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# Vixen

Mina Carter

## Dedication

To Mike,  
the real life hero that puts up with me.

## Chapter One

Gorillas didn't look good in dresses. Especially not silk bridesmaid dresses, even if they could get one to fit. This was a situation Kyn Warrior, Vixen, never thought she'd find herself in, she decided as she looked at herself in the mirror, tarted up and virtually shoehorned into said bridesmaid dress, which proved that the fates were bitches of the highest calibre. Granted, she was more Amazonian than Simian in build but next to the other bridesmaids, none of whom reached past her shoulder, she felt like a lumbering ape.

Of course it had to be pink, Vixen's least favourite colour. It even had a bow. A large one, right on her ass, which made it look twice as large as it was. And it didn't need any help in that department. They might as well have slapped a 'Wide Load' sticker on her and been done with it, she grumbled to herself, craning her head as she twisted, trying to tug it into a better position. Then again, wide load stickers would definitely clash with the colour scheme and the wedding co-ordinator, a woman that wouldn't look out of place as an Army drill sergeant, would have had kittens. No, pink and white it was. And only pink and white. Baby pink, she'd been corrected firmly earlier. She'd taken that at face value. Pink was pink, why did it need so many different names? Blush, salmon, baby...

She shook her head with a sigh. She'd never been scared of anything. So when Maria Ravensford, the King's fiancée, had asked her to be one of her bridesmaids Vixen had happily agreed. After all, she was Vixen, big scary Kyn Warrior. The only female Warrior ever to have been born, her life dedicated to the hunting and killing of some of the most vicious creatures that walked the Night-World; Rogue Vampires. And she was damn good at it. Only last week her patrol had topped the leader board for the third week running with the most kills. What was being a bridesmaid compared to that? You wore a dress, carried a bunch of flowers and followed the Bride up the aisle to make sure she didn't do something disastrous. Like break a nail. It couldn't be that hard, right?

Wrong, dead wrong. Now that the time was actually here her knees were knocking so hard she was surprised they didn't keep checking the door to see if someone wanted in. With mere moments to go before Maria and her little group of attendants were due to step out into the main hall, she was virtually shaking with panic.

She looked stupid. Why the hell had she avoided all those fittings? Boring as they had been, the reason behind them was now crystal clear to the tall Warrior.

Her dress didn't fit.

The hated pink silk was stretched scandalously tight across her bust, so tight she could barely breathe. And she dare not take a deep breath in case the delicate lacings across her back, stretched to their limits, gave out. The dressmaker, already annoyed at having to make the dress without a dress fitting, had just tsked under her breath irritably and ordered Vixen not to breathe. Vixen was still trying to work out if that was not breathe at all, or just not breathe so deeply. No breathing at all was probably the best option. The neckline was so low that if she'd been able to take a deep breath she'd probably spill out over the top!

She sighed, not too deeply of course, as the beady eye of the dressmaker was still on her from the other side of the room, and looked around the small antechamber. Just off the main hall of the court, the one the binding-cum-wedding ceremony was taking place in, followed the rest of the building in style. Heavy wood panelling covered half the walls with ornamental plaster carvings over the rest, the symbols of ancient Kyn families surrounded them as the Bride prepared to walk up the aisle and marry into one. True to form for a lot of Vampire buildings, there wasn't even a window she could try and wriggle out through.

As soon as it occurred to her, she dismissed the idea. One, you did not run out on the wedding of the King. It just wasn't done, protocol and all that. Well, she didn't actually give a damn about protocol but if she didn't show, Marak would track her down and bust her ass for it. Even though he had been caught up in court protocol recently, with the wedding preparations, Marak was her patrol leader as well as her King and someone she really didn't want to piss off. Besides she was a Kyn Warrior, and Warriors did not run from anything she told herself firmly, ignoring the fact her knees were shaking under the pink silk skirt. Besides, she'd never be able to climb in the thing.

“Now... you look amazing.” As though Vixen's thoughts had conjured her up, Maria appeared at her elbow like a genie out of a bottle. If genies appeared in full wedding gowns, with veil and tiara to boot, that was.

“Me?” Vixen asked surprised, resisting the urge to tug on the dress again.

Yanking it up until it felt more secure across her bust reduced the risk of her breasts falling out but meant the split up one thigh went indecently high. Pulling it down to solve that gave her the fall-out problem again. Catch-22, she thought miserably. “I don’t, I look ridiculous,” she grumbled, giving in and going through the whole yank up, yank down routine again. “Like a damn Gorilla in a dress.”

“What are you talking about? You don’t look like a Gorilla at all! You look stunning!” Maria insisted, her dark eyes making a quick assessment of her in her dress. Slim fitting, it moulded to every curve she had. A fact she was very aware, very uncomfortably aware of. She wore clothing this tight on patrol but that was work gear and somehow skin-tight leather pants with a skinny fit tee didn’t seem quite as bad as her cleavage or the entire length of a leg on display. “You can practically see my underwear in this thing,” she muttered, tugging at the dress again; about to do something she'd never done in her life before, have an all-out panic attack over the way she looked.

“Don’t be stupid, it’s perfectly decent. You’re just used to hiding yourself away down in the compound... leave it, you’ll crease the silk,” Maria ordered firmly, swatting Vixen’s hands away impatiently.

Perhaps she could still make a break for it, Vixen wondered as the bride moved off to chat to one of the other bridesmaids. Already Maria was automatically adopting the role of hostess, skills she’d need as Marak's Queen. Hope filled her, surely Maria would understand... Vixen was a Warrior, not used to being pulled about and torted up as she had been this morning by a succession of beauticians and hairdressers. All to put her on display like some kind of performing seal.

No, it still wouldn’t work, she realised glumly as she picked at the ribbons on the handle of her bouquet. Whatever Maria said, regardless of whether or not she agreed with Vixen’s reasons, she wasn’t the big problem. There was still Marak to consider. Although it had been Maria that who had asked Vixen to be a bridesmaid, Marak had also mentioned how pleased he was that there would be at least one Warrior amongst his bride-to-be’s attendants...

*“I know it’s just from the Ravensford estate and you’ll be escorted by the Ravensford Knights all the way, but you know what some knights are like. I’ll be far happier knowing there’s at least one of my guys in there too,”* he’d said to her, catching her as she was training in the gym last week. She’d grimaced as she lifted, hiding the sense of pride that filled her as he called her one of ‘his guys’. She had no feminist principles about it. The only female Warrior in existence, she’d spent most of her life trying to prove herself in a man’s world. And she’d done it, making the grade as a member of Marak’s patrol, but having him describe her as one of his was just the icing on the cake for her.

But she had to agree with his point about knights. Warriors trained hard to keep up their speed and reactions, constantly learning and practising new forms. It was necessary, a matter of survival. Rogue vampires were fast as hell, and stronger than most Kyn, thanks to the madness in their veins. So a slow Warrior was usually a dead Warrior. But it wasn’t the same with knights, not that Vixen had seen. Once you were a knight, sword across the shoulders and all that jazz, you were always a knight. No one took that away from you, even when you got too old and slow to lift a weapon.

“I was going to stick Feral in a dress just for the hell of it but you know what he’s like, he’d only sulk,” Marak continued, his expression verging on pleading when she didn’t answer straight away, revealing how nervous he was about the wedding. Marak was not normally what you could describe as chatty, he was more the silent brooding type. Right up to meeting and bonding with Maria that was, saving the beautiful woman’s life after a Rogue had attacked her. She liked the change though. It suited him.

“So come on, what do you say, Vix? Put me out of my misery here... and I promise Feral will love you forever when I tell him you saved him from the dress.”

“Who’s wearing a dress? Blondie?” A new voice broke into the conversation from behind Marak. A voice Vixen knew only too well, one she both longed and dreaded to hear. Kalen sauntered into the gym. A tall,

leanly built Kyn, he was Marak's right hand man as well as his patrol partner, and she had had the hots for him for years.

"Blondie's wearing a dress? Hell, that I'd pay good money to see," he continued, his dark eyes flashing amusement as he gave her the once-over, eyes settling on her sweat pant-clad legs. "Screw you, K," she snarled back, ignoring him as she carried on with her lifting and mentally wishing him to hell...

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Vixen's mood took a nosedive as she returned to the present, her memory having done a fantastic job of reminding her about Kalen's amusement at the very thought of her wearing a dress. "Feral would have looked better in this," she muttered under her breath, careful to keep her comment soft. Kyn hearing was acute and the last thing she needed was to tip everyone off that she felt like a complete and utter prat in this get-up.

"What was that?" Maria asked, at Vixen's side again, but her attention was diverted as the door opened, a tall figure appearing. Instantly Vixen was at attention, her body automatically tensing, ready for an attack. She knew just how much some people would like to make sure this wedding didn't go through and Marak didn't marry, even if the bride was blissfully unaware. She relaxed marginally, recognising the man that stepped into the room, a silent look passing between Warrior and Knight.

"Are you ready, sweetheart? They're all waiting for you out there... Marak's like a cat on a hot tin roof," Garen Ravensford said as he crossed the room to his daughter, pride sparkling in his eyes as he took in her appearance. "You look wonderful, honey. Beautiful. Just like your mother did. She'd have been so proud of you."

Vixen turned away with a lump in her throat, feeling uncomfortable at trespassing on such a tender moment between father and daughter. Despite falling in love with a human woman who couldn't be converted, Garen had stood by her, and the two half-Kyn daughters she'd borne him. Everyone knew the old scandal, one of the most eligible lords had chosen to marry a human for love, rather than contract a dynastic but loveless marriage with the daughter of another noble house. It had nearly cost Garen his title. A Kyn and a human, it was unheard of! Perhaps if she could have been converted it would have been a different matter. But occasionally, no one knew why, some humans couldn't be converted. Kyn scientists thought it might be something to do with another strain of paranormal DNA in their genetic makeup, something not quite human in their family tree that stopped the possibility of conversion. Regardless of the pressure on him, Garen had stood by his mortal wife until she died and Vixen admired him immensely for that.

Her own father had been a completely different matter. He had taken one look at the Warrior's marks across the face and body of his newborn daughter and had walked out, leaving her and her mother to fend for themselves.

"Yes, I'm ready... is everyone ready? Everyone got their bouquets?" Maria asked, twisting and turning to check as Garen lifted her veil to draw it gently down over her face. Vixen lifted her bouquet and waggled it in confirmation with the rest, adding her voice to the chorus of yes from the other bridesmaids. The panic left Maria's face as her father gently drew her hand onto his arm and led her towards the door. The bridesmaids fell into the order they had drilled into them by the wedding co-ordinator and followed her, Vixen bringing up the rear.

Then the moment of truth was upon her and she took a deep breath before stepping through the door. Abruptly she wished she were somewhere, anywhere, other than here. All eyes in the hall turned towards them and she bit the inside of her lip firmly, wishing fervently she were out on patrol instead. In fact, if a Rogue were to burst into the hall, scattering the wedding guests, she would probably kiss it before she kicked its ass. "I still think Feral should've worn the dress," she muttered to herself, fixing her gaze firmly on Maria's slender form as she took the longest walk she could remember in her life.

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"Oh god, she's here." As the strains of the bridal march sounded the tall, the heavily built Warrior at Kalen's side leapt to his feet, anxiously scanning the back of the hall for a first glimpse of his bride. Kalen smiled, intensely amused by the bundle of nerves his usually implacable friend had turned into in the run up to the binding... sorry, they were calling it a wedding ceremony, even though it had been specially written to

combine both human and Kyn traditions. The way Marak was acting, anyone would think he was a green youth on his first date, rather than a centuries' old vampire. Nor that he was already bonded by blood to the vision in white that was floating up the aisle, sheer happiness in the eyes fixed on Marak's face.

"Of course she is," he murmured, completely unheard, which tended to happen a lot when Maria was around. "It's only her wedding day; where else do you think she'd be?" Despite his sarcastic tone, Kalen was delighted for his friend. If anyone deserved a bond-mate, it was Marak. And as an added bonus, a bonded couple were more likely to have children. Maybe even female children, something the dwindling Kyn race desperately needed.

But despite seeing the evidence of it right in front of him as Maria took her Bridegroom's hands, the lithely handsome Kyn Warrior at his side didn't believe in love. Not for himself anyway. Not even when he could see it in the petite bride's eyes and reflected in his friend's face.

