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DARK EMBRACE

Tryst
MINA CARTER

Dark Embrace by Mina Carter

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By

Mina Carter

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Dark Embrace

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Dedication

To Will, Doug, Jake and Charlotte.
The best support group a writer could ever have.

Chapter One

“Married? You've got to be fucking kidding me!”

The rich sound of male laughter rolled through the large room in response, like cream through strong coffee. At one end of the chamber, majestic in its shadowed decoration, paced the owner of the voice. He was tall, a looming figure almost merging into the darkness. He turned suddenly, his silver gaze sharp as he glared at the man still chuckling as he lounged in the chair opposite the roaring fire.

His companion just shrugged, not at all fazed by the deadly look he was receiving. Like most of the warrior caste Marak, sixth monarch of the Kyn, was well known for his violent and unpredictable temper. He flopped down in the chair, raking long fingers through his close cropped hair in frustration and glared at the fire moodily.

“This can't be happening. Freaking politicians,” he muttered, not caring the other man heard the bitter note in his voice. His best friend from childhood and a fellow warrior, Kalen's family was nearly as old as Marak's own and their blood nearly as blue.

“Sorry, mate, you heard the man,” Kalen said bluntly. Earlier that night they'd sat in the Royal Hall, listening as Lord Elsveth, leader of the Lord's Council, relayed the concerns of the council over everything from the cost of decent daylight shielding these days, to the view that the warrior caste were dinosaurs, then went straight for the jugular about the fact that Marak still had no heir.

“They want an heir, which means *you* need a woman. I love ya,

man, but not that much," Kalen drawled, his deep voice full of humor as he watched Marak fidget. His annoyance at the situation he was being forced into and the trap any idiot could see was coming, translated into movement. The rasp of leather whispered in the room as he shifted and crossed his leg over his knee, lounging in the large chair with the indolent grace inherent to all vampire-kyn.

"So...the Lady Kassandria doesn't catch your interest?" Kalen asked with amusement, rising and striding over to the large sideboard to one side of the fireplace. He lifted one of the decanters in a long fingered hand, swirling the contents in the heavy glass as he looked enquiringly over his shoulder at Marak.

Marak nodded, leaning his head back and closing his eyes as a wave of tiredness and hopelessness washed over him. He knew his duty and he'd known this day was coming. The king needed an heir, the line needed to continue through his children...his sons. He wasn't conceited enough to think he may be lucky enough to sire a daughter on any woman, not with how rare female children were. What was the saying? 'You're not a man until you've had a daughter'. He smiled without mirth, his eyes still closed. It was peaceful in the dark, the warmth of the fire on his face like the warmth of the sun he'd never seen, only imagined.

"She's a very beautiful woman," he admitted simply, watching as Kalen inspected the decanters at the bar. Born with the distinctive warrior marks adorning the left side of his face and most of his body, Kalen was silent as a cat when he moved. And a sneaky bastard to boot, Marak admitted. Many times he'd have been a goner, fallen to the Rogue if Kalen hadn't had his back.

"But?" Kalen demanded, his voice suddenly closer. Marak opened his eyes to see the warrior stood over him, holding out a heavy tumbler of amber liquid.

"But what?" he asked, reaching out to take the glass but Kalen held onto it for a moment, his dark eyes unreadable.

"I can hear the 'but' there. She's beautiful and that figure would tempt a saint! Heaven knows it wouldn't be a hardship to bed her. Hell, if I had a shot at her I'd start a damn nursery!" Kalen said, finally relaxing

his grip on the glass, frowning at Marak. "So what's the deal?"

Marak threw the contents back in one move and sucked his breath in as it burned all the way down to his stomach. "She's not my bond-mate. I don't have one," he said, his voice slightly husky from the alcohol.

"And?" Kalen asked, clearly puzzled. "Bond-mates are rare, have been for centuries. Why else do the courts watch the humans, looking for the mark?"

Marak grunted. He knew the answers to that as well as Kalen did. The Kyn were the descendants of twelve demon-warriors who had crossed into the human dimension, the last survivors of a bloody war that had wiped out their race. At first, things had looked good for the Kyn, great in fact. Their new home had magnified their natural abilities and food was plentiful, living in the open rather than hiding in the perpetual shadows, the humans terrified of anything that looked even vaguely Kyn-like. And some of the humans could be brought over into the night-world, be made Kyn, providing much needed women for the race to continue. The icing on the cake though had been discovering some of the converted were bond-mates. Rare and cherished women, they were literally born as the other half of the warrior they were destined for. And a treasure the demon warriors thought they'd left behind them in the dying ruins of their home.

But then things took a turn for the worse. Vilan, one of the twelve, fell victim to Blood-Rage, a devastating condition that all their kind flirted with once they reached adulthood. Marak shuddered slightly. It all started so innocuously...the ever present temptation, just a few swallows more. Then it was a slippery slope into blood addiction and there was only one way to go from there. Rogue.

Vilan had gone Rogue without warning, killing his mate and disappearing into the night, his trail long dead by the time the other warriors realised what had happened. But his presence was still felt. From Vilan rose another breed of vampire, the Rogue—vampires without the moral codes of their Kyn brethren, creatures only interested in the rush of the hunt, and the high of the kill.

For generations Marak and warriors like him had been trying to

wipe them out, to protect both human and Kyn alike. However, the Rogues knew as well as the Kyn did that there were humans that could be converted. So they converted indiscriminately, killing when one of the converted showed a bond-mark. Useless to the Rogue, their deaths denied the Kyn precious fertile females, a grievous loss as throughout the years less and less children were born, always more male than female. The scientists amongst the Kyn theorised that it was something to do with the demon DNA of their ancestors, DNA that wasn't supposed to exist in this realm, and was failing gradually.

Marak sighed, the enormity of his race's situation bearing down heavily on his broad shoulders. He tapped the empty glass against one leather clad leg, the hefty tumbler looking delicate against his large hand. His eyes focused on it. He was king but his hands were more used to killing, marked with heavy calluses and bearing a myriad of small scars. Some quirk of fate somewhere and he'd been born with the warrior's marks over his face and body, sealing his fate twice over. His lips quirked in amusement as he traced the edge of a holster strap over his thigh. He was suited and booted for a night out on patrol with Kalen and the lads. Not for them the pale, languid romanticism of vampires in the human books and films. Which was good, because Marak sure as hell wasn't Brad Pitt. He was something altogether more dangerous—a Kyn warrior in the prime of his long life.

He put the glass down and rose in one lithe movement, the demon blood in him expressed in a fluid and predatory movement. "Move your ass, K. We need to hit the streets."

The rest of their patrol was waiting for them by the time they hit the compound—a small group of low rise buildings tucked away at the back of the estate, close grouped as though for protection. Unlike the rest of the estate, built in Marak's youth centuries ago, these buildings were squat and utilitarian. Heavy-duty shutters adorned the windows and doors, operated by remote from the control room deep inside, as much security as protection against sunlight. Behind them, strengthened steel bars sat behind the windows, preventing access should someone be lucky enough to actually get through the shutters. Lucky enough or stupid

enough; anyone that got inside was then going to be facing Kyn warriors. Averaging around six foot five and a couple of hundred pounds apiece and each with years of combat experience, any intruder would have to be seriously suicidal.

Marak swept in through the doors, unlocked and open to the night air at this time of night, his tall figure wrapped in an ankle length leather coat that swirled around his powerful figure. A black polo and leather pants with black shit-kicker boots completed the ensemble, reinforcing the 'bad-ass' image Marak did so well.

"You're late," a voice announced shortly from the back of the room, as their driver ceased his pacing to glare at the new arrivals. Tall like the rest of them Feral was built along the same lines as a small tank, massive muscles corded in his heavy frame. The lines of his warrior's mark were deepest blood red, startling against the ivory of his skin. "We should have been out an hour ago," he said, sweeping a hand over his shaved head in agitation, his eagerness to get out and start kicking Rogue ass obvious.

"The other teams left just after sundown. Mikal said to tell you he's got your lazy ass nailed," he added, jerking a glance towards a wipe board in the corner of the room, where the patrol teams recorded nightly kills—some friendly, but mission specific, competition. Marak didn't care who took down the most Rogue, as long as someone did. But it helped the teams bond and when you had a couple of dozen warriors, all with independent and highly aggressive natures, that was something he really needed them to do. Otherwise they'd start taking their aggression out on each other.

"Noble prattle," Marak replied with a shrug, completely disregarding the fact that a couple of the guys, he and Kalen included, were nobles themselves. Here it didn't matter. They were warriors first. "Gotta listen to them, or they get their panties in a bunch."

"That and they want pretty boy married off so he can father a posse of brats," Kalen added helpfully, earning himself a glare from Marak as he slid past. Feral looked at Marak with interest. No one but Kalen could get away with calling their leader 'pretty boy' but all the warriors knew the constant battles Marak had to run with matchmaking mothers and

enterprising females with an eye on being the next queen.

"So...which vision of loveliness are they offering on the sacrificial altar?" The question came from the back of the room, from a lounging figure dressed similar to Marak and every other guy in the room. Except this figure filled the leathers out a little more in certain areas than the rest of them.

Shit, the last thing Marak wanted was to get into a pissing contest tonight. Not with Vixen, the only female Warrior on the team, possibly in existence. Especially not over female rights in the Kyn world. Although most of the Warriors in the room outweighed and towered over the lady-warrior none of them, including Marak, wanted to take her on in a fight. Tall for a woman, easily topping six feet, with the distinctive Warrior markings tracing over her left temple and cheek, Vixen was every young Kyn guy's wet dream. Like the rest of them she was dressed in black, ready to hit the streets, the t-shirt almost scandalously tight over an impressive rack, and her leather pants virtually sprayed onto her curvy hips and ass. Even some of the warriors in the room watched her out of the corners of their eyes, appreciation on their faces, when she wasn't looking. Which wasn't often. Vixen was as sharp as a cut-throat, and as deadly.

Marak looked her in the eye, his expression indicating he wasn't about to take any shit. Not tonight. Not when they were already late for patrol. "Kassandra of House Santien," he replied simply, watching Vixen for something, anything. Until Vixen female warriors had been unheard of, and all the guys trod a bit carefully around certain times of the month now.

"Stacked," was Vixen's reply, the faintest hint of contempt in her voice. "And brainless. She'd be good for sex, but if you want good conversation you'd do better moving in Ugly over there," she commented, flipping her hand in a gesture towards Kalen.

"Bite me, bitch," Kalen threw over his shoulder, busily arming up from the large weapons locker in the corner. Only his and Marak's weapons were still in there, the rest of the small arsenal the locker had contained already secreted about the bodies of the rest of the patrol. "You

wish!" she snarled back without looking. It was a ritual the two of them had been going through for years.

"You two finished the sweet talk?" Marak growled, his patience wearing thin now. "Because the Rogue are gonna think it's damn Christmas with no warriors busting their asses out there!"

"Yeah, we're finished," Kalen replied. "Blondie's too chicken to admit she fancies the pants off me." He grinned as Vixen, predictably, flipped him a hand gesture.

"Fuck you, K," she snarled, and stomped out the door.

Feral sighed and threw a long-suffering look at Kalen. "I wish you wouldn't *do* that! I'll be scraping freakin' Rogue gore off all night now," he said with resignation, his head bowed as he set off after his patrol partner, obviously hoping to calm her down a little before they hit any action.

Kalen chuckled, and turned back to Marak. "What?" he asked, catching the disapproving look in his king's eyes. "She likes me. Really!" he protested.

"Yeah right, just tone it down a little. Last thing we want is psycho warrior-bitch to flip out on us without any Rogue to point her at, ok?" Marak rumbled, heading for the weapons cabinet and calmly starting to tool up. It didn't take him long, speed born from long experience, and within minutes he and Kalen were headed outside to where a black SUV with darkened windows awaited them.

"So." Kalen stopped Marak from opening the front passenger door with a hand, his dark eyes alive with interest. "What you gonna do about the lil' woman issue?"

Marak sighed in frustration, having an inkling now of how Feral felt earlier. Once Kalen had hold of something the Kyn was like a damn terrier. "Hell, I don't know! I'm not marrying Kassandria for sure. She's a nice girl and all, but I'm not gonna be dictated to," Marak replied grimly, annoyance on his face. "I pick my own woman, not have her picked by some jumped up lord. Would serve them right if I took the first woman I see out there as mate."

Chapter Two

Maria wasn't scared. Not scared, definitely not scared. A little apprehensive maybe... Yeah, apprehensive was a good word she decided as she walked along the darkened streets, her hands thrust deep into her pockets. Who was she kidding? She was scared out of her mind and trembling like a damn leaf!!

The petite half-vampire paused for a moment at the edge of an alley, opening her senses into the inky darkness beyond the reach of the street lights. Nothing. The alley was as dead as the rotting fish she could smell, no doubt the purloined contents of someone's bin dragged down there by some enterprising moggie. She shivered slightly. She hated cats. Their damn scary eyes and way of staring at you just sent shivers down her spine.

Mentally ticking off the alley as dead, she moved on, scenting the night air as she hunted her prey. It was unusual for a woman to be walking alone at night, particularly on these streets but then Maria wasn't your average woman. Not for either of her species. Neither a Kyn nor a human woman would have felt comfortable out here in the night. A human because, despite the derogatory comments she often heard about her mother's race, they had highly developed survival instincts. Deep down they *knew* there were nasty things that prowled in the darkness. And not a Kyn woman because they were all locked up nice and tight, safe in the bosom of their families, precious commodities to be bartered in marriage.

Maria's small nose wrinkled in distaste. It had taken her long enough to gain her freedom, even though she was only half vampire. She'd argued with her father time and time again that no Kyn in his right mind would want her for a mate; so little was known of half breeds. As far as Maria knew she was one of only three Dhampir to survive to adulthood. Usually the mixture of human and vampire was a sickly one, easily susceptible to childhood diseases. Of the other two, one had been a knight hundreds of years ago and little was known about him other than he was half human and he'd died fighting the Rogue. The other had been Maria's little sister, Annabel, and the reason Maria hunted.

The next alley proved as fruitless as the last so Maria moved on again. She was beginning to think her prey, the Rogue, had all decided to stay in tonight with a nice mug of cocoa... bit of a break, rest and relaxation after all the slaughter and mayhem.

A small snort escaped her throat. Yeah, she could just see your average blood-maddened Rogue cozying it up opposite a roaring fire, tartan slippers and good book optional extras. The only time the Rogue would appreciate a fire was to roast their victims on. Her full lips compressed, although that didn't really give her the bad-ass expression she was unconsciously hoping for. At five foot nothing and weighing about as much as a wet kitten Maria was best described as 'cute'. Long dark hair curled itself lovingly around her small heart-shaped face, a face dominated by large dark eyes framed with inky lashes. She'd definitely missed the queue for 'bad-ass', especially in the looks department, despite the fact she was in head-to-toe black leather a la Kyn Warrior. In attitude though, she was streets ahead of 'bad-ass' and heading into 'bitch' territory.

Usually.

Right at this moment her knees were knocking together so much she was amazed they weren't transmitting her location via some sort of freaky Morse code to any Rogue that might be near. At the thought her small hand closed tight on the daggers concealed within the deep pockets of the jacket. Bring it on, she vowed silently, bitterness flowing through her. One of those bastards had killed her baby sister. Annabel had been

just thirteen, out on a trip to the cinema when she was snatched. The momentary lapse of attention of a guardian and two of the girls in the group had disappeared in the blink of an eye. They'd found her of course. Maria's father and his knights had spent night after night tracking the Rogue, hunting them to retrieve the girls.

But they'd been too late. For either of them. Annabel's friend, fully human, had been converted. She was beyond hope, the corruption of the Rogue blood in her veins had already tipped her into blood-madness. It happened that way with forced conversions sometimes. Like a rabid dog, Maria's father had been forced to order her execution; there was no way they could return a creature like that to a human family.

Annabel however was another story. She was half-Kyn and it was well known that the Ravensford Lord had two Dhampir daughters. She'd been bled dry, reduced to a blood slave and her mind shattered. Two weeks after she was brought home she committed suicide. Two minutes after seeing her sister laid out, peaceful and serene in death, Maria had sworn revenge on the Rogue. As a whole, all of them. As an entire race her breaking heart wanted to wipe them out for good.

So her plan was born. It had taken a lot of planning to get here. She'd had to convince her father, already grieving for one daughter, that she wanted to try living in the human world. Get a job, support herself, that sort of thing. A year later she'd finally bugged the crap out of him enough that he let her, swearing he was going to get no peace until she got her own way. Which was more or less the truth. Once Maria got a bee in her bonnet about something she just kept on and on about it, until people either caved in. Or went insane.

So now she had a comfortable little apartment in one of the better areas of town. She suspected the rent was being subsidized by her father and she was fairly certain one of her father's Knights swung by her place at least once a night to check on her. Which was cool, she'd installed timers on her lights and had a top notch security system fitted as well as paying for some heavy-duty magical protection from the local spell-warden. There was no way anyone was getting in to see whether she was in there or not.

“Oh hello, what do we have here?” she murmured under her breath, her sharp eyes catching a glimmer of movement in her peripheral vision.

She was being stalked.

Instantly adrenaline hit her system like a hyper-active kid’s sugar rush and she gripped her blades with renewed purpose. Grim determination and death, the Rogue's death, sparkled in her dark eyes. She carried on down the street, not changing her pace or giving any indication that she'd seen her little friend at all.

The black leather jacket swathed her slender figure, hiding the hardware she was carrying—blades in the deep pockets, ready in her small hands. Another set nestled in the sides of her high boots, and she was carrying in a shoulder holster. It was a good job she was half vampire, with the ability to cloud human minds, because if the human cops lifted her like this she really didn't want to explain why she was dressed up like Bride of Blade.

As she walked she looked for somewhere quiet for this to go down, the automatic need to hide knowledge of the Kyn from humans strong in her. She knew this was what the Knights and the Warriors did. Hunted Rogue and covered their tracks so the humans didn't put two and two together and actually start making four. The last thing her race needed was humans hunting them again. Not with the Rogue already on the case.

She headed for an alley a little further down the street, casting ahead with her senses, all her instincts on alert as the possibility of a trap occurred to her. The Rogue might be flushing her towards more of its kind. But the alley came up clean, staying that way as Maria approached. The Rogue must be working alone. Not unusual, they were highly dangerous and unpredictable creatures. It wasn't unknown for them to attack and kill each other. An all out Rogue slaughter-fest.

She reached the entry to the alley and the light tingle at the back of her neck warning her she was being followed got worse, the roar of the Rogue behind her loud as he attacked. But Maria was already moving, a year of intensive martial arts and other combat training taking over as she moved with the speed of the Kyn deeper into the alley.

The Rogue overshot and hit the wall, turning to glare at her. His red eyes burned with rage and feral interest. "Well, well, what do we have here? You ain't human, little pretty," he snarled, unable to speak properly for the fangs that filled his mouth, elongated, ready for feeding. Ready to rip her throat out.

"Bright one, aren't you?" Maria replied, with a nonchalance she didn't feel as she stood in the middle of the alley. Her stance was text-book, ready for any attack the Rogue might make. One hand had already swept down the front of her jacket, the edges of the leather hanging open to give her easy access to her weapons.

The Rogue paced, eyeing her up. "You smell human," he growled, obviously a little confused with that fact and the speed Maria had just displayed.

"Yeah? And you smell like a day old corpse," she replied, wrinkling her nose a little at the smell. Her voice was calm but inside she was screaming for him to get on with it. She didn't want conversation with the Rogue, she wanted to kill it!! Cutting its black heart out was as much interaction as she wanted. Period. "Listen, I'm on a schedule here so can we cut the deep and meaningful and just skip ahead to the part where I kill you?" she asked, a bored edge in her voice.

Surprisingly, to Maria at least, her nerves seemed to have completely disappeared, leaving just emptiness. And focus. She slid her hands out of her pockets and cocked a small eyebrow at the Rogue. It looked stunned for a moment, the fact that she wasn't screaming and trying to get away not computing for a moment. Then it roared and charged.

Chapter Three

The woman was dead. Deader than a dodo. Or maybe a lemming, they were more given to suicide. Because a human facing off against a Rogue, even a newly converted one like this, was total suicide. Marak sighed, time to play Good Samaritan. He looked up and whistled to get Kalen's attention. The other warrior crouched on a roof a couple of blocks away, watching the street below. When he looked up Marak cocked his head down at the alley and leapt lightly down, the three storey drop nothing to him as he landed as light as a cat.

"Ok, did I miss something?" Kalen asked as he reached Marak's side, only to stand just as dumbstruck as his friend, watching the little scene in the alley. Where the human female, the one Marak had expected to have to rescue from the deadly embrace of the Rogue, was busily slugging it out with the damn thing. "Huh... Warriors come in pint-size now and nobody told me?"

Marak didn't answer, shaking his head in disbelief as he watched. He'd expected the woman to be on her back in the filth, her vein opened as the Rogue drank her dry. That's what usually happened. Only it wasn't. The tiny woman was kicking ass and taking names. For a human she was fast as hell, dancing around the Rogue and delivering punishing blows that would have incapacitated a human easily. Since the Rogue was newly turned, he still had shakes from conversion sickness. He was having to suck up the damage. It wouldn't last long though. Marak had fought more than enough Rogues to know once he was steady on his feet the woman,

even as fast as she was, was toast.

"Cute though, nice ass," Kalen commented, folding his arms and he leaned against the wall, his eyes on the fight. Abruptly a surge of jealousy ripped through Marak, a snarl rising from the middle of his broad chest, his silver eyes still locked on the petite woman. She was his, and he'd rip the arms off any male that touched her.

Woah! Where did that come from? Marak blinked in surprise. He didn't do jealous, his sexual encounters were brief and to the point; one-off's. With women who had no idea who he was, just thinking that he was a warrior.

He tensed, about to wade into the fight when it happened. The Rogue moved, a flash of movement with all the speed of the Kyn race. There was no way the girl was going to avoid it. "Shit," both men breathed, realising the danger in the same instant and reacting like lightning. But even as they were drawing weapons, Kalen's twin blades were already in his hands as Marak's katana slid from the spine sheath, the Rogue was faster, and nearer to his target. They weren't going to make it in time!

The Rogue bore down on the tiny woman, knocking her block aside and lashing out with its deadly claws. Her scream echoed in the narrow alley as the claws tore through the soft skin of her throat, a terrible sound that trailed off into a gurgling. Spinning from the impact, her hands flew to her throat, pressing against the terrible wound as she staggered away. The Rogue went to follow her, instinct driving it to finish the kill, but registered the two warriors, turning and roaring at them. Its blood red eyes glowed in the darkness of the alley as it tracked the two big males, turning to try and keep both in sight as they circled it.

"Com'on, handsome, how about you take on someone your own size?" Kalen drawled, his blades spinning in his hands, lazy circles of deadly steel.

The creature hissed, its eyes darting from one to the other and then past Marak to the woman slumped against the wall. The source of the tantalising scent lingering in the air. "Mine!" it spat, launching itself at Marak, target obvious.

The Kyn-Warrior King moved without warning, one moment standing unflinching in the face of the Rogue's charge, almost nose to nose with the creature as it roared. The next instant his blade flashed through the air, a deadly glittering arc. A surprised look crossed the Rogue's face as an ever widening second grin opened along its throat. Marak didn't spare it a glance, not even bothering to watch as lines of ashy corruption spread outwards from the wound, rapidly spreading across and consuming the Rogue's skin. There was no blood even when the head fell away from the body, a body which was dust before it hit the ground.

"Shit," he breathed, sliding the katana away in a practised movement and kneeling by the fallen woman. She was tiny; a crumpled figure against the wall, her skin pale against the darkness of the brick. Rich chocolate eyes locked onto him as he approached, still tracking movement despite the thick blood now oozing sluggishly from her ruined throat. Her heart beat stuttered, loud to Marak's enhanced hearing, struggling to pump the blood which no longer filled her veins.

Guilt hit him like a speeding truck. This was his fault. He should have been quicker, nailed the damn Rogue as soon as he'd seen it. Not idled about and watched her fight it. Fighting Rogue vampires was a Warrior's job, not one for a cute little human female. He cursed under his breath, feeling helpless as the light in those beautiful eyes began to dim.

"She's not gonna make it, man. Want me to call in Feral and Vix for a clean up?" Kalen's voice sounded nonchalant behind him. Just another body to clean up, business as usual. Marak frowned, something inside him unable to leave it like this. She'd been beautiful, unafraid as she'd battled the Rogue. He ignored Kalen, hauling the woman's body into his arms. She wasn't gone yet, she couldn't be. This was his fault and he would put it right. He *had* to put it right!

"Marak, what you doin', man?" Marak ignored the alarmed query as he tore his wrist open with his teeth, ancient and powerful blood running from the wound as he held it against her mouth. In the same second, his extended claws tore her clothing from her shoulder and he struck, driving his fangs deep into her soft flesh to drain whatever blood was left in her.

“Holy *crap!* Man, you really don’t wanna be doing this! Shit, the Council’s gonna have my hide for sure now!” Marak closed his eyes, feeling the surge as her blood hit the back of his throat, ignoring Kalen’s panicked voice as the warrior paced, pulling a cell from his pocket and dialling rapidly. “Feral, pick up. Com’on, you ugly bastard, pick up. Feral? It’s K. Listen, man, we got one hell of a situation going on down here. I need you and Vix here stat.”

Marak was lost to the world, his fangs buried deep in the female’s throat, his own working powerfully as he drained the last of her blood. The instant it touched his lips, the instant he tasted it, he was in heaven. Hitting his body like a shot of vodka-laced type A, sheer pleasure coursed through him. Moaning he pulled her limp body closer, terrified she was slipping away from him. *Come on*, he urged silently, *don’t give up on me now*. Then, slowly, she started to respond, her lips moving against the open wound on his wrist. Marak let go a sigh of relief, a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding. She was feeding, slowly but getting stronger. It wasn’t long before she clamped on, survival instinct from the few swallows of his powerful blood driving her.

He withdrew his fangs, sliding them from her neck and gently closing the pinpricks with a stroke of his tongue. He sat back as her small hands held his wrist to her lips and she drank deeply, the feel of her little teeth in his flesh sending shivers of pleasure along his spine. He tightened his arms around her, keeping her in his dark embrace as she drank from him, blood that would save her life. And convert her to Kyn.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall, chuckling to himself. *Oh Lord, I’ve gone and screwed the pooch completely on this one, haven’t he?* The evening had started off with the Council telling him he should get married and was ending with him converting a human, after he’d joked about taking the first woman he saw as a mate. And he couldn’t even claim ignorance. He’d known the petite woman resting in his arms could be converted. He’d seen it in those beautiful eyes as they’d started to dim, and he’d done it anyway.

“That’s enough, little one,” he murmured softly, prising her from his wrist. She mewed in protest, trying to hold onto the source of life

giving fluid, her grip surprisingly strong for the newly converted and nipping him in the process. He caught his breath at the tiny bite, her teeth sharper than he expected. His cock twitched, surged to life between them. He bit out a curse, suddenly extremely uncomfortable, as much at the lack of control as at the erection. Hell, she'd been bleeding out on him a few minutes ago and now all he wanted to do was the horizontal tango! *You are a sick man, Marak, get it together*, he told himself in disgust.

Finally he managed to prise her from his wrist, easily overpowering her weak efforts to recapture it, and sealed the wound with a quick lick of his tongue. "Hush, sleep now, more later, I promise," he told her, using a compulsion to nudge her into sleep, her mind open and responsive to his thanks to their blood exchange. He gathered her into his arms and stood. Too much blood on a first feeding wasn't good for her. All she needed at the moment was enough blood to kick-start the conversion process and sleep for her body to repair itself, sloughing away her humanity even as it healed the grievous wound the Rogue had inflicted.

She murmured something, not a protest, more a sound of contentment as he shifted her closer. The breathy little sound and the way she nestled against him, snuggling trustingly into his arms, chipped away at the wall of loneliness around his heart. He looked up, finding not only Kalen looking at him like he'd grown another head but Feral and Vixen as well.

"Want me to take her? You look like you could do with some of the red stuff," Kalen said, already stepping forwards with his arms outstretched to take the unconscious woman from Marak.

A snarl reverberated around the alley, rumbling from deep within Marak's chest, his eyes flashing dangerously. "Mine," he growled, the sound low, almost animalistic. To a man—or woman, in Vix's case—the patrol stepped back. Most people stepped lightly around Vix when she was mad but that was standard stuff. If she hadn't threatened to rip someone's balls off at least once a week she was sickening for something. But Marak, he was a different matter. The big Warrior King was even-tempered, his temper usually held in rigid check, so the sheer rage in

his eyes at Kalen's suggestion had them all backing off. Fast.

"Leave him be, K. I'm sure a big strapping lad like him can carry a little thing like that without needing help," Vix said. "Besides he's already got blood on him and I don't wanna listen to you whine about your cleaning bill all the way back to the compound." She laid a warning hand on Kalen's arm, a surprise in itself. Vixen rarely touched anyone. Not voluntarily.

The trip back to the compound was mercifully short, the three other Kyn watching Marak out of the corners of their eyes as he cradled the petite form of the woman to his chest. His large hand smoothed over her hair soothingly, murmuring soft nothings in high Kyn, the ancient language of their demon-ancestors. He avoided their eyes, looking out the window of the SUV until they pulled through the ornate gateway, the heavy steel gates closing automatically behind them.

"Up to the main house, Feral," Marak ordered, pulling the catch on the door almost before the heavy vehicle had crunched to a halt on the gravel outside the main doors. He climbed from the vehicle, careful of his burden, and headed up the steps. The stone arch of the mansion's ornate façade all but dwarfed the leather-clad warrior, a doorway more suited to the elegant dressed nobility of a bygone era than a Kyn Warrior carrying the bloodstained form of an unconscious woman cradled in his arms. And one Marak completely ignored. He'd been born in the century it had been built, was used to the trappings of his position. They'd ceased to impress him years ago.

Leaving the guys at the door Marak headed inside, scattering human servants before him as he stalked through the corridors, a dangerous look on his face. Most of them had been with Marak's family years, born into families who had served the Kyn for generations, and were well used to the moods of the various Kyn at the court.

Striding into his bedchamber, he shut the door with a swift kick and moved through the darkened room to lay his unconscious burden gently on the bed. Frowning he looked around the room, realising how dark it was in the room. He had the advantage of excellent night-sight, granted by his demon blood, but she was still human until the conversion

kicked in. He didn't want her scared waking up in the dark. Reaching over he snapped on one of the lights on the bedside table. Had he ever used it? He wasn't sure. If it weren't for the look of the thing he'd have moved down into the compound with the others years ago. But he was king, as the Council insisted on reminding him whenever they could corner him long enough, and he had to 'keep up appearances'. Usually though, he spent the minimum amount of time possible here, spending most of his time training in the compound, or on patrol. He shrugged to himself; it kept him out of the way of the damn politicians, which was a win-win situation as far as Marak was concerned.

At the moment though he was glad he had rooms like this. She would be more comfortable surrounded by luxury. He looked down at her, wondering where this odd need to see to her comfort had come from. She looked so fragile lying there against the deep-red silk and he shuddered, his heart lurching again as he realised how close she'd come to the edge. He reached forwards, smoothed the dark hair from her face.

"Now why does that matter so much, little one? Why should I care about one suicidal human?" he mused, studying her features. Small and delicate they reminded him of someone but he couldn't place who, the feeling of familiarity too vague to pinpoint.

"Let's make you more comfortable, shall we?" he said quietly, starting to undress her. The leather jacket was ruined, slashed at the collar to allow him to get at her throat earlier. He didn't bother with the sleeves, extending his nails to talons and just slicing along them before sliding it from her sleeping form. Her boots and socks quickly followed along with enough weaponry to arm a couple of warriors. Good quality stuff too. Marak's brows snapped together in a frown as he considered the little pile on the nightstand. Just what the hell was a human female doing out there hunting Rogue in the first place?

Marak shook his head; it didn't make sense. She couldn't have been the victim of a Rogue attack, since she was still alive. Rogue didn't leave survivors, often killing entire families in one go, and she wasn't wearing a family sigil so she wasn't from one of the Seneschal families. Slayer? Marak's lips compressed on a smile. No, he couldn't see even that bunch

of weirdos taking on a woman so unsuited for a life of violence such as this. Buffy may have made great TV, half the Warriors down at the compound were addicted to the re-runs, but it was a far cry from the brutal reality of vampire slaying. That's what Marak and the Warrior caste were for and even then they had a battle on their hands.

He moved, big hand caressing her throat where the grievous wounds were healing, little more than red marks across her creamy skin. She'd need to feed again soon, more blood to carry on the healing process and continue the conversion. Marak gritted his teeth as his body responded eagerly, instantly hard at the memory of those soft curves pressed against him and her small fangs in his wrist. He closed his eyes, hiding the reddening tint in them, knowing he looked like the monster he felt at the moment and hoping to all that was holy she didn't wake up. Seeing him like this would scare her out of her mind. But those little fangs... God, he wanted to feel them again. In his wrist, in his throat as she moaned under him. Or as she rode him... A low moan escaped his lips as his imagination presented him with image after erotic image, tormenting his already aroused body further.

Determinedly he blanked his mind, exercising the iron control of an elder Kyn and carried on with his task. His hand hovered over her belt buckle, pausing as a war raged within him. Slowly it closed where it was, withdrawing without touching her. He couldn't do it. If he undressed her, saw her naked in his bed, he was going to lose it. Already his fangs were extended, as full and heavy as his aching body, and ready to feed.

Backing up he left her lying on the bed, still with her t-shirt and pants on. They were covered in blood but she'd just have to deal with that he decided, an expression akin to pain on his handsome features as he deliberately put distance between himself and the feminine temptation on the bed.

Chapter Four

Darkness surrounded her, as warm and comfortable as a mother's womb, a soft welcoming darkness, supporting and protecting her all at once. Maria floated comfortably, resisting the pull of consciousness. Something bad had happened in the waking world and she wasn't ready to return and face it just yet, a small instinct warning her, whatever it was, it was bad. She snuggled down deeper into the softness. Far better to stay here in the darkness, wrapped in his arms. Because she wasn't alone in the darkness, he was here. Who he was she wasn't quite sure but it didn't seem to matter. She trusted him, knew instinctively he was here to protect her, not hurt her.

Strong arms wrapped around her, pulling her into their circle of protection with her back against a hard body. She murmured her pleasure, feeling his breath on her throat. She moaned and turned her head as the sharp edges of a set of fangs trailed over the delicate skin of her throat, hot and cold chills racing through her body and making goose-bumps rise on her skin.

Oh god, she needed him to bite her, those fangs piercing her skin and biting deep. She shifted restlessly, her skin suddenly too tight, her clothes too restrictive. She arched her neck, tilting it to the side, baring the long line of her throat temptingly. He had to bite her! Need rose within her to a crescendo, a fine tremble setting up in her limbs as the moment spun out. Then he bit her, white hot pain forcing a cry from Maria's lips. Pleasure followed instantly on its heels, arching through her body like

lightning. Even though she'd never been with another Kyn, Maria knew this was right. Deep down it felt right, familiar. He was feeding from her throat, a place she'd only let a lover touch. So she must know him...must love him.

A frown formed on her face as, even in the dream, reality started to intrude. She'd never been bitten; no male Kyn would bother with a Dhampir girl when there were other, full blooded Kyn-females to choose from. A reality Maria had accepted a long time ago. Desperately she tried to hold onto the dream, wanting to wrap the fantasy around her for just a little bit longer.

But it faded and she shifted on the bed, her head thrashing a little as she came to. Then memory caught up with her and she sat bolt upright, eyes wide with fear as a gasp escaped her. Her hand flew to her throat, her last memory the Rogue attacking her, the foul smell of its breath and the look of glee in its eyes as it lashed out...the terrible pain as those claws ripped through her skin. Hot blood, her blood, bubbling out, flowing over her hands as she desperately tried to hold it in...

"Oh god," she muttered with relief as her hands met unbroken skin. She shuddered, fingertips exploring her throat. *Had it all been a dream?* No, it couldn't have been. The memory was too clear, too vibrantly detailed to be a dream. Then she found them. Hard ridges in her skin, areas that felt different. Long lines across the soft flesh right where the pain of the Rogue's touch had been. *Some warrior you turned out to be, the little voice in her head sneered at her, first Rogue you come across damn near kills you!*

She ignored it, her fingers still exploring the nearly healed wound. Being Half-Kyn her body healed fast, much faster than a normal human's would. But there was no way she could manage healing like this on her own. Not before she bled out, which was sort of end-game anyway. So someone had helped her, but who? And for that matter, where the hell was she? She looked around, studying the luxurious room around her as the fog cleared from her brain. Which was when she saw him, the large figure shrouded in shadows by the window...the biggest damn warrior she'd ever seen in her life!!

She was awake. Marak turned from the window, heavy shutters lifted at this time of night, to see dark eyes watching him warily. Another mystery. For a human she had a very strong mind. He'd been aware of her fighting the sleep compulsion he'd laid on her, a compulsion which should have kept her sleeping for hours, allowing her body to repair itself with his powerful blood. