I shouldn't do this, or that, or the other? What gives them the right to dictate what I can and can't do?" she demanded as she came up behind Tessa, winding a small hand around her throat.

"Ok, I'm really getting bored now," She jerked Tessa's chin up with a strength her frail body just shouldn't have had. Her voice rose a little, carrying over the fight. "Enough, or she dies."

He wasn't going to win this, couldn't win it. Despite the adrenalin of the fight surging through his veins Feral could feel the exhaustion beating at him, leeching his strength. He needed to feed, and more than the random splashes of blood here and there when one of his opponents got too close to his fangs. Tiny tantalising splashes of blood practically humming with power. Fae blood always did have that effect, and gave him a blinding headache in the morning to boot.

The scene froze as Ilia's voice cut across the mayhem. One moment a writhing mass of violence, the next a scene worthy of a medieval tapestry. Standing off to one side was Ilia,

Tessa held captive in her arms. Her small hands around the Pixie woman's throat and her lips hovering close to the pulse Feral could see beating frantically.

He went still, as still as the death he could feel stalking the room, his eyes locked on the Fae Princess. On the small smile that played over her lips. He recognised the subtle warning. A silent message from one predator to another, something intended for him alone. *Behave or I tear her throat out.* Bile rose in his throat along with his anger as he registered the excitement on her face at the impending kill.

No Fae should have that kind of knowledge or that dark need. It just wasn't natural. It was a curse his people lived with, put up with. Learned to control. It wasn't something any of them would have chosen but something thrust on them at birth and to a man, woman and child every one of them would do anything to be free of it. That someone would seek it, revel in it. That sickened Feral on levels he didn't realise existed.

There was no way out of this. No way at all, he was on his own in a place his fellow warriors couldn't come riding to the rescue as they had when Vixen had been taken by the Pixies. His lips quirked in amusement. The fact he didn't look *half* as good in leathers as Vixen did might have something to do with it.

His amusement faded as he spoke, his voice low and full of menace. "Harm her and you'd better make sure you put me down for good. Because I don't care how long it takes, I'll be coming for you."

Her laugh, light and musical, flowed around the hall. A beautiful sound totally out of place with the ugly words that followed.

"Did you really think I was going to let any of you live anyway?" she sneered, "Come on, even a vampire thug like you has to have figured it out. At least I should hope you did because, honestly sweetheart, your brains are about all you've got going for you," She laughed, amused by her own joke.

"Look at Talven for example. He's lucky he's got his looks because, well, let's just say his IQ isn't the best. I pity his children... the Fae as a race get dumber and more like the humans every generation," she spat. "Why do you think I've done what I have? *Someone* has to step up and stop this descent into... averageness!! And if it takes the flesh of a half-breed brat then that's a sacrifice I'm willing to make! The rest of you... collateral damage," She flicked her hand dismissively.

Behind Feral, Talven jerked slightly, the small movement registering in the Kyn's mind. *So loyal lapdog Talven didn't know about that little snippet eh?* That was interesting. Quite how Feral was going to use that to his advantage he didn't know. Yet.

He watched her with dead eyes. He had a stare that could give a rattlesnake a headache and he was employing it at full strength now, the promise of her death in his dark eyes as he made a silent promise. Somehow, this bitch was going down!

"Get him out of here," she snapped, breaking eye contact first. "Take him to the pit of eternal despair."

Feral couldn't help it, he burst out laughing as the guards seized his arms, clamping heaving manacles around his wrists.

"Sheesh, the 'pit of eternal despair'?" he mocked as they dragged him towards the doors. "Can't you guys come up with something a little more original? No wonder you're dying out, a human toddler has more imagination than that!"

His mocking laughter echoed around the room as the doors closed with a resounding clang, leaving the woman he loved at the mercy of a monster.

## Chapter Nine

“*Tessa!*”

It took two knights all their strength to get the struggling Kyn even halfway down the corridor. Even then it was obvious he was only waiting for a gap in their concentration to allow him to get the drop on them.

“You can’t do this! You can’t let her do this!” He dug his heels in harder, stopping his guards’ forward momentum in its tracks. Feral was a big man, even for a Vampire and he was packed with hard earned, rather than gym sculpted, muscle. The sort of muscle a guy built up working for a living. In Feral’s case that was fighting violently. But he wasn’t fighting physically now. No, he was astute enough to realise that his advantage lay in the verbal. After all, they couldn’t put a manacle on his tongue.

“You do realise what she is, don’t you?” He carried on, his voice low in the corridor, punctuated by the grunt of effort from the guards and the shuffling of feet as he made them work for every inch they moved him.

“She’s some sort of Fae Rogue Talven, worse than a blood drinker... she eats flesh!” He watched his target for the tiniest flicker or emotion or reaction. He knew Talven wasn’t immune to the situation, he’d felt the guy start in surprise when Bitch Queen in there had said she intended to sacrifice the baby. Desperation filled him, could *already* have sacrificed him. He could already be too late, Tessa and the baby might already be dead.

He went for broke, “You ever seen a Rogue victim Talven? Ever seen how the Rogue feed?” he asked, his voice strangely hypnotic in the silence of the corridor. “They prefer their victims alive you know, apparently the pain and terror of what’s happening to them adds flavour to the meat,” he explained nonchalantly, as though this were merely an academic discussion.

“Of course... they have to tourniquet their victims in some way, so they don’t bleed to death during a meal and lose all that lovely flavour. I’ll bet your Lady-love in there’s into bondage isn’t she Talven? Bit of titillation before she has a snack... does that do it for you as well? The idea of that baby wrapped up in bondage gear? Something she’s used for something so corrupt and kinky?” Feral continued hammering away at what instinct told him was a chink in Talven’s mental armour.

“Think about it Talven. That little baby. Abused and tortured because some stupid bitch can’t handle the way life turned out. Can you live with that?”

Talven sighed, his pace faltering as he lowered his head in shame. Nausea filled him. The Vampire was right. He had no idea that Ilia planned this, that she’d sunk quite this low.

No, he corrected himself, he’d known. He’d just been ignoring the warning signs because he didn’t want to believe it. Hadn’t wanted to believe these horrors of the beautiful, gentle woman he remembered from when he first came to court.

Deep down, he loved her. Or did he? Did he love a memory, a ‘what if’ or a ‘what might have been’? Either way, that wasn’t a good enough reason to let her carry on. If he didn’t do something now, if he continued to look the other way, then more people would die... an innocent baby died. And the resulting battle for power could destroy the court as they knew it.

He couldn’t let that happen. Even if it meant destroying himself.

“Let him go,” he ordered, his voice a bare whisper in the corridor. He turned with a grim look on his face, to find both guards looking at him warily.

“Oh for God’s sake, you can’t tell me we can cover this up anymore!” he snapped and moved forwards to undo the spelled manacles himself. “Go find the Queens Guard, hell the

Queen herself if you can and bring them back here.”

Feral eased the bruised skin over his wrists as the two guards disappeared down the corridor like Ferrets down a rabbit hole. The small marks, like the other cuts and bruises he collected during the fight in the hall, would soon fade. A perk of his Kyn physiology.

He eyed Talven, accepting his blades back from the Fae’s outstretched hand. “So, what made you decide to grow a pair?” Feral leaned against the wall for support as he slid them over his knuckles. His Kyn body might have been able to heal itself faster than other species but it came at a price. Energy. He and the other Warriors burned through enough energy to power a small city block and needed to feed daily. Trouble was Feral was going on two days now without and it was beginning to show.

Talven shrugged, busying himself with his own sword hilt. “I can’t bury my head in the sand anymore. You’re right, someone has to stop her. *We* have to stop her.” He looked up, the misery in his blue eyes really making Feral feel for the poor bastard.

“You love her don’t you?”

Talven nodded, then laughed bitterly. “Yes and no. I used to be but she was someone different back then,” he shrugged and admitted. “I guess I never got out of the habit.”

The Kyn nodded. He knew all about unrequited love from his semi-obsession with Vixen.

“Hey, you ok? You look sort of pale there,” Talven asked suddenly, noting the way the Vampire was leaning against the wall. A careful posture, one that Talven recognised. A posture designed to hide just how shit its owner was feeling.

Feral shook his head but Talven carried on. “You need blood don’t you?” he guessed, Feral’s wary look telling him he’d hit the nail on the head.

Feral sighed and nodded. There was no point in denying it anymore and Talven had released him, so in Feral’s mind that meant he could trust the Fae. At least a little.

“Been too busy running from our little Pixie friends and I wasn’t going to feed from Tessa. She was already exhausted,” he said, “Let’s just say other donors have been in short supply recently.”

“Can you metabolise Fae blood?” The Knight demanded as he started to strip off his neck guard.

“I can but I can’t feed from you man, you’re going to need all your strength when we go back in there. We can’t wait for backup. I’ll be fine,” Feral insisted and pushed himself upright with the aid of the wall, “We need to move and now!”

Talven stopped him as he turned, intent on heading back up the corridor and storming the hall alone if he had to.

“We need you at full strength,” The Fae argued, his blue eyes direct. “Think about it, Ilia knows every trick I’ve got. She’s watched me train for years. Nothing I do is going to surprise her. But you, you’re the unknown quantity. She’s going to have no idea what moves you’re going to pull next...” he trailed off for a moment, emotions flitting across his face. Regret, resignation, despair...

“If we win, I won’t be able to kill her,” he admitted. “We need you at full strength, you *have* to kill her.”

Feral looked at him with admiration. There wasn’t much he could say to that. He nodded and clapped his hand on the other guy’s shoulder, squeezing slightly. A gesture of understanding and solidarity. “Cover your neck man, I can’t take blood from you there,”

Talven paused, confusion on his face.

“Taking from the neck is...” The Kyn paused, looking for the right words. “It’s too personal. Part of our courtship rituals,” he explained. “And sorry mate, I just don’t swing that way! Give me your wrist instead,”

“Oh thank god! No, I don’t either,” Talven’s pale skin flushed scarlet as he extended

his arm, visibly grateful he didn't have to offer the Vampire his neck.

Feral grasped the offered wrist in a no nonsense grip, his fangs aching to descend, dropped down ready for feeding. He ignored the need for a moment. He needed to warn Talven first and a mouth full of fang tended to make speaking a little difficult.

"This is going to hurt," he said, knowing there really wasn't any other way. Well, there was but he wasn't going to embarrass either of them by going down that route.

"I thought Vampires could dull the pain?" The Fae asked, quickly adding, "Not that a little pain bothers me, just curious."

Feral's lips quirked, recognising the typical male cover up as he pushed the fabric back from Talven's wrist, bending the hand back to reveal the tender flesh on the inside. Veins beat strongly, just visible under the skin. Feral's mouth watered, an instinctive reaction to the source of sustenance so close.

"We can but back to the neck point, it's all about sex. I'd explain further but I don't think either of us needs those visuals," he commented, his thumb sweeping over the skin as he picked his spot. "I'll make this as quick as possible," he said, and struck.

He moaned as his fangs pierced the skin, sinking through the barrier with the ease of a hot knife going through butter. Blood, hot sweet tasting blood, filled his mouth in a rush. He swallowed, the powerful muscles of his throat worked strongly. Relief filled him, the blood hit his system like a bullet.

Strength surged through him, eased the weariness in his limbs, making him feel as though he had about a week's sleep and several good meals all rolled into one. The power in it, the magic that all Fae carried within themselves, headed straight for his head like a good shot of vodka.

Feeling Talven's arm start to tremble Feral carefully withdrew his fangs, mindful that the Fae's mind wasn't clouded and he could feel all of this. He paused, a quick pass of his tongue stopped the bleeding and sealed the broken flesh.

Talven sighed in relief, pulled his arm back against his body and rubbing the abused skin. "Ok," he laughed shakily, "You were right, that *really* hurt!"

*Oh god, this couldn't be happening.* Tessa watched helplessly as Feral was dragged away, held motionless by the cruel grip around her jaw. Then she remembered she had a voice, yelling and screaming for all she was worth, trying to get someone's attention. Her rebellion was short lived, Ilia increased the pressure on her throat until Tessa saw stars.

"Shut. Up," The corrupt princess hissed in her ear. "The place is spelled, no one can hear you. And you're giving me a headache,"

Tess sank to her knees as Ilia released her, gasping for breath as she smoothed her hand over her throat, still able to feel the imprint of Ilia's hand clamped there.

"Get her on the table with the brat," The Fae Princess ordered, voice hard as she sauntered towards a cloth covered table in the middle of the hall, flicking the fabric off and letting it flutter unheeded to the floor. Covered with the cloth the table had been innocuous enough but now, uncovered, the feelings that rose from it were vile enough to turn Tessa's stomach.

Lust, terror, greed, and excitement. All rose from it in a cacophony of emotion that was overwhelming, even for a part Fae like Tessa. And if she felt ill, her human half adding an insensitive shield, then she had no clue how the full blooded Fae were dealing with it. A quick glance at the nearest one, a Fae in the full armour of one of Ilia's knights revealed a clenched jaw and hollow eyes as he looked down at her. Tessa shivered. No help there then.

Ilia though, seemed unaffected. Or worse, she actually seemed to be revelling in the dark emotions as they rose from the table. Her slender hand smoothed across the darkly stained surface in a caress. Dark stains Tessa didn't need a Vampire's affinity with blood to

recognise.

People had died on that table. People *would* die on that table, her and Spud amongst them.

“Nooo! NO!” she screamed as hard hands reached for her, but it was no use. Several minutes later and she was bundled onto the bloodstained surface, all her struggles counted for nothing against the strength of Ilia’s hollow eyed guards.

“You can’t do this, he’s just a *baby*! What kind of sick bitch are you?” Tessa demanded, struggling as the straps were tightened over her wrists and thighs. She watched helplessly as they brought Spud over, laid him down next to her. His terrified whimpers eased as he recognised her scent, calming down as he was near someone he trusted.

“Shut up and behave, or it’ll go harder on you,” Ilia’s eyes flashed fire as she started to unroll a scroll.

Tessa laughed, the sound rolled around the cavernous hall. “Behave or it’ll go harder on me? Oh, that’s a good one” Tessa laughed, scorn in her eyes. “So... you gotta tell me. Just *how* this is gonna get harder on me? You’re gonna bloody *kill* me! It’s doesn’t get much bloody harder than that you stupid bitch!”

Ilia’s eyes narrowed as anger flashed in their depths. “You’ll pay for that, *really* pay for that. No one insults me in my own hall. I’ll make you suffer and your flesh will taste all the sweeter,”

“I hope I give you fucking food poisoning!” Tessa spat and threw her weight against her bonds again. They were so tight she was already beginning to lose the feeling in her legs. Which could be a blessing or a curse depending on which way you looked at it. She closed her eyes for a moment, really hoped this was just a bad dream and any moment now she’d wake up on the couch in her sister’s apartment.

Tears welled in her eyes, one slid from beneath her lashes to blaze a hot trail down the side of her face. It was hopeless, despair flooded her. She couldn’t even save herself, much less help Spud.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, shifting in her bonds to look at him lying next to her. In the background Ilia began to chant; dark, guttural words that struck fear into Tessa’s heart. She shut the sound out, concentrated on the baby next to her, strained so she could touch him. Just one touch, a brush of her fingers. A small comfort to take into the darkness that was coming.

Whether it was a comfort for the baby or for her, Tessa wasn’t sure.

Just a little more. Her whole body tensed with the effort, Tessa pushed against the heavy strap around her wrist, fanning her fingers out until...

There! Her fingertips brushed his leg. The swiftest touch, over almost before Tessa realised she’d managed it. She relaxed, a sense of peace stole over her as she looked into the baby’s eyes. Eyes that suddenly seemed too old. Like something ancient was looking out of them.

Unbidden an image rose in Tessa’s mind. That of a tall man dressed in black, his pink hair cut short and spiky, colour bright in the darkness of an alley. He moved as though hunting something, an edge of danger surrounded him, and then seemed to become aware of Tessa’s ‘presence’. He turned towards her suddenly, his fists snapping up, the light glinting across the blades across his knuckles. He smiled; relaxed as though he recognised her, easy charm in every line of his body. Then, with a wink, he was gone into the darkness in the swirl of the long leather coat.

Tessa gasped as she slammed back to reality, blinking at Spud. He smiled slowly at her, the old look faded from his eyes. Shock coursed through her as she realised what she had seen. A glimpse of the future, of the man Spud would turn out to be. The man he would become, which meant somehow he would survive this ... and she had been shown to give her

hope.

Ilia's voice rose, triumph filled the unintelligible words as she reached a crescendo, the last words reverberating around the hall in a way Tessa recognised. Words of power, used to close a spell. An evil smile crossed the Princess's features as she moved forward and reached for Spud.

But before her hands could close on his small body, the door behind her crashed open and slammed into the walls on both sides, splintering. More kindling now than the elegant doors they had been.

A tall figure filled the ruined entrance, his massive frame taugth with the promise of violence and dark retribution in his eyes.

"Get away from the baby," Feral snarled, fangs visible even at his distance, leaning a sneer to his handsome face. "You want to take pieces out of someone, you come pick on someone your own size."

The look of surprise on Ilia's face almost made Feral laugh aloud. It was a look that swiftly descended into annoyance as Talven stepped into the hall behind him.

*Oh honey, I'd be a little more than irritated if I were you,* Feral thought as he eyed her darkly. *I'd be running for my life.* But she wasn't running. She merely hissed in frustration and dropped her scroll onto the table next to the two forms trussed up there.

Tessa and the baby. Feral's gaze swept over them to make sure they were breathing and nothing more. He couldn't allow himself the luxury of anything more, even though all he wanted to do was rush over there and free Tessa, take her into his arms and never let her go.

"I shall deal with you later Talven," she snapped imperiously. "You have overstepped your bounds this time. There will have to be ... repercussions."

"You'll be dealing with me first darling," Feral growled, shifting to a guard position and beckoned her on. Watching her every move like a hawk. "That is, unless you don't have the balls for it..." His hard gaze racked her obviously feminine figure in the flowing dress. "Metaphorically speaking of course,"

"Insolent creature!" she hissed, "How dare you speak to *me*, a Princess of the Fae, in that way? You will pay and pay dearly for this insult!"

Feral lifted an eyebrow as he chuckled, the sound rich with amusement.

"Sweetheart, you lost all claim to any kind of respect the instant you made a deal with whatever kind of critter lent you all that power. Because one thing's for sure, it ain't Fae! So, come on, you going to dance with me... or does it only get your rocks off when your victims are strapped down?" he challenged, an arrogant tilt to his head as he baited her.

It was a dangerous thing to do. Borrowed power or no, she was still a threat and he knew it, but all he had to do was keep miss high and mighty here occupied long enough for Talven to get to Tessa and the baby. They'd deal with the rest when they got to it.

She snarled at him, revealing her teeth for the first time. Unlike Feral's fangs they were crowded haphazardly into her mouth, jagged and darkly stained. Definitely not the dental equipment she started life with and classic for a flesh eater. Feral wrinkled his nose as she circled him; a sword appeared in her hand as if from nowhere.

"I'd look into getting a refund on your dental policy as well if I were you. That look does nothing for your romantic chances you know," he taunted, the glimpse giving him a good idea of just what sort of demon she sold her soul to.

She ignored the comment, circling him with intent. The sword in her hand flashed out, checking his defences, looking for an opening. Feral smiled, countering each attack easily. If she thought it was going to be that simple she was very much mistaken. He might have been taken down easily before but that had been against multiple opponents and when he was blood-starved.

Now though, it was one on one and he had a belly-full of fresh blood. Fae blood. The

power virtually hummed through him, making him faster and stronger than he could ever recall feeling. *Oh yeah, he could get used to this!* He turned another of her attacks, slid one of his blades down hers with a screech and winked at her as she snatched it back.

"Got to be quicker than that sweetheart," he chided her, as though this were a friendly match between colleagues.

Her face flushed with rage. "You'll sing sweetly for me Vampire," she hissed, "A sweet song as I carve chunks out of your living flesh."

Feral shivered dramatically, circling her. "Ohh baby, you're getting me all hot under the collar. Bring it on, if you can..." he taunted, seeing how far he could push her before she snapped and lost her temper.

When she did that, it was game over. You couldn't win a sword fight if you let your emotions rule you. Not unless you were either really good, or really lucky. Usually you just got really dead.

Dimly aware of the hall filling up Feral kept his eyes on the woman in front of him. It was between the two of them now, the rest of the world would have to wait to get a piece of him until after he'd taken this bitch down. With her skirts flying around her dramatically, a useless bit of magic that made him smile, and the look of rage on her face she looked like some dark goddess of battle.

"Oooh, I will," she promised, as she lashed out again and forced him back with a complex set of moves. Begrudgingly he had to admire her skill with the weapon, especially when she landed a cut on his upper arm. Her blade just kissed his skin, delicately parting it to allow the blood to well, ooze sluggishly down his arm.

"You *can't* beat me!" she told him, arrogance in her voice as her nostrils flared. Her eyes flicked from the blood on his arm to his face and back again, her small pink tongue flicking out to lick her lips. She had it bad, he realised.

"I mean, how can you?" she carried on, "How can a mere Vampire compete with *me*? I ate Demon flesh, absorbed their power and soon I'll be a *Goddess!*"

Feral didn't reply, moving like lightening as he spotted the gap he'd been waiting for. His blades crashed into hers in a complicated overhand movement, flicking her blade from her grasp with ease. Not giving her chance to react he spun her in his arms. One large hand engulfed her forehead, racking her head up and exposing her neck.

"Sorry sweetheart, I was *born* a demon," he whispered, his breath kissing the side of her throat.

Then he tore it out.

Silence descended on the hall, all eyes on Feral and the tiny figure in his hold. She drew in a breath, a ragged wheeze that bubbled as the blood gushed from her ruined throat, a tide that flowed down the white gown staining it scarlet in seconds. He released his hold, letting her drop to his feet like a rag doll as he spat out the blood in his mouth. The ultimate insult from a Vampire.

Ignoring her frantic scrabbling to try and stop the bleeding Feral turned on his heel, joined Talven at the table to release Tessa. Dropping his blades on the table next to her, his strong hands made short work of the buckles and, as soon as the last strap slithered free, he dragged her into his arms.

"I thought I'd lost you," he murmured and buried his face into her hair, breathing in her scent as a shudder of relief went through his big body. Pulling back a little he hooked a finger under her chin to look deep into her eyes looking for answers to questions he didn't know how to ask. What he saw there made him smile, his head bent to claim her lips in a searing kiss that said far more than words ever could.



## Epilogue

It was all over. Tessa sat on the edge of the bed in the frankly *huge* room that they'd been given at Queen Mab's order, her eyes closed as she took it all in.

She thought that was it, all she wrote, for her and Spud... whose name had turned out to be Colin Jenkins. Colin James Jenkins. She smiled to herself. Such an ordinary sounding name for a little boy who would become such a powerful man. She had no doubt that the Winter King thing would come to pass... the guy she had seen in her dream had had that aura about him. The kind only powerful people did, the ones with the kind of power and charisma that was innate.

He would always be Spud to her and his parents had said she could visit whenever she wanted, just grateful to have their baby back.

The shower in the en-suite snapped off. Tessa looked up as Feral re-entered the room, a towel wrapped around his lean hips. The expression in her eyes warmed, appreciation in her gaze as it wandered over his body. Satin skin that moved over the heavy muscles as he reached up, running a hand over his shaven head, the light catching the tattoo-like marks of a Kyn Warrior that covered one side of his body, disappeared under that towel.

She licked her lips, in a moment she was going to find out how far down those marks went. But instead of coming towards her he turned away, opened the wardrobe and peered inside. He checked both of them, even walked to the door and opened it to check the corridor outside.

"Feral?" Tessa asked, her voice confused as she watched him. Just what was he up to? "What are you doing?"

"Looking for Pixies," Came the reply as he shut the door and headed over to the window, opening it to lean out into the darkness.

"Looking for Pixies? Why?" *What on earth did he want to look for Pixies for?*

He re-emerged, shut the window and switched the curtains shut as he turned his attention on her, stalking towards her with a look that was so hot, it should be illegal.

"Because I'm planning to have my wicked way with you and *this* time, I don't plan on getting interrupted..."

## Author Bio

Mina Carter can be found exploring in the middle of the English countryside with her real-life hero and their young daughter...the true boss of the family. As a successful businesswoman, Mina never tires of learning new skills, qualified in such fields as Aromatherapy, welding and corsetry.

She juggles full-time mumhood, running a family business and writing, tossing another ball in the air with her cover artwork. For her, writing time is the wee hours of the morning or any spare minute that can be begged, bought or conned.

Her first stories were penned at age 11, when she used a stationery set meant for Christmas thank you letters to write stories instead. More recently, she wrote for her own amusement to save on outrageous monthly book bills, as well as for the masses of friends on her doorstep demanding longer stories. Now you'll find her reading and writing original worlds where the paranormal is everyday and romance is a must.

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