He hardened his heart. Nope, been there, done that, and she'd been a lying bitch who'd torn his heart out then danced all over the pieces. Not only that but the child he thought was his, had been so proud of, had turned out to be a cuckoo in the nest, not his at all. How Astra had managed to keep that one to herself Kalen had long ago given up trying to work out. It had been her parting shot, thrown over her shoulder as she left him to be with her lover, a lover who wasn't a Warrior or even a knight. A knight Kalen could have handled. Mainly by tracking the bastard down and running him through. But a doctor. He wasn't even the sort of doctor who got their hands dirty and helped people, but a damn limp-wristed excuse for a man who talked about 'feelings' all day. A snake in the grass who had convinced Astra that Kalen was a dinosaur throwback to the Kyn's demon past, that he and all his kind should be put down at birth as they had no place in modern Kyn society.

So thanks but no thanks. He'd leave love to those gullible enough to believe in it. He was sticking strictly to the temporary, physical interpretation of the word. AKA lust. Yeah, he could happily fall in lust on a regular basis, he decided, his gaze wandering over the bridesmaids. Unable to attend the wedding rehearsals he'd not met any of them yet and as best man he would have the pleasure, or duty if any of them looked like the back end of a bus, of dancing with them all. However, he was pleased to discover they were all lookers. Most were petite and dark haired like the bride, he realised. Probably family, there was a definite resemblance to Maria in most of them. The Ravensford family were a prolific bunch, that was for sure, he thought absently, his gaze moving onto the only blonde in the party. The look in his dark eyes grew warmer as they travelled over her figure appreciatively.

*Well, heeeello honey, where have you been all my life!*

If he had been anywhere else, he would have wolf-whistled and leaned back in his chair to get a better look, perhaps even a glimpse of her face. As it was, his appreciation of her mouth-watering figure earned him a glare from an old dowager who sat behind him, the sour-faced old prune clucking her teeth and pursing her lips in disapproval. Some great aunt of Marak's he recalled, ignoring her completely and continuing his assessment of the mystery woman.

Tall and slender, she had to be over six foot, unlike the midget-sized creatures around her. Tall enough that he wouldn't get a crick in his neck when he kissed her...Because he was kissing her. There was no way he was letting her slip through his fingers, even if he had to drag her off some place. One look at that figure, the gentle curve of her neck at the nape as she turned away from him, leaning down slightly as one of the other bridesmaids whispered something in her ear was more than enough to make that decision for him. Even if he hadn't gotten a good look at her face yet. If it was as perfect as the rest of her though, then he would be hard pressed to stop at just kissing.

Then the ceremony started and he was forced to turn back around, to pay attention to what was going on so he could present the rings at the right moment. He was on pain of death from both Marak and Maria to make sure he didn't: a) lose the rings or b) screw up in any way, shape or form. Actually, although Marak had well earned his reputation as a nasty piece of work in a fight, he was more scared of what Maria would do to him if he did. A woman scorned and all that.

Insanely curious now, he tried to sneak glances as the ceremony progressed, to see if he could get a look at the mystery blonde's face. Perhaps even catch her eye and smile. A good smile went a long way in this kind of thing and Kalen hadn't earned a reputation as a Casanova for nothing. But his efforts came to nothing, his view was blocked by three other bridesmaids and the tall figure of Garen Ravensford, who was giving him a



few funny looks now. Probably wondering why Kalen kept staring at him. He sat back in his chair, seething with frustration. All he could see was the long length of a slender leg and although it was a very nice leg, one that threatened to sidetrack him with all sorts of interesting thoughts, he really wanted to see her face.

Curiosity gnawed at him relentlessly as he listened to Maria and Marak exchange vows, a curious blend of the Kyn and human ceremony all rolled into one. How had he missed a woman like that in the court, he mused, his mind running through all the families, trying to recall every distant cousin or minor branch of the noble families. The only woman he'd ever seen approaching that sort of look was Vixen, he thought as the ceremony concluded and everyone stood as the bride and groom started to make their way back down the aisle. His heart stilled in his chest as he turned that one over in his mind.

In fact, his mystery woman was almost exactly the same height as Vixen, as well as being blonde. A sudden suspicion filled him as he moved, turned to hold his arm out to escort one of the bridesmaids, only to find himself looking into a familiar pair of green eyes.

*It was Vixen!*

## Chapter Two

The western terrace ballroom had been transformed so magically that Vixen's jaw nearly hit the ground when she walked in. Far from the rather formal room she remembered from the few times she'd been in it. Now it looked like something out of a fairytale, swags of white and silver chiffon descending from the high ceilings in loops and winding around the imposing columns. Huge floral displays replaced the suits of armour along the walls, guarding proceedings in their place. As this was a vampire wedding for the most part, there was no wedding lunch. The waiters were circulating with trays of glasses instead, champagne the drink on offer, at least for the first toast. Another human custom Maria had insisted on. After the champagne, Vixen knew they would switch to serving blood. It was the way of things and the Kyn court, in fact, the race as a whole, took a while to adapt to any new changes.

There was a small buffet tucked away in one corner for the human guests, discreetly out of the way of the majority of the Kyn guests. Some of the older Kyn, the ones that had been born Kyn, found the sight of people eating distasteful. Vixen took refuge near it. If she thought walking into the main hall behind Maria had been bad with all those eyes boring into her, assessing her, and finding her wanting somehow, then the reception was a thousand times worse. At least in the ceremony no one had been talking. To her or anyone. Here at the reception, they could but no one, other than her fellow bridesmaids and the other Warriors, had bothered to.

The bridesmaids, she discovered, were mainly human. Maria's mother had been from one of the seneschal families, so they knew exactly what she was and were slightly over-awed at being in the presence of a Warrior. Particularly the infamous Vixen. She was surprised to learn she'd become a girl-power icon amongst the seneschal girls, at least two of them asking hesitantly if she'd ever thought of teaching self defence.

Still absorbing that one, Vixen sat quietly by herself, sipping champagne and studying the wall opposite to avoid 'circulating'. She was also ignoring the small group of Kyn women who had congregated nearby, all exquisitely dressed in the manner of the very wealthy, and all eyeing her covertly with a mixture of pity and amusement. She recognised them, daughters of the wealthy noble houses and no doubt, all of them were madder than wet hens that Marak hadn't chosen one of them for his bride.

Their whispered comments reached her easily, her knuckles whitening slightly on the stem of her glass before she remembered and relaxed. The last thing she needed was to crush it and drop champagne and blood from a cut hand all over her dress, right in front of everyone. That would just top the night off, she thought, ignoring the whispers. Either they thought because she was a Warrior she was too stupid to realise who they were talking about or they were too rude to care she could hear them.

*"What does she think she looks like?"*

*"Heels with her height?"*

*"...complexion's far too pale for that colour."*

*"Not talked to anyone, bar the cattle, you can tell she's got no breeding..."*

*"Don't know why they invited her, or the rest of those Neanderthals."*

Vixen knocked back the rest of the champagne in one go, not caring if that showcased her lack of breeding or not. Who cared about that stuff anyway? All it meant was Mommy and Daddy had been lucky enough to be born with a silver spoon in their mouths. She stood in one lithe movement and stalked past the small group of women, all her nerves gone as she met their eyes challengingly, the lethal grace of a born predator in every line of her body. She hid a satisfied smile as they nearly fell over themselves to get out of her way.

They might look down on her for what she was but at the end of the day, she'd rather spend her days doing something useful, like protecting people by fighting the Rogue, than live a pampered and useless existence like these women. Wrapped in cotton wool, they wanted for nothing and nothing was required of them. Other than the ability to look pretty, offer their throats to the guys their Daddies picked out for them, and then pray like hell they were fertile enough to carry at least one child to term.

She curled her lip. Although they were born Kyn, the descendants of demon Warriors transported from their own dimension to this one millennia ago, they'd probably forgotten the meaning of the word 'predator'. No doubt half of them were afraid of their own shadow, preferring to fight with words and politics in the courts.

The nobles might consider the Warrior caste dinosaurs but personally, Vixen thought the nobles were slowly killing their race. Making them pale imitations of the humans with their bureaucracy and systems.

Needing to get away, Vix headed out onto the terrace. Stepping into the cool darkness, she closed her eyes in relief and turned her face up to bask in the silvery light of the moon. But her peace was shattered by a voice from the darkness.

“I wondered how long it would take you to come out here.”

.....  
Vixen turned, startled at the deep, well-modulated voice that cut through the shadows. A familiar voice, one she'd been waiting all night to hear, ever since she'd taken his arm for that silent walk down the aisle, his eyes unreadable as he'd looked her over.

Kalen's voice.

Her heart leapt as it always did when she was around him, did that frantic little dance behind her ribcage as everything female in her screamed, ‘Me! Me! Notice me!’ It was an instinctive reaction, one she'd been trying for years to smother. But it just wouldn't go away.

Then reality returned and her mood took a nosedive as she remembered where they were and, more importantly, how she was dressed. “Yeah, no prizes for that one. Anyone with half a brain can see I don't fit in in there,” she replied, without her usual bite.

Surrounded by Kyn Warriors, often the meanest SOB's out there, she was supposed to be mean and tough, so she was. A grade-A bitch a lot of the time. She hid a gentler, more sensitive nature behind the sarcastic mask so none of them, especially Kalen, would guess at it. She just couldn't muster it at the moment, taken too far out of her comfort zone, dressed up in the unfamiliar finery and feeling as though she'd had the stuffing knocked out of her.

She walked over to the stone railings that bordered the terrace, next to a set of steps that led down into the gardens. Her hands rested lightly on the cool stone as she took in a breath of the night air. Planted with the Kyn in mind, the gardens were filled with night blooming flowers, the gentle scent soothing her agitation for a moment. A tranquillity that only lasted a few seconds as his voice sounded right beside her ear. Vixen jumped slightly; she hadn't even heard him move! The last time anyone had been able to sneak up on her like that was... years ago.

“You look different dressed up,” he commented softly, a whisper of sound in the darkness that sent a warm shiver down her spine. As if he reached out and ran a large hand over the sensitive skin.

She ignored it and snorted, “No shit, Sherlock! You've never seen me in a dress before.”

There was silence behind her instead of the derisive chuckle and cutting comment she was expecting. Both were normal for their usual conversations but instead he leaned closer. So close she could feel his warm breath on the back of her neck, whispering across the tiny hairs on her skin. “No, but I like it,” he said softly, his deep voice a wicked temptation, a tone she'd never heard before. She whirled around, wariness in her eyes, expecting to see a grin on his face, for him to start making fun of her in the next breath.

But he didn't. His dark eyes were unreadable. “You look stunning,” he whispered, lifting a hand to tuck a stray curl of hair, escaped from the pleat at the back of her head, behind her ear. She shivered at the touch, just watching him as his fingertips trailed gently over her cheek.

“Yeah right,” she managed, her mouth suddenly dry. He only touched her cheek, yet her body was going haywire! “To hear them talk in there, you'd think...” She shut up mid-sentence, closing her mouth with a snap, appalled at what she'd been about to say, that she'd been about to admit her innermost fears to him! Never let anyone see the chinks in your armour; she'd learnt that one very early on. Teasing in her childhood about her lack of a father and the marks on her face and body had taught her to keep everything safely inside.

It was too late, what she'd said was enough. Realisation flooded Kalen's eyes as he looked down at her. Amazingly, even at Vixen's height, she had to look up to meet his eyes.

“Ignore them, they're just jealous.” His voice, once more weaving magic out of the moonlight and darkness, sent a shiver up her spine. She wanted to believe him. His words were like a balm to her injured feminine pride. Then he surprised her. “Dance with me?” he asked, holding a hand out to her.

Vixen couldn't help it, a shudder running through her as she cast a hunted glance at the tall windows, the light from the festivities inside spilling out into the night. She couldn't bear to go back in, have them all

watching her again, dissecting her every move and hoping she'd fall over her own feet or something. "I don't think I'm ready to go back in yet," she admitted, although she desperately wanted that dance. Just one dance, then tomorrow they could go back to sniping at one another.

"Neither am I... I came out to escape as well. Out here, just you and me." His voice was still low, his eyes never leaving hers.

It was her fantasy coming true. Vixen reached out and placed her hand in his without speaking. Of course, in her fantasies, the ones she woke hot and flustered from, he pulled her hard against him. His hands moulded her softer body to his as he plundered her lips, drawing her deeper into the shadows where... Abruptly Vixen pulled herself together, her heart already starting to race, before the betraying blush on her cheekbones could warm half the city.

She met his eyes as he pulled her into his arms, their bodies moving slowly to the music that filtered out onto the terrace from the ball going on inside. It was slow and seductive. Under any other circumstances, she'd never have agreed to dance to it with anyone, much less Kalen. Rock and heavy metal were more her style. But the romance of the occasion had mellowed her and her tense body relaxed in his arms.

They fit together well, moving so naturally it was as though they were made for each other. She sighed softly, the unaccustomed champagne flowing through her veins. Not enough to make her tipsy, Vixen was too experienced a Warrior to make that sort of mistake, but enough to relax her guard several notches. So when the music changed to something slower, more romantic, and Kalen pulled her closer, she didn't argue. Instead, she sighed in pleasure and gave into the temptation to lay her head on his shoulder and close her eyes, luxuriating in the feel of his hard male body against hers.

She had no idea how long they stood like that, moving slowly to the music with his arms around her, hers around him. She felt safe and protected, a feeling she had never experienced before. It was a feeling she was finding she liked. Eventually Kalen stopped moving, murmuring her name softly.

She looked up, blinking as her eyes readjusted to the darkness only to find he had moved them further into the shadows at the edges of the terrace, well away from the ballroom doors.

"I've wanted to do this all night," he whispered, tilting her chin up to claim her lips.

## Chapter Three

Hot. That was the only way to describe the way Kalen had kissed her the night of the reception. Hot and wildly erotic. Even four days later, Vixen could feel the imprint of his lips on hers, the way he tasted and the electric heat that had swirled through her body in response. Flushing at the memory she hooked her towels over the rail and stepped under the shower. A groan left her lips as the hot water eased her sore muscles. Muscles she abused in her workout trying to escape that same memory, especially the bit where they'd been interrupted and she panicked and fled like a startled teenager.

Unfortunately, neither a heavy-duty workout nor trying to avoid Kalen seemed to be working. The nights since the reception Vixen had been switching patrols at the last minute, taking the late patrol if Kalen was on early, and early if he was on the late roster. That way she only saw him for a few seconds in the main area of the compound as one of them was going out and one was coming in. Even then, she kept her head down, avoiding his gaze.

Like tonight for example. They had both been on the early patrol but with Marak off after the wedding, their patrol had been broken down to cover gaps in the other teams until he returned. At the last minute, she had managed to swap patrols with a guy from Mikal's team who wanted to get back early to spend time with his mate.

Vixen was rinsing the last of the shampoo out of her hair, dunking her head under the spray and smoothing her hair back in a slick pelt down her back when her sensitive ears picked up a sound from the other room. Frowning she snapped the shower off and stood for a moment, dripping in the stall as she listened.

Nothing.

"Hello?" she called out, just in case, wondering if one of the guys had wandered in by mistake. Although there was only one of her, Marak made sure she had her own shower and changing room. Didn't need the rookies falling over their own tongues the first time they had to take a shower he said. Early on, with each batch of rookies, the older Warriors always dared them to try and sneak a look at her in the showers. It was a bizarre initiation ritual but it tended to die down after she bounced the first few off the walls a couple of times.

However, the next batch of rookies wasn't due in until next month and normally she had the place to herself. Well, apart from on a Tuesday and a Thursday, when Maria used the gym. But it couldn't be Maria as one, it was Wednesday, and two, she and Marak were on their honeymoon.

She stood for a few seconds longer, ears still perked for any sound from the changing room, until the air on her wet skin started to make her shiver. Still nothing, she must have imagined it.

"You're going nuts, Vix," she told herself softly, stepping from the stall and reaching for her towels. Wrapping the larger one tightly around her body she started blotting the water from her hair with the smaller one as she headed back out into the changing room.

She got less than three steps before she realised she wasn't alone, hard hands closing on her even as she started to turn. In the next instant, she found herself pinned against the wall by a hard male body, the impact driving the breath from her lungs, a familiar scent filling her nostrils, sending her senses haywire.

"You seem to be going to some lengths to avoid me, Blondie," Kalen's voice drawled by her ear, kicking her body into high awareness. "Any particular reason for that?"

"Kalen, let go of me, you bloody idiot! I thought we had an intruder or something!" She struggled against his hold. But the way he had her pinned, one arm twisted up her back and a booted foot kicking her bare feet further apart until she was off balance, meant she couldn't get any leverage to fight back with. She recognised the hold. It was one they often used on patrol if they found any Kyn youngsters out and up to no good.

She was a strong woman, all Warriors were stronger than average but even she couldn't break this one. It was designed to hold a much larger opponent immobile. Not that she was bigger than Kalen but she could hold her own in a fight and he knew it. Being held down wasn't the worst of it, her body tightening at his touch, a moist heat slipping from between her thighs. Hot colour flooded her cheeks. Surely she couldn't be getting turned on at being treated this way. It was embarrassing, she admitted, closing her eyes as she bit her lip...and very, very hot.

“Not until you tell me why you’ve been avoiding me and why you ran out on me the other night,” he demanded, pressing harder against her to quell her struggles. Hard enough she could feel every solid plane of muscle in his body. As well as a growing hardness pressing into her ass that proved that, like her, he wasn’t immune to the situation.

Even though she knew what night he meant, after all what other night would he be referring to, she played dumb. “Other night?” she asked, her voice innocent as she wriggled to test his hold on her. It gained her a warning growl, an unusually feral sound from the normally eloquent Kalen that should have warned her off.

“Don’t play games with me, Blondie,” he threatened. “I might take you up on it and I don’t think you’d like the games I want to play.” His warm breath fanned over her neck and cheek, making her body clench with need. “Now,” he added, his voice ominously low. “That kiss...” Despite the warning Vixen couldn’t resist playing with fire.

“What kiss?”

“Dammit, Vix, don’t do this!” Kalen’s voice was thick with fury as he released her long enough to spin her around to face him, then pinned her back against the wall. His dark eyes blazed down into hers. “As you obviously don’t remember, maybe I should remind you...”

Fear struck her. She couldn’t allow him to do that! Already she was fighting a losing battle. Not to get free of his hold, but not to throw herself at him. Only his hold on her was stopping her. If he kissed her, the slight resistance she managed to muster would crumble into dust. “Don’t bother,” she hissed at him, flashing her fangs warningly.

“Unless you plan on using them, Blondie, put them away. No one likes a tease.” His voice dropped dangerously, his eyes flashing. His hand shot out, winding into the hair at the nape of her neck and holding her still as his lips descended, covering hers in a kiss that was all about punishment and anger.

Tears prickled the backs of her eyes as she struggled against him, struggles that only served to increase his determination. Desperately she did the only thing she could, nipping his lip sharply. The rich, sweet taste of his blood, the blood of an elder, exploded onto her tongue. She moaned, another need swirling darkly within her even as he groaned. The kiss changed, his tongue sweeping into her mouth in a sensual exploration that filled every cell in her body with pleasure.

Lost in a myriad of other sensations, she barely felt the towel fall away. The cool air hit her skin, her nipples tightened in response, a shiver chased down her spine as he stretched her arms above her head. One large hand held her slender wrists easily, the other exploring the curve of her waist.

He broke away from her lips, ignoring the small sound of disappointment she made to trail white-hot kisses along her jaw and down her throat. Her back arched in response, thrusting her naked breasts against the solid wall of muscle that was his chest. She moaned, biting her lip to try to stifle the sound as his large hand closed over her. His clever fingers rolled her sensitive nipple between them, pinching and pulling gently until a small whimper escaped her throat, her hips bucking against him.

All her protests, the reasons why this wasn’t such a good idea, were forgotten as he released her wrists, his warm mouth reaching down to lave his tongue over the nipple he’d just tortured. Her head dropped back against the wall at the sensual torment, the sound of his zipper almost unheard in her pleasure. She bit her lip, her cheeks flushed with arousal. Oh god, she needed this, needed to feel him filling her, stretching her, and driving into her.

The wait was over and he was there. The hard promise she’d felt earlier pressed against her sex. His large hand lifted her thigh, smoothing over the satiny skin as he held it over his hip. His expression was tight, harsh, and his dark eyes unreadable as he dipped down and pushed against her slightly. She caught her breath as he slipped the rounded head of his erection just inside the silken entrance to her body, already slick with her excitement. Her eyes widened a little as her body started to stretch to accept him but he was pulling back, drawing a moan of protest from her. A moan that quickly became one of pleasure as he slid the hard head of his cock up, rubbing against her sensitive clit. She bit her lower lip, eyes half closed as shivers chased over her skin. This was torture, pure torture.

“You want it, don’t you? I can smell your need. So sweet, enticing,” he breathed in her ear, reaching down to nibble along her neck, leaving a trail of tiny nips that left fire on her skin and her heart racing. She nodded, unable to phrase a coherent sentence. But she didn’t need to speak; the eager responses of her body, the

breathy moans and gasps, the way her hips moved searchingly against him, were all enough to give him the answer he was waiting for.

Abruptly he stopped teasing her. Stopped running the heated head of his erection over her, alternating between running it over the sensitive nub of flesh that was her clit to pressing teasingly at the entrance to her body and back again. Stopped all that to draw her thigh higher on his hip, opening her body completely to him and driving into her in one strong movement.

His eyes met hers, holding them and reading everything all the way down to her soul as he thrust into her slowly, time after time, pressing her hard against the cool tile wall. The room around them filled with the sounds of flesh hitting flesh, soft moans...even the smell of sex hanging in the air, a combination of warm skin, sweat, and pheromones. His hunger for her was evident in the look in his eyes and the fierceness of his possession. This was no sweet exploratory lovemaking, two new lovers coming together gently.

No, he was taking her, staking a claim. She was too far gone to complain, loving every minute of it, her arms around his shoulder and legs wrapped around his lean hips as he pumped into her. Quick, rough sex against a wall and she'd never found anything so erotic in her life!

She moaned as her body tensed on his where it was buried deep inside her, deeper than she'd thought possible, each slide stroked nerve endings that cried out with pleasure. Already a familiar tension started within her, a need to move faster, deeper, clench harder. Anything, just anything to release the tension coiling low in her belly.

"That's it baby, just let go," he breathed in her ear as her movements slowed, became more uncoordinated.

Then everything stilled, one perfect moment of pure clarity as she hovered on the edge. Waiting for his next movement, the need for his next thrust to tip her over the edge. He moved, hips driving against hers hard even as he struck, his sharp fangs drove deep and pierced the soft skin of her throat.

"Shit!" she gasped as ecstasy hit her at light speed, breathy moans of pleasure filling the room. Moans Vixen later realised were hers, but for now, she was simply too far past reason. The combination of her climax and the ecstasy of Kalen's bite rendered her unable to think, virtually mindless with pleasure. His powerful body drove into her once, twice more...a guttural groan left his throat as he pushed deep inside her a last time, his sex pulsing and jerking as his own climax hit him hard.

Long seconds passed. The only sounds in the room were their ragged breathing, and then Vixen came back to reality. Unwelcome reality crowded into her pleasure-numbed brain with a vengeance. Still held tight in Kalen's arms she struggled violently, raining blows on his shoulders until he let her go.

"You bloody...bastard!" She staggered away from him as he stumbled backwards, his stunned expression as horrified as hers as she swiped at the warm wetness on her neck.

Her hand came away red with blood. Her blood.

"You fucking bit me!" she accused, her eyes furious. It wasn't a serious bite but that wasn't the point. You didn't bite a casual lover and you definitely didn't bite on the first bloody date! Not that what had just happened could be called a date by any stretch of the imagination.

Biting was reserved for people in love, people like Maria and Marak. Bond-mates. Married couples. Not people you just screwed up against a wall in anger. Definitely not ever without asking permission!

"Vix...let me explain," he started, holding out a pleading hand but she just grabbed the towel from the floor, wrapping it around her as though it were a shield. "I don't wanna hear it, K," she snarled, fury in every line of her body. "Now I have a patrol to get ready for."

"Vixen..."

"Get. Out!"

.....

To say Vixen was distracted for the rest of the night on patrol would have been an understatement. Hands stuffed in her pockets, her shoulders rounded as she walked, her body language screamed, 'Don't talk to me'.

Fortunately she'd been partnered with Feral again, her last minute switch put them both covering Mikal's patrol. As the two were used to each other, they'd been put together. Which was good since Vixen didn't feel like talking. If she ended up with Lucan, who'd looked her way hopefully when Mikal was calling the pairs, she would have had to kill him. Leave his body down an alley somewhere for the morning sun to clear up. One of last year's rookies, he was far too enthusiastic and chatty for her liking, especially with the foul mood she was in.

Scowling she wrapped her arms closer around herself as she and Feral walked down the main club strip on Southside. It wasn't part of their usual route but with Marak off on honeymoon, everyone had to pull extra duties. So she and Feral had elected to cover Southside then head over to their usual patrol route.

Nearing club kick-out time the street was getting busy, which was why they decided to check this area out first. This time of night was always a favourite with predators, paranormal and others. The people pouring out were usually high, alcohol and other substances surging through their veins, lowering their reactions and numbing their survival instincts. In fact, Vixen noted, some predators were already present. As they walked down the road, she spotted at least three Kyn feeding in the shadows. She nodded as they passed, a silent warning to not take more than the women they lured into the shadows could afford, and to wipe their memories when they were done.

"Fucking hate this time of night," Feral grumbled as they reached the end of the road and stopped on the corner, just two more clubbers waiting for a cab to pick them up. The more astute observer may have noticed that although several cabs passed the tall couple on the corner, none of them stopped. It was as though they didn't see them at all. But then any observer would need some sort of paranormal blood in their veins to actually see the two Kyn, to be able to pierce the veil of obscurity that shrouded them whenever they preferred not to be seen.

Vixen grunted in reply, it was a well-known fact Feral hated clubs anyway, claiming the lights inside gave him a headache. Given he was one of the most photosensitive Kyn she'd ever met, she wasn't surprised.

Pretty soon things quietened down, the last of the humans finding cabs or making their way off to the subway, leaving just the two of them on the corner. Feral pushed off from the wall as soon as the street was clear and the club lights started to snap off one by one.

"So, you going to tell me what's bugging you?" he asked as she dropped into step with him, automatically shortening his stride to match hers.

"Don't know what you're on about," she replied shortly, not in any mood to talk about it. Kalen snuck up on me in the shower and we screwed each other's brains out against the wall. Not the sort of thing you wanted to admit to your patrol partner, especially when you weren't sure how you felt about it. Well, that wasn't entirely true. She was sure how she felt about what had happened.

She loved it. Loved every hot, sweaty minute of it. Right up to the point where he bit her. Anger rose again at the memory. She still couldn't believe he'd done that. What did he think gave him the right to bite her? Without thinking, her hand started to rise to her neck. She checked the movement, annoyed with herself. It was only a little bite, for god's sake, so why did it feel like it was lit up in neon for all to see?

"Come on, Vix, this is me, drop the act. You've been like a bulldog chewing a wasp all bloody night, so what gives?" Feral asked, sliding her a glance from the corner of his eye as they walked, easily covering the distance to their own patrol area.

"That bad, huh?" She arched an eyebrow at him. That was why she and Feral got on so well. He didn't talk a lot but when he did, he was blunt as hell. A spade was a spade with Feral.

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" His comment caught her off guard, actually making her stride falter a little. His voice was calm, emotionless, Feral at his most dangerous.

Most of the Warriors saw him as the sensible one, the guy always around to clean up and organise things when they needed it. But Vixen patrolled with him, had seen him in action against the Rogue. Like most of the Warriors, he fought with bladed weapons. In Feral's case those blades were little more than sharp edges on a heavy pair of knuckle-dusters. Ancient and brutal weapons that came with the Kyn when they crossed into this world. Not many used them anymore, but Feral was lethal with them. A beast as wild as his name lurking under his quiet, 'sensible' exterior.

"How'd you know?" she asked warily.



“You’re wearing a turtleneck. I can count the number of times I’ve seen you in one on one hand. Even in the middle of winter you wear a tee,” he pointed out, startling her with his perception. She hadn’t thought anyone noticed what she did or didn’t wear.

“That and I saw you two out on the terrace the other night. Doesn’t take an idiot to work it out; he’s the only one that puts you in a foul mood on a regular basis.” His voice was quiet in the darkness as he stopped, a hand on her arm turning her to face him. His expression was concerned, his fingers gentle as he peeled the fabric back from her neck to check the healing wound. To her surprise, she let him.

“Not too bad, it’ll be gone by sundown. You’ll be back in your favourite T-shirt by tomorrow. I like the one that says ‘This Bitch Bites’ myself.” He replaced her collar and smiled sadly. “I guess this means there’s no chance for me then?”

“Huh?” She frowned, blindsided by the comment, and looked up at him. Realisation slammed home as she read the truth in his eyes, admiration and sad resignation. “Oh hell. Feral, I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” she managed, her heart wringing for the proud man standing in front of her.

He shrugged. “Don’t be. Should’ve had the balls to say something...just thought you’d notice if you wanted to. Realised a long time ago you wouldn’t...I saw the way you light up whenever he enters a room. Just...if he hurts you I will kill him, okay?”

Tears prickled at the back of Vixen’s eyes for the second time that night, although for very different reasons. She pulled him into a fierce bear hug, too choked to speak. She’d grown up in a one-parent family on the outskirts of the Kyn community. Her mother one of the converted and Vixen displaying the marks of a Warrior, neither had been fully accepted. So Vixen had never known a family. Never had a big brother too look out for her.

“Well now, isn’t this cute?”

So caught up in their own conversation the voice startled both Warriors. Leaping apart, they went for weaponry at the same time. Feral’s hands diving into his pockets whilst Vixen’s went over her shoulders for the heavy blades sheathed across her back.

They were surrounded.

She cursed as she instinctively turned, putting herself back to back with Feral. Her eyes swept the alley. There were figures leaning against walls, crouched on dumpsters and hanging off the fire escapes all around them. Tall, lean figures she recognised instantly, her lips curling back to reveal her fangs as she hissed lightly.

Dressed like street punks, their brightly coloured hair cropped and styled into spikes or Mohawks and covered in the piercings and tattoos of the socially non-conformists. They could be easily mistaken for a standard street gang. But they were something far more dangerous.

“Pixies, why did it have to be bloody Pixies?” Feral’s voice was filled with the same disgust Vixen felt. To be surrounded without realising it was bad, an unforgivable mistake for the experienced Warriors they were supposed to be. But to be caught with your pants down by bloody Pixies was adding insult to injury!

Nastier cousins of the Fae, Pixies were violent, bloodthirsty creatures that lived in packs. Unlike their tree-hugger kinfolk, their ‘Might makes right’ philosophy would have done your average Rogue or warlord-dictator proud.

“Not here to get into a fight, lads,” Feral stated, voice a deep rumble as they stood in the middle of the street, blades drawn and bodies tensed for fight. All senses alert to the first signs of an attack from the Pixies surrounding them. They all appeared to be young men but as with most of the night races, appearances could be deceptive. Pixies were almost as long-lived as the Kyn and retained their youthful appearance well into old age. Simply put, an elderly looking Pixies was like an elderly looking Kyn. Rare as rocking horse shit.

Old looking Pixies might be rare but because of their volatile tempers, pissed off Pixies were more common. A lot more common. Especially if you mentioned toadstools. Thanks to the human fairytales books that depicted Pixies as cute androgynous creatures that sat on toadstools, your average Pixie tended to get somewhat sociopathic if the word was mentioned. Trouble was, it was the word currently hovering on Vixen’s tongue and she was just itching to make a comment.

“Don’t you dare,” Feral ordered, his voice pitched so only she could hear it, well aware of what was going through her mind. Vixen was a wind-up merchant, never missing an opportunity. With a street-load of

Pixies, even though they were massively outnumbered, he knew there was no way she wasn't thinking the 'T' word.

"Spoilsport," she pouted. A good fight was just what she needed to dump some anger from her encounter with Kalen earlier. Warriors on the whole didn't have anger management issues. They just went and beat the living snot out of something, usually a Rogue Vampire, until they felt better. Problem sorted.

"Perhaps we are," a Pixie ahead of them said, with spiked hair a sky blue Vixen knew hadn't come out of a bottle and an armful of tattoos that proclaimed him the leader of the little gang surrounding them. She frowned at the comment. Why would they pick a fight? Even though they were fiercely territorial, the Pixies usually left the Kyn Warriors alone. After all, a Rogue in the area did no one any favours. Her hands tightened on the leather grips of the heavy machete-like daggers she favoured. Something wasn't right here.

"Now why would you want to go and do a thing like that?" Feral asked, his voice soft. Deceptively soft. It was a question Vixen wanted an answer to as well, looking over her shoulder at the speaker with a frown. There were at least twenty Pixies surrounding them, but even with those odds, they had to know some of them weren't walking away from this. If the two Kyn were going down, they were taking as many with them as they could.

However, it seemed the Pixies had their own thoughts on that matter. Her attention diverted over her shoulder for a split second, Vixen almost missed it, catching a brief glimpse of movement out of the corner of her eye. At first, she thought the Pixie by the dumpster was going for a gun, which made less sense than a bunch of Pixies picking a fight. A bullet had no chance of putting down a Kyn before they got to the shooter and ripped his throat out. Hell, even a hail of bullets wasn't going to put one down for long. It was the reason the Warriors fought with blades. Decapitation was the only sure method of killing a vampire, that and sunlight. So any guns the patrols carried were strictly backup and for dealing with other paranormals.

But it wasn't a gun in the Pixie's hand when he pulled it from within his jacket, although it looked like one. Vixen's green eyes widened in recognition as he pointed the device at her and Feral. "Feral! Taser!" she managed to yell, even as the weapon fired, the barbs piercing her jacket and contacting her skin. She felt the metal barbs graze her skin before a thousand volts of electricity poured through them and into her body, tumbling her into darkness.

## Chapter Four

Vixen went from asleep to awake in the blink of an eye, drawing in a ragged breath as the memory of pain, sharp and immediate, surged through her body. The bastard had shocked her! Rather than loading for bear, the Pixies had been loaded for Kyn. Tasers, provided they were military or police spec, were the only things that could take down some Kyn. But not all Kyn were susceptible to the weapon, just some. Feral wasn't bothered by them but she was. Facts started to connect in her sleep-fuddled brain. That street was on the usual patrol route she and Feral took and they'd been carrying tasers. Which meant that there was the distinct possibility that they'd been looking for her in particular. But why? Why would a bunch of Pixies be looking for her?

All this crossed her mind in the split second she opened her eyes and looked up, focusing on...fabric? She frowned, not quite sure what the ceiling was doing covered in fabric. A second later she realised it wasn't the ceiling but rather the canopy of an old style four-poster bed. She sat up in a bolt of movement, looking around for Feral. Where was he? Was he ok? What had the Pixies done to him? With her out of the picture, he'd have been easily overwhelmed. A taser wouldn't take him down but it would hamper him long enough for them to...

He wasn't here. Not in the room with her anyway. She worried her lower lip with her teeth, fangs safely retracted, imagining his beaten and bloody body left in some alley some place. Worry filled her, if he didn't wake up before the sun rose...She needed to find him, make sure he was ok.

Her green eyes swept the room. The bed wasn't the only piece of furniture from a different era. The whole place was furnished with the ornate elegance of a bygone era, heavy dressers and wardrobes to match the bed, surrounding her. If Vixen hadn't known better she'd have sworn that somehow she'd been transported back in time.

"I wondered when you'd rejoin us. How are you feeling?" a smooth voice asked from the other side of the room. Having assumed she was on her own she jumped a little, turning to sweep the half-drawn bed curtain out of the way.

Lounging comfortably in an old-fashioned wing chair by a large fireplace was another Pixie. Unlike those from the alley, this one wasn't dressed as a punk. His lilac hair was shoulder length rather than cropped and spiked, and rather than multiple piercings most Pixies had, Vixen could only see one, a small stud in his ear. Given the period feel of the room, she wouldn't have been surprised to see him in skin tight breeches and a frilled shirt but instead he wore blue jeans and a black shirt. Although simple, Vixen was astute enough, and familiar enough with men's clothing to realise that it was the sort of simple that came with a price tag. All of a sudden she felt grubby in her plain shirt and leathers.

"Me?" she replied. "Oh, not too bad. Just a nagging pain in my side, you know? Like some asshole shot me with a taser, pumped a couple of thousand volts of electricity through my body before I hit the deck...Oh, wait, that really happened," she replied, a hint of sarcasm in her voice as she slid off the bed on the opposite side and watched him carefully.

"Who the hell are you and what did you do with Feral?" She wasn't at all fooled by his pleasant, non-threatening demeanour. Pixies were vicious bastards, rising through the pack by means of brutal challenge fights or otherwise killing off anyone who stood in their way. Legitimate fight or just having their opponent disappear, it was all the same to a Pixie. As long as the disappearance couldn't be traced back to them, it was cool. From the elaborate tattoos on the back of his hands and across what she could see of his forearms before they disappeared under his shirt, this guy was a hell of a lot further up the ladder than the leader of the little bunch that had waylaid them in the alley. Which meant he was someone she didn't need to either piss off, or get taken in by, she decided, doing a quick mental inventory.

Her weaponry was gone, no surprise there. Knocking out and kidnapping a Kyn Warrior was a dangerous undertaking. Unlike Schrödinger's cat, there was generally only one result when they woke seriously pissed off. Therefore, weaponry in the vicinity wasn't particularly good for the abductor's long term health.

He had the good grace to wince at her comment. "I apologise for that. Soran is still young and has a slightly different interpretation of the word 'persuade'. Rest assured he is being educated in the error of his

ways. To answer your question, my name is Markus Lysander and your friend is perfectly fine, at least he will be. Just a little bruised around the edges and will wake up with only a headache, I assure you.”

Vixen didn't reply. She watched him impassively as relief flooded through her. If he was telling the truth, that was. Pixies were known liars. “Is that supposed to make me feel sorry for him? The bastard shot me with a taser! I hope you damn well crucified him!” She spat with feeling, stalking around the bed towards him, her movements angry and unblinking eyes fixed on him. Pixies were dangerous, granted, but so were Kyn, especially the Warrior caste. And none more so than pissed off Warrior bitches like Vixen. Forget Xena, she had nothing on Vix in a bad mood.

“So, handsome...You sent your bully boys down to ‘persuade’ me. Since I’m here and you’re still breathing, I’d say you got my attention.” Whatever game he was playing, she had already had enough of it. In fact, she had had enough of men and their damn games, period! If she was at all that way inclined, she’d probably be considering batting for the other team right about now. But she wasn’t, so she’d settle for beating the snot out of someone. Starting with tall, pretty, and pastel-haired here, if he didn’t give her some straight answers in the next few seconds.

She stalked towards him, her long legs eating up the carpeted distance. She wasn’t aware of it but the roll of her hips as she walked, the aura of danger that clung to her like an expensive perfume were all sheer aphrodisiacs for the man that watched her, his lavender eyes darkening in response as she placed a hand on the arms of the chair either side of him. “So, what do you want?” she breathed, leaning over him. “And I warn you, I reached my bullshit level before nine this evening,” she added, her breath fanning across his neck, stirring the pale strands of his hair.

Markus looked up at her, his throat moving reflexively as he swallowed, obviously wondering if her nearness was a come on or not. It could have been, physical closeness, leaning over him provocatively. Until she smiled, the barest hint of fang at the corners of her lips pointing out how close to his throat he’d let her get. A subtle reminder that he might have taken all her blades away but that she wasn’t unarmed. Not by a long shot.

“You. I want you,” he stated bluntly, arching an eyebrow pointedly. At the same moment Vixen felt a light tapping on her thigh, right over her femoral artery. She looked down, surprised. She hadn’t felt him move. But in his right hand he held a small blade that hadn’t been there before, pressed against the black leather that covered her thigh. A small blade that looked totally innocent, until he twisted his hand slightly. A sickly green shadow moved over the metal. Not a reflection but almost like something was moving under the metal.

A spelled blade.

Vixen went very still. Normally she would shrug off the threat of a blade. Sure he could have cut her femoral artery which would have been painful and given the room a whole new look. But it would take her at least a minute to bleed out and far less time than that to rip his throat out to replace the blood she’d lost. Pixie blood wasn’t her preferred type, like most paranormal blood, it had a hell of a kick and left you with a rotten headache in the morning. However, with the choice of bleeding out or drinking Pixie blood, well, it was a no-brainer.

But spelled blades were a completely different matter. They were dangerous, created by dark magic and bringing everything from true death, even to creatures like the Kyn, right through to stealing souls. In fact, some of the things were even created from souls trapped at the moment of death, usually a violent death.

She looked back up, what he said registering. “Me, what do you mean you want me?”

He smiled, no humour in his eyes. “Wonderful device for focusing attention, don’t you think?” He nodded towards the dagger in his hand. “I have two of them. This is the smaller, Whisper...”

Vixen couldn’t help it. “So what’s the larger one? No, don’t tell me...Shout?”

His lips quirked, proving that he did have a sense of humour. “Actually no, it’s called Midnight. They’re a matched pair.”

“So...Midnight Whisper? Sounds like a dodgy strip joint to me,” she quipped. “But you didn’t answer my question.”

He tapped her thigh again and Vixen obeyed the unspoken command, backing up a little to lounge one hip back against a sideboard near the fireplace. Truth be told, she was more than happy to put some distance

between them. That spelled blade made her as edgy as having her fangs within striking distance obviously made him.

“No, I haven’t,” he replied, still watching her. Almost as though he were looking for something, some sort of reaction. What though, she had no idea.

“You gonna? Or are we gonna stay here all night staring at each other?” she pressed, tilting her head to one side questioningly. It was a very feminine gesture, one she was completely unaware of.

He laughed, a low chuckle that under any other circumstances would have been rather pleasing. Vixen had always had a thing for guys with nice laughs. It said good things about a man who laughed nicely, a proper genuine laugh that crinkled his eyes and everything. That, and a nice backside; she definitely liked a good ass on a man. So working where she did was a dream job. Lots of nice scenery on a daily basis. But the fact that he’d had her kidnapped pretty much negated any attraction his laugh, or his ass, might have held.

“Pushy, aren’t you?” he asked, his smile broad.

“Add impatient and violent to that and you’re bang on, sunshine.”

“And absolutely perfect. Just the qualities I’m looking for in a wife,” he replied. This time it was Vixen’s turn to laugh.

“Well, don’t let anyone tell you you haven’t got a sense of humour,” she said, wiping a tear of amusement from the corner of her eye with a knuckle. Then it dawned on her that he wasn’t laughing. In fact, his amused look had faded into one of cold seriousness that sent chills down her spine. “You’re not joking, are you?”

“Nope, I’m dead serious.” He twirled the small blade in his fingers, the green shimmer flashing with each turn it made. A daring feat considering what it was. Even a small nick would visit whatever effect the blade had on its victims upon him. “Emphasis on the dead part.”

Vixen looked at him for a long moment, utterly still as she considered his words. Her calm look concealed the wariness churning in her gut. “O...k, so I marry you or you kill me?” she asked carefully.

“Pretty much. After all, I went to a lot of trouble to get you here. Surely you don’t expect me to throw all that away because you said no?”

“Might makes right?” she asked lightly, moving around the room and picking up objects at random and studying them. You never knew, one of them might turn out to be heavy enough to smash over his head and knock him out. The question was how she was going to get close enough to him to do it. Because she sure as hell didn’t want to get within range of that blade without knowing what it did. Whatever it was, that sickly green sheen meant it wasn’t gonna be good.

He nodded. “I’m so glad you understand, my dear. There’s also the loss of face to consider. And as Warlord, you can understand I can’t allow that. I must admit, I wasn’t looking forward to this conversation at all. Only a fool would look forward to being locked in a room with an angry Kyn.”

Vixen’s eyebrow winged up at this interesting snippet of information. Whatever else he was, she had to admit he had guts. She wouldn’t want to be shut up in a room with an angry Kyn either. Whilst his Pixie heritage might have protected him from being turned into a vampire, it did buggar all to protect him from being dead. Which led to another interesting point.

“So what’s to stop me marrying you and very quickly making myself a widow? Like say, on the wedding night?” She asked with a grin, flashing her fangs to remind him.

“Have you ever seen a Vampire defanged?” he asked lightly. “It’s quite a simple procedure but I’m told it’s intensely painful.”

She blinked, all the colour leeching from her face as she tried to hide the fear that wound its cold fingers around her spine. Defanging, through an accident or purposely, was one of the worst things that could happen to a Kyn. Thankfully, as a punishment amongst the Kyn it was rare now, reserved only for the worse offences. With no way to feed naturally, a defanged vampire would quickly weaken and die unless a blood supply, something like a blood bank or the like, was established. More than that, as her encounter with Kalen earlier had proved, biting and being bitten was all part of the sensual experience of lovemaking for the Kyn.

“I see you get my point. Perhaps we don’t need to go quite that far though...” he said quietly, standing as there was a hammering on the door. “Bloody imbeciles! I told them I didn’t want to be disturbed!” he snapped, striding over to the door and flinging it open to reveal the Pixie from the alley earlier. “What?”

Sky blue eyes flicked from Markus to Vixen. “Boss, we got a problem. The Kyn are here.”

Markus’s voice was irritated. “So? Why is this a problem? The barrow won’t let them in, we’re safe.”

“Uhm, yeah, there’s a slight problem there. They brought a Warden with them. They’re waiting for you in the main hall.”

## Chapter Five

A few minutes later Vixen followed Markus into the main hall of the barrow, two Pixies with determined expressions at her back making sure she didn't decide to take a little walkabout of her own. Not that there was any fear of that, if the Kyn were here she wanted to be where they were. It was her best shot at getting out of here.

Despite the situation, she stopped for a moment in sheer awe as they entered the hall. The room she'd woken up in and the corridors were fairly mundane, appearing to be something out of an old manor house. So it was easy to forget they were in what basically amounted to a small section of Faery, albeit one tethered permanently to the human world. But here in the hall, majestic columns supported a high ceiling decorated in a breath-taking mural depicting the history of the barrow. Only Pixie murals weren't quite the same as the mundane human ones, being virtually a real time account of the events they recorded. As she watched, a vicious battle raged across the ceiling, Pixies fighting goblins and all manner of other creatures. Including other Pixies. In fact, a hell of a lot of other Pixies.

A startled intake of breath brought her back to the present and she looked around. At the other end of the hall stood Marak, surrounded by the largest bunch of Warriors Vixen had ever seen in one place. Well, that she'd ever seen in one place not arguing anyway. Instead, they were all looking her way in concern. Next to Marak Kalen started to take a step forward, only to be stopped by the King's large hand on his arm.

Vixen blinked, surprised to see Marak. In fact, she was surprised to see so many Warriors congregated in the room. Marak must have cut his honeymoon short she realised, feeling both guilty and touched that he'd come to her assistance. And there at the back was Geran, the guy she'd swapped patrols with so he could spend time with his mate, as well as others she knew weren't rostered on tonight.

A warm feeling settled deep in her chest, warming her heart. Bless them, they'd all come to her rescue. And she thought no one liked her, total bitch that she was most of the time. Finally she found the face she was looking for amongst them. Feral looked more than a little worse for wear, covered in cuts and bruises, one eye swollen shut and an arm in a sling. Regardless he stood tall, his no nonsense expression not boding well for the Pixies around them. She knew without asking that any Pixie that crossed Feral in the future was going to get the snout beat out of it.

"Well now, we are honoured. I didn't expect to see you gracing our humble barrow, your highness," Markus said smoothly, nodding towards Marak. The two men, King and Warlord, eyed each other up, both obviously used to this sort of game. Marak inclined his head, ignoring the vaguely insulting tone Markus had somehow managed to inject into his voice.

"When one of my Warriors goes missing..."

"You mean kidnapped!" A voice Vixen recognised as Kalen's snarled, only to be interrupted by another.

"Shut it, K, let Marak do his thing before you open your trap."

"... when one of my Warriors goes missing," Marak repeated, slightly louder as he cast a sharp look at Kalen. "Then I'm all over it, wherever I need to be. Obviously I'm interested in resolving this matter as soon as possible."

"Oh, you hear that, sweetheart? Your old boss wants to 'resolve the matter'." Markus smirked, draping an arm over Vixen's shoulders. She stood rigid, well aware that he still had that spelled blade on him. But where? Thanks to Pixie sleight of hand, she hadn't seen him put it away, had no clue where he'd concealed it. Nor, more importantly, how quickly he could have it in his hand. Knowing Pixies though, it would probably be within a heartbeat. Which was the only thing keeping Vixen from just snapping his neck where he stood.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he carried on, false regret colouring his voice as his eyes sparkled. Pixies loved danger and there was nothing more dangerous, or more suicidal, than baiting a bunch of Kyn Warriors. "You've had somewhat of a wasted journey. You see, Miss Vixen here has already agreed to become my wife," he said smoothly, smiling smugly at them.

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"Bullshit!" The comment was snarled in more than one voice, at least four Warriors starting forward at the same time as Kalen. Marak held up his hand, stopping them in their tracks.

That Pixie was a dead man. Kalen's eyes, normally the colour of warm chocolate, hardened as a muscle in his jaw jumped irritably. Fury surged through him like a tidal wave, battering aside all the defences of logical reason as he focused on the hand resting across Vixen's shoulders. But first, he decided, he was cutting the bastard's hands off for daring to touch the woman he loved.

*Whoa! Where did that come from?* He blinked, that thought shocking him. Not the hands thing. That was happening anyway. If not Kalen, there were at least ten Kyn around him with the same intent shining in their eyes. But he was calling dibs on it by dint of his relationship with Vixen. Could years of sniping and two steamy encounters be counted as a relationship?

Yes, it counted. It definitely counted. His sniping over the years had been a defence mechanism. After his ex-wife, he had vowed off women, off love. But Vix had been a threat, he saw that now. His sub-conscious had tried to shield him from it, trying to keep her at arms length. It hadn't worked though.

He loved her.

He held that discovery to himself for a moment, feeling the warmth spread out from his heart to fill every cell of his body. His eyes sought hers, their green filled with worry and fear. He smiled, reassurance in his. They were getting out of this, simple as. He wasn't going to let anything else happen.

"Vixen, is this true?" Marak's voice brought Kalen back to the present and he turned, awaiting Vixen's answer with interest. There was no way she'd agreed to this, not of her own free will anyway. If she had, the Pixie had something held over her. Kalen's hand tightened on his hilt, if he'd hurt her in any way...

But she didn't get a chance to answer, Markus interrupting as she opened her mouth to speak. "I say it's true and in my barrow, my word is law," he said, his eyes glittering dangerously.

Kalen knew what he was about. Challenge. To disagree with a Pixie Warlord on their own turf was suicide, unless you formally challenged them, according to Pixie law. Trouble was, what the average Kyn knew about Pixie law was roughly the same as what Kalen knew about women's cosmetics. In other words, jack shit.

"Oh buggarit, I just knew this was going to happen," a female voice grumbled. Kalen turned slightly as the petite woman standing almost un-noticed next to Marak stepped forward. He'd not understood why they'd had to stop and pick up a Warden en-route, frustrated by the delay in getting to Vixen. But he had to admit, she'd already proven her worth getting them into the place with her mystical mumbo-jumbo.

"Who is this?" Markus demanded, only to be fixed by a steely look from the young woman, who looked like she'd been dragged from her bed with little more time than to throw on a pair of jeans and a jacket. Which was true as it happened.

"Look, you, I'm knackered, I've had less than an hour's sleep and I'm really hoping to get home in time to get some more before I have to get up, ok? So keep the chatter to a minimum and let's do this thing," she snapped, a tone of authority in her voice that impressed even Kalen, who'd spent years hearing the same tone from Marak. "Right, according to the laws passed by Nemain, Mistress of the Hunt and Lady of the Dark Court, to which all lesser courts, including this one must pay homage, we...meaning the Kyn Warriors in this room and myself...do formally challenge you ...Warlord Markus Ryan Lysander...upon the matter of the kidnapping and current detention of the Kyn Warriress known as Vixen." The warden's voice was calm, even slightly bored as she rattled off the challenge in what appeared to be the correct format if the reaction of the Pixies in the room was any indication. To a man, they'd gone from bored and nonchalant to attentive and interested. Hell, Kalen could almost feel the excitement in the air as they watched Markus, waiting for his reaction as she carried on.

"Furthermore, we challenge you to a trial by physical combat to be held within the appointed challenge circle of this barrow. The winner of the trial shall be defined as the person that draws first blood from his opponent. This trial shall be between only two combatants, we shall name our own and you shall do likewise. This need not necessarily be yourself but must be a Pixie belonging to your pack. Likewise, we shall name a Kyn Warrior in the room to be our champion. As the challenged, you may specify type of weaponry. Do you understand the terms of this challenge as I have outlined it?"

Bloody hell! Talk about tying a man's hands behind his back! Kalen shot the Warden a frown as she outlined the terms. First blood? What did she think she was playing at? For a Kyn Warrior it wasn't a good fight unless you were bleeding from at least a dozen cuts afterwards. And in one fell swoop she managed to



remove one of his advantages. Like most Kyn, Kalen could take an awful lot of damage in a fight, a fact he often used to get close to his opponent so he could finish them off.

“So I can’t kill the bastard then?” he growled, blades leaping to his hands in an instant, a murderous gaze fixed on the Pixie Warlord. He didn’t bother to ask who the Kyn were naming for the fight. It was a moot point, it was going to be him and that was final. Even if he had to put the rest of them out of action beforehand!

“No, you can’t. The bout is to first blood only and don’t piss me about on this one, Kyn,” she threatened, a no nonsense look in her eyes. Wardens obviously didn’t appreciate being woken up in the middle of the night to join rescue parties storming Pixie barrows then. “I have no qualms about turning you into something unpleasant for a few hours. Now, my Lord, do you accept this challenge?” she asked, turning towards Markus.

He smiled. Not in amusement but a small and unpleasant little expression that triggered a warning prickle at the base of Kalen’s skull as he said, “Oh, most definitely, Lady Warden. I think your pet Warrior there has the right idea, my choice is blades.”

Vixen paled at Markus’ words, the tone in his voice telling her exactly what was going through his mind. “Crap! Kalen, he has a spelled blade!” she warned, which earned her a sharp look from the Pixie Warlord. “Now, now, my dear, that wasn’t nice,” he chided, tightening his arm around her neck for a second. “Completely ruined my little surprise.”

Vixen ignored him, stepping away as another Pixie approached carrying a sheathed blade. The spelled blade, it had to be, given the wary way the younger Pixie was handling it, backing up in relief when Markus took it from him. In a single movement he drew it, discarding the sheath on the floor and holding the blade up to the light. She shuddered. Like the smaller blade, Midnight had that aura of wrongness about it, a malevolent sheen across the metal that reminded her of something moving underneath it. Like it was alive.

She sought Kalen, eyes locking onto him. Standing on the other side of the room, he looked as calm and unruffled as he normally did. His twin blades already in his hands he rolled his neck, a movement she’d seen hundreds, if not thousands, of times before. Oh god, he has to survive this....Please let him be alright, he has to be alright, she chanted in her head, a pleading litany.

“If you’ll all step back to the edges of the circle please,” a new voice asked politely, a Pixie Vixen hadn’t noticed before pointing out the design in the marble of the floor. The challenge circle. The place Kalen would risk his life to save her. “Only the two fighters are allowed to be in the circle during challenge,” she said, smiling slightly, a sad look in her lovely eyes. Not much was known about female Pixies and now Vixen could see why. Delicate in build with an exotic fae-like appearance, she had deep chestnut hair rather than the bright colouring that characterised the male of the species. A small glamour and she could easily pass for human. No doubt they did and that was why no one had ever ‘seen’ a female Pixie. They probably had and just didn’t realise it.

Vixen bit her lip as everyone did as instructed and stepped back from the edges of the circle, the sharp tang of blood almost un-noticed in her worry. She needed to be in there, do something. Not just stand around like some damn wallflower straight out of a gothic novel. Her agitated fidgeting drew the attention of one of her Pixie guards, one that resembled Markus too closely to be anything but family. He raised an eyebrow, tapping a finger against his wrist sheath pointedly. She recognised the hilt of the dagger there, Whisper. Markus had obviously anticipated and planned for a reaction from his captive.

The two men, Pixie and Kyn, stepped into the circle. It was easy to see from the way they moved that violence was nothing new to them. Neither bothered with flashy moves or showy displays like twirling their blades around, and both already had their blades drawn. It took longer to draw a blade than to get hit by one, and in this kind of fight, you needed every advantage you could get.

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Kalen kept his body loose and his breathing light as he circled his opponent. The slightly musty, earthy scent of the barrow hall filled his nostrils, reminding him unpleasantly that they were underground some place. Bizarre, for a vampire anyway, Kalen had a fear of being buried alive. The expression on his face was deadly

serious rather than his usual jovial expression. Sword fighting was a deadly game, even without the threat of a spelled blade. You needed all your wits about you just to stay alive, never mind win the thing. Above all, he had to stay loose, relaxed. If you were tensed up, you couldn't react as quickly. And not being able to react as quickly as your opponent in a fight had a very predictable outcome. It got you dead. Fast.

Tension mounted with the silence in the room as the two circled each other. They hadn't exchanged a single blow yet. Kalen was just watching, assessing as he circled the other guy, the world beyond the edges of the circle ceasing to exist for him. He knew from long experience that he needed total focus. The outcome in a sword fight was often decided within seconds, sometimes with the first serious blow of a fight. He watched the Pixie, eyes alert for the way he moved, noting everything. Even the way the Pixie kept his weight slightly on his right leg as he moved, perhaps indicating a right handed dominance.

"She was quite right, you know, this is a spelled blade," Markus said softly, his voice oily as he feinted towards Kalen, testing his reactions. Sword steel clashed briefly for a second before the Pixie broke away. Hell, he was fast! But then Kalen had expected that. After all, you didn't get to be a Pixie Warlord by being slow or inept in combat.

"No shit, Sherlock," Kalen replied nonchalantly. The ominous colour reflecting from Markus' blade was enough to tell him that. Spelled blades tended to be easy to spot because of it, the dark magic involved usually leaving a visual marker of sorts. Nearly all spelled weapons were created by dark magic, apart from a few notable exceptions. After all, not many people were willing to volunteer their souls to power the things.

Another feint and a flurry of blows were exchanged, each over almost as soon as it had begun. Kalen kept to the defensive, side-stepping the Pixie's attacks where he could and conserving his energy as he studied Markus' technique. The bout was to first blood, which was bloody typical of a Warden. He'd never heard of one that actually carried or used a blade, other than for ceremonial purposes, not even members of their 'fighting' wing, the Battle Wardens, did. Even so, if Kalen saw an opening for a killing shot he was taking it. Compassion and chivalry were all wonderful ideals but in combat it boiled down to one simple truth. The fighter willing to be merciless was the one that walked away from it alive. Besides, a couple of hours as an amphibian was well worth it to rid the world of an irritating Pixie.

His defense was ironclad as Markus tested it again. "It doesn't kill you, you know...well, not straight away. It devours your soul and when that is gone...well, there's nothing left but an empty husk. A mindless vegetable. Mind you, how desperate you lot are for kids, they might put up with you dribbling down yourself and use you as some kind of freakish sperm donor. Or a conversation piece," Markus taunted, grinning as he spun away out of reach of Kalen's blades again. He was enjoying it. That was obvious in his eyes. Markus was sure he'd gotten the measure of his Kyn opponent.

Kalen ignored his insults, not even indicating he'd heard them. Cocky and arrogant, he knew Markus was just trying to get an edge on him, make him nervous about the spelled blade he was swinging in glittering arcs. Nervous enough to perhaps make a mistake. Which wasn't happening. He was far too long in the tooth, literally, to fall for amateur tricks like that.

"It took the last guy nearly twelve hours to die, you know?" Markus continued with glee, not noticing as Kalen subtly shifted the flow of the pacing. So instead of Markus pacing after him, he was stalking the Pixie. "He was crying for his mommy near the end. Got so irritating we had to cut his throat. Didn't kill him, just stopped the damn noise."

"Is that so?" Kalen asked disinterestedly. Up until now he'd simply been defending, watching the Pixie test his reactions and given the guy several false tells, things like favouring his left knee slightly as though shielding an old wound. Something the Pixie would try to capitalise on when this got serious, expecting it to be weak. Only to find it wasn't.

Finally, considering he'd seen enough of his opponent's technique, he'd definitely heard enough from him, Kalen launched his own attack. He moved in an explosion of movement, power bunching in his powerful muscles as his twin blades danced through the air. The deadly movement of razor-sharp steel, never stopping, never slowing, took the Pixie by surprise, making him gasp and back-pedal to the edge of the circle. Markus blanched, reading his own death in Kalen's dark eyes and blocked as though his life depended on it.

It did.

But the fight was already over, Markus just hadn't realised it. The tines on Kalen's off hand blade snarled the Pixie's sword, sliding along the spelled steel and catching. Kalen grinned as he forced the other man's hand down, leaving Markus wide open. Defenceless. The Kyn Warrior moved like lightening, bunching his fist around the hilt of his sword. Still holding the blade, he rolled his body, twisting at the waist to deliver a powerful uppercut. The heavy blow smashed into Markus' jaw, Kalen's knuckles clipping his nose, and had him staggering backwards. Kalen stepped back, a satisfied smirk on his face as he watched blood gush from the Pixie's nose. He hoped it was broken.

“That, I think you will find, is first blood.”

## Chapter Six

He had been beaten. Disbelief surged through Markus as he sat on the floor, a cloth pressed to his throbbing and bloody nose. How could this have happened? He couldn't have been beaten, it just wasn't possible! This wasn't the way he planned for things to go! The damn vampire should be on the floor dying, his soul being leeched out through whatever injury Markus' superior swordsmanship had inflicted. But he wasn't, the Kyn had used his fist! *Cheated!* Everyone knew you didn't use your fists in a swordfight!

The thoughts chased each other around in Markus' head as he looked up, watching his opponent walk away with an arrogant swagger. Fists shouldn't be used in swordfights, he glowered, which meant the Kyn had cheated and that first blood hadn't been drawn. Which meant the fight wasn't over...not yet. He rose to his feet, murder in his eyes. It had been a mistake, the cheating Kyn hadn't beaten him. It was his barrow and he was all powerful here, the best Warrior. He had to be...

Relief poured through Vixen as Kalen stepped back, still hyped up from the fight and dancing lightly on his feet as he grinned down at the defeated Pixie on the floor. Elation filled her, what a typical move! She had always known Kalen was unconventional, but who said first blood had to be caused by a blade?

Vixen, still penned in by her bodyguard armed with the second spelled blade, saw the movement as Markus rose to his feet. She couldn't see his face but there was something about the way he moved, the set of his shoulders, that set off alarm bells in her head.

Then everything happened too fast to think again. She was already moving as Markus' lunged for his dropped blade, screaming a warning to Kalen. He started to turn but she could see he wasn't going to block in time. Barely aware of her actions she dropped her Pixie guard in a lethal explosion of movement to writhe on the floor, curled around his groin in his own private world of pain. She launched herself across the circle, time slowing as she moved, fear lending wings to her heels.

Shock and horror crossed the faces of the Kyn Warriors watching on the other side of the circle, their faces contorting as they yelled warnings she couldn't hear past the thunder in her ears. Yelling warnings to Kalen. The tall man already turned with his blades half out their sheaths as she hit him from the side, a solid body-slam that threw him off balance and out of harm's way. Putting her right in it. All the air left her lungs in a rush as Markus slammed into her, the sword he carried piercing the skin of her belly and sliding deep with a fleshy sound.

It didn't hurt.

She looked down, watching with absent fascination as thick red blood oozed around the edges of the metal buried in her flesh. It should have hurt but it didn't. There was just an aching numbness spreading outward through her body from the wound. A coldness as the curse on the spelled blade started to devour her soul.

Markus froze, his lavender eyes wide as he looked down at his hand. And the sword in it, following the path of the steel until it disappeared into Vixen's abdomen. "No!" he breathed, his voice breaking, "It wasn't supposed to be you, it was supposed to be him!"

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"Oh God! Vix, no!" Kalen's voice was ragged. A tormented moan dragged from deep within his broad chest. He wrapped his arms around her as she staggered. She sagged against him, her legs suddenly buckling at the knees, unable to support her weight and giving way beneath her. She gasped at the change in position as he lowered them both to the floor, her hands tightening convulsively around the weapon buried deeply in her stomach as the rest of the Kyn gathered around them.

"Someone grab that son of a bitch Pixie," Marak growled, his eyes filled with a fury that softened into concern as he looked down at Vixen. It was an order most of the Kyn Warriors seemed more than happy to follow, several setting off after the fleeing Pixie, their expressions grim.

Vixen scrambled for Kalen's hand as she felt him tense behind her. "Please, don't leave me," she begged, her voice a whisper as exhaustion hit, scared he was going to join the hunt for Markus and she wouldn't last until he got back. Already she could feel the cold fingers of death clawing at her, leeched the very life, her very soul, from her. She was so cold, so sleepy. If she just shut her eyes for a moment...Alarmed,

she jerked her eyes open. Somehow, she knew if she closed them, succumbed to the tiredness that washed over her, then it was all over.

“Promise you won’t leave me,” she whispered again, her eyes searching, finding Kalen’s face. It was filled with concern, emotion. Perhaps even love? She thought hopefully. “I don’t have much time. I can feel it spreading already.”

“It’s ok, I’m here. I’m not going anywhere, I promise.” His voice was thick as he held her in his lap, his strong arms wrapped around her tightly. So tightly she normally would have complained he was hurting her. Now though, she could barely feel it as her body grew numb.

She nodded, revelling in the feeling of being held, closing her eyes for a moment as his hand smoothed her hair gently back from her face. “Kalen?”

“Yes Vix?”

“I love you,” she said softly, opening her eyes to judge his reaction. Pain crossed his face, an expression gone almost before she’d seen it. She knew her chances weren’t good but that look confirmed it. He didn’t think she had a chance either. Surprisingly, peace stole over her. She’d always known she was going to die, had assumed it would be at the hands of the Rogue like so many other Warriors. A painful and noble death. At least this way it was peaceful and she got to tell the man she loved that she did, in fact, love him. Could say goodbye. So many Warriors didn’t get to, so she felt blessed.

He smiled, lifting her hand to kiss the soft skin of her palm. “Save your strength,” he whispered back. “Tell me later, when you’re better.”

“Kalen, I’m not going to get better. I’m going to die,” she said bluntly, the two of them locked in their own private world, not paying any attention to the crowd around them. “I just wanted you to know before...” She couldn’t bring herself to say it, just trailed off and looked at him.

“Know what? That you love me?” His lips curved into that lopsided grin she’d fallen for all those years ago. “Of course you do, what woman wouldn’t?” he joked, his expression dropping serious as he added, “I know, I love you too, sweetheart, always have. Why do you think I was always taking the piss? To get you to notice me, talk to me. That and you’re gorgeous when you’re mad!”

Vixen chuckled, the movement causing a coughing fit, the spasms robbing her of breath and leaving her in pain for long moments before it subsided. “I should have guessed,” she said finally, “Only you would piss someone off because you fancied them. But I didn’t mean that.”

“Fancied the pants off actually,” he corrected. “If you didn’t mean that, what did you mean?”

She smiled sadly and held out her wrist for him to see. Or rather, so he could see the new mark there that curled lovingly around the delicate skin. He stilled, his eyes widening a little, a stunned expression entering them as he studied the mark in her skin. “That’s a bondmark.”

Her lips quirked. “Way to go, Captain Obvious,” she teased gently. “It appeared earlier, when I realised how I felt about you.”

His arms tightened around her, a low moan in the back of his throat. “Oh hell, Vixen!” he muttered brokenly.

“It’s ok,” she said, trying for soothing but managing tired. She closed her eyes, another wave of exhaustion washing through her and stealing the strength she had left. She couldn’t muster the strength to lift her eyelids again, dropping further into the blackness that washed up to claim her, her own voice seeming further and further away. “It’s better...better this way. Not good...enough for you...”

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Kalen felt the instant her body relaxed, went slack against his and he knew he was losing her. A moan of anguish escaped him as he clawed her to him, desperately trying to shake her awake. Bring her back to him. “No, Vix, wake up! Stay with me!” he pleaded, not caring that the tears flowed down his cheeks in bloody streams. He couldn’t lose her, not now. Not like this.

“Please, you have to do something!” he begged, looking at the one person in the room that might be able to do something. The Warden.

Her eyes were grave as she knelt down next to him, her hands already moving, hovering a few inches over Vixen’s fallen form. Her lips moved soundlessly, some sort of incantation as her eyes unfocused. Some sort of incantation...hell, she could have been reciting her damn shopping list for all Kalen cared! As long as it

helped Vixen. Hope coiled in his chest as he watched her. He had to have faith. Wardens dealt in magic on a day-to-day basis, worked with it, knew more about it than anyone.

But that hope was crushed when she shook her head, opening her eyes to look at him sadly. "I'm sorry," she said, reaching out to touch his hand. "But it's already started. The only way to try and stop it would be to offer another soul in place of hers. But even so, that might not work. It could take both."

"Try it anyway," another voice growled. "Use his!" Kalen looked up as Feral and another Kyn frogmarched a struggling figure back into the hall, throwing the Pixie Warlord Markus down on the floor.

"No! You can't do that!" the Pixie argued, stark terror in his eyes. "That's cold-blooded murder!"

"What do you call that, if not murder?" the Warden asked sternly, her voice echoing with the power of her calling as she motioned toward Vixen's barely breathing form. Before he could answer, she shook her head, sighing regretfully as she addressed Marak and Kalen. "Much as I think he deserves it, it would be murder and I can't do that. Not even to save a life. The only way it would work is with a willing soul."

Feral smiled, a nasty little expression that sent chills up the spines of the Kyn around him as he fingered the blades hooked onto his belt. "Five minutes and I guarantee he'll be willing," he promised.

"I'll do it," Kalen said quietly, his voice a bare whisper as he leaned down, pressed a gentle kiss into Vixen's blonde hair.

"I will not allow you to torture him. Not while I'm her... What did you just say?" the Warden asked, catching the end of Kalen's sentence, holding her hand up for silence as the room erupted around her, all the Kyn trying to talk at once.

He looked up as silence fell again, resolve in his eyes. "I'll do it," he repeated, his eyes steadfast as they held hers.

"You do realise it'll kill you?" she asked, something in her eyes as old as time and he knew he was speaking to a Warden in her full power. Although she was still a young woman, would be considered a child still had she been Kyn, the power she channelled was ancient. It showed.

He nodded. "I do," he said firmly, not flinching or looking away as he became the focus of intense interest from everyone in the room. He could feel their eyes on him as they waited for the Warden to speak again. But it wasn't the Warden who spoke next, Marak beat her to it.

"K, are you sure about this?" he asked, concern and worry colouring the deep timbres of his voice.

Kalen nodded again, looking up to meet his King's gaze. "I've never been more sure about anything in my life." His voice echoed around the silent hall, conviction ringing in the words.

"If she dies, I'll be meeting the Rogue," he added, a term used for the ritual suicide of a Warrior who was too close to the edge, too far into blood rage to do anything but take their own lives on a sort of suicide run. If Vixen died tomorrow, Kalen would arm up for his last patrol; spend the night hunting Rogue in their lairs until they overcame him through sheer weight of numbers. If by some slim chance he survived the night then he would meet the dawn, seeing his first ever sunrise at the very moment the sun's lethal rays killed him. He turned Vixen's wrist out, displaying the bondmark against her paling skin. Already she was as cold as the grave. "I can't live without her," he said simply.

Marak nodded silently, his silver eyes troubled but he didn't argue Kalen's decision. He had a bondmate and he lived with the fear of losing such a precious gift himself. Relief and gratitude filled the tall Warrior as he turned his attention to the woman kneeling next to him and Vixen.

"Well, Warden, will my soul be acceptable?" he asked. "Freely given as it is."

She shrugged, "We can but hope. All I can do is perform the ritual and then it's in the hands of the Goddess. The decision rests with her."

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Kalen sat quietly, rocking Vixen gently in his arms as the Warden... Maribel, that was her name, he remembered absently... as Maribel made arrangements around them. He whispered softly to the woman in his arms, even if she was unconscious. Wasn't hearing the last thing to go when you died? He hoped so, because if this all went bad he wanted the last thing Vixen heard was his voice telling her all the things he couldn't when she was alive. Pain crossed his features as he realised he was already thinking of her as dead. Somewhere deep inside he wasn't sure either of them were going to survive this. It wasn't something he could fight, hit with his fists, or a sword and kill as he'd faced all the problems in his life. And Kalen felt lost, unsure of himself...

He opened his eyes, watching as the Warden drew a magic circle, her hands swift and sure as she traced the sigils in the air with the ease of long practise. With his Kyn-enhanced vision, he could just see the edges of the sigils as she activated the circle, a brief flare of magic that faded quickly.

Then she was standing over him, smiling softly with a serene expression on her face. "We're ready for you two now," she said, blinking a little as Kalen easily rose to his feet, despite the weight of Vixen in his arms. The movement startled a little chuckle out of her. "I always forget how strong you guys are sometimes." She reached forward, her hands gentle as she checked Vixen's vital signs. "We have to move quickly, she's fading fast. I need the blade removed before you enter the circle."

Kalen nodded, his first instinct had been to remove the blade but experience with combat wounds had stopped him. Very often a foreign object stuck in a wound was plugging the blood loss to a certain extent, at least that's what he recalled from the few First Aid lectures the Warriors had gotten from the doctors who regularly attended them.

Although to be perfectly honest, most of what they'd been taught was mainly designed to keep someone alive long enough to get them back to the compound. If all else failed, they could always open a vein. Shove enough blood down a vampire's throat and they could pretty much heal anything. Well, except your soul being eaten by a cursed sword. They hadn't taught them much about spelled blade injuries. The entire lecture on spelled weaponry had been short and sweet. Something along the lines of 'Don't try and be a hero, run the fuck away!' Kalen hadn't wanted to remove it for fear of Vixen bleeding out to boot, a complication they really didn't need to add to the situation.

"I'm gonna need a little help here," Kalen admitted, finding Marak already at his side as he gently hefted Vixen's weight in his arms, tucking her head into his shoulder. "Ok, now," he murmured, holding her tight as the other Warrior's large hand closed on the hilt of the blade, easing it from Vixen's stomach. To Kalen's surprise, it slid out easily, with a fleshy sound that turned his stomach. He paled, feeling green.

"K, you're not gonna pass out on me are you?" Marak asked with concern, handing the blade off to the Warden, his other hand already out to steady Kalen.

"Not a chance," Kalen assured him, tightening his grip as he checked Vixen's stomach for fresh bleeding. Her Kyn physiology had already reacted to being wounded, slowing her heart rate down until the bleeding was nothing more than a sluggish oozing of blood from the gash in her stomach.

Nodding to the Warden he walked over to where they'd prepared the circle, waiting until Maribel waved him through before stepping forwards. As always, when he stepped into a magic circle, there was a slight shiver over his skin, as though someone had blown a soft breath over it. Over all of it. He shuddered slightly, feeling a wave of goose-pimples rise and fall as he headed for the centre of the circle. He turned to face the Warden as she settled herself cross-legged on the other side of the chalked border. Over her lap lay the spelled blade, now carefully wrapped in someone's jacket, just the handle showing over her knee.

Feral's jacket, Kalen realised, looking up and finding Vixen's patrol partner right behind the Warden, his face tight with worry. Always the sensible one, who else there would have thought to protect the Warden from the bite of the spelled blade? The last thing they needed was for her to fall to its spell!

"If we're all ready, I'll start," Maribel said softly, looking around once before she closed her eyes and started to chant. Her voice, sweet and melodious, filled the chamber. The language she spoke wasn't one Kalen knew but it resonated deep in his soul, something within him recognising it as ancient. He could feel the power building up in the room as she started to trace more symbols in the air. Each one flared mellow green, a green that made him think of nature and late summer nights for a few moments before they faded from view, only visible to the non-magical for the first few seconds as Maribel called them into existence.

The pressure within the circle built. An infrequent flyer, Kalen swallowed and wiggled his jaw from side to side to try and release it, trying to equalise the pressure. It didn't work. The pressure continued to build into near pain before it started to affect his vision. A shimmer started up at the edge of the circle, in front of the Warden as she chanted, like the shimmer in water when saltwater met fresh and everything became hazy.

He watched as it spread, the forms of those outside the circle becoming indistinct as it raced around the chalked line until it completely surrounded them. He swallowed, looking up as it raced overhead as well,

completely sealing him and Vixen within it. Without asking, he knew it went under the floor as well, a complete sphere of magic. Crap, he really really hoped that Warden knew what she was doing!

Then the circle...sphere, whatever it was, snapped closed with a sonorous clang and everything paused for a moment. Something was coming. He knew it, could feel it on the air. A sort of expectation.

There was a word, clear as a bell. A word of power, ancient and mystical. Kalen had no idea what it was, but as soon as Maribel said it, everything shimmered like a bad special effect out of an old Sci-Fi show. It grew into a glare, making him squint and close his eyes against it.

When he opened them the circle was gone, the hall was gone. In fact, everything was gone. He stood on a woodland path, in broad daylight. Born Kyn, it was a sight he'd never seen and he looked around in awe. The colours were so bright, so beautiful! His eyes wide he spun around, only realising there was someone behind him when his eyes fell on a tall figure.

The Warden. But not as he'd ever seen her before. He'd guess not as anyone had ever seen her before. The witching made up her armour-clad form, more an astral projection than a physical manifestation. The green of her magic shaped it, gave the witching form and weaving to make up the amour and mail she wore, even woven through her long hair. In her hand she carried the spelled sword. Midnight, the wind whispered in his ear as she moved, holding out her other hand. In it she held a small ball of light. Kalen frowned, stepping forwards. "Is that...?"

"All that remains of Vixen's soul," Maribel said softly, her voice quiet but terrible. It held the baying of the hounds as they hunted, the howl of the wolf and the clash of metal as a thousand battles were joined, as a thousand men died. Kalen's eyes narrowed as he looked at her. "You're not fully human," he accused. No human sounded like that, no human should ever sound like that!

Her lips quirked slightly, "I never claimed to be," she replied with a shrug. "Where do you think Wardens get their power? Try as the council might to deny it...our power doesn't come from our human blood but humanity's ability to breed with things that aren't," she said with a wink. "I guess my great-great-great grandmother got busy with something that went bump in the night. We don't tend to think about what though...sounding like this, it doesn't make for easy sleeping, if you get my drift,"

The comment and the self-deprecating look on her face startled a chuckle out of the tall Kyn. "No, I guess not. I'll admit, I certainly didn't expect it. I'll not look at a human quite the same way again, wondering what's under that delicate exterior."

"Mostly, just plain old mankind...sorry, humankind," she corrected. "Sometimes though, even Wardens get a shock. Now, enough talk, you got a job to do, Mister. Here, take this," she said, handing him the small orb of light. Already it looked duller, almost...

"It looks sick," Kalen commented, the orb fitting into the palm of his hand easily. As soon as he touched it, it pulsed weakly as though it recognised him, nestling against his skin as though even that effort had exhausted it.

"It is, and getting sicker. Soon there'll be nothing left. You have to hurry," Maribel urged, turning him around and pointing along the path. He followed the path as it wound through the trees with his eyes. Up ahead the trees petered out, beyond it he could see the gentle rise of a hill. "She's waiting for you up there, I can't come with you, it's not my time," she said, her eyes kind. "But you'll be fine, go ahead..."

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The next moment, Kalen found himself taking the last few strides towards the top of the hill and the small temple standing there. He paused for a moment, turning to look back the way he'd come. He couldn't remember leaving the Warden or walking out of the woods. One moment he'd been speaking to her, then the next he'd been here. Almost like thinking it had made it happen.

"Ok, now that's freaky," he murmured to himself, glancing down at the precious burden he carried. The orb's light was almost gone now, the glow at the centre almost invisible in this light, only slender threads running over the surface like veins helping him to pick its form out. For an instant he wished it were night so he could see it clearly. He smiled slightly, sure it would look beautiful in the darkness of night, even diminished like this. He looked up, renewed purpose in his eyes, and stepped into the temple.

It was almost empty, no furnishings inside, nothing on the stone bench inside other than a few old leaves obviously left over from last fall. On the other side of the room, looking out of the window sat a young girl.



Unlike the Warden's astral form, this girl seemed as solid and real as Kalen did. A mere slip of a girl. Kalen had the bizarre impulse to ask whether her mother was at home.

"You could try, but as I don't actually remember my mother, that could be somewhat of a problem," she replied, turning to face him with a smile, her voice as terrible as the Warden's had been. Kalen froze for a moment, startled by such ancient eyes in such a youthful face. Like Maribel's had been when he'd glimpsed the power within her but a thousand times worse. Then he realised he hadn't actually spoken.

She smiled, "Of course, all my granddaughters carry part of me within them," she said, her eyes unfocusing for a moment as though in thought. "Ahh, Maribel...her journey is just beginning. A difficult journey but that tends to happen to the powerful ones. And you don't need to speak, here mere thought is sufficient."

"Granddaughters?" Kalen couldn't stop the question that sprang immediately to his lips but then the weak pulsing of light in his hand brought him back to his reason for being here. He held the orb out.

"Please..." he began and faltered. What did you call a Goddess? Because he had no doubt the creature stood in front of him was a deity and as Kalen avoided religion like an arachnophobe avoided spiders, he wasn't sure what the approved method of communicating with one was! "Please, my Lady," he settled on, seeing the small quirk of her lips and realising she was reading his predicament easily, and held out Vixen's failing soul.

She rose, taking the small soul-orb from him with delicate hands, cradling it in both of hers as she looked at it. Her bow-shaped lips pursed thoughtfully. "A soul. The soul of the Warriress Vixen," she said quietly, looking up at him. "Her journey is almost over. Why do you bring this to me?"

Fear froze Kalen's heart in his chest. What did she mean Vixen's journey was almost done? It couldn't be! "She's my bondmate, my Lady...Please, I can't let her die," Kalen said humbly, dropping to one knee before the slender figure of the childlike goddess.

She arched her eyebrow, an imperious look on her young face. "You can't let her die? Why...what do you think you, a mere Kyn, can do to avert the will of the Gods?"

Kalen bit his lip. He was going to fail. Vixen would die and there was nothing he could do about it. Coldness seeped into his heart. "Nothing, my Lady, except to beg you to take my soul in place of hers," he said quietly, his shoulders slumping in defeat. Head bowed, he didn't see the brief look of surprise, then calculation that crossed the Goddess' features. "You would offer your soul, why?"

Kalen looked up, hope bright in his dark eyes. "I love her. I would rather die so that she could live."

The Goddess nodded and wrapped her hands around the faltering light in her hands. Kalen gasped, starting forward, scared she was trying to snuff it out, the urge to snatch it back strong. "And if I refuse?" she asked, still watching him.

His response was calm as he stood and looked down at her. "Then take mine as well. I would rather share her fate, whatever it is, than live without her," he said, his head held proudly. Silence stretched between them, the two powerful beings...a Kyn Warrior and a Goddess matching each other look for look. The tension tore at Kalen's nerve, at his very will as the impulse to scream and rail at her grew with each second.

She smiled. Darkness started to close around Kalen and tears filled his eyes. He had failed. Defeat crowded into his heart, crushing him, leaving him empty. Then her voice whispered in his ear.

"A soul offered willingly for love is a rare thing, Warrior. Perhaps rarer than you realise for one demon-born. Live your days with your Warriress, and may the child she carries be the first of many."

## Epilogue

"I swear to God if you ever touch me again, Kalen, I'll rip your hands off!" The irate female voice filled the small room and filtered out into the corridor beyond. Kalen, one hand currently being crushed in what felt like a grip of iron, managed a small smile and brushed the hair back from his mate's face.

"You're doing great, sweetheart, just one more push and it'll be all over," he promised, a promise he'd been making for the last hour in the vain hope that it would be true sometime soon and save his hand a mangling.

"One more push!" Vixen, currently in her umpteenth hour of labour and way past a sense of humour failure, bellowed. "How many more damn 'one more pushes' d'ya want?"

"Nearly there, Vixen," the midwife, who'd seen it all before said calmly from the bottom of the bed. She might not have attended a birth where both the mother and father were Warriors before but she was more than used to dealing with near hysterical fathers of all descriptions. And one yelling mother-to-be didn't phase her one little bit.

"That's it, one long push," she encouraged, as Vixen gritted her teeth and bore down, the pain racking through her body spiralling as she pushed. Then the midwife moved...both parents waiting with their hearts in their mouths. A strong wail split the air in the quiet room and the midwife looked up, her face wreathed in smiles.

"Congratulations, you have a little girl. And from the looks of these marks, you have another Warrior in the family."

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 eleven, 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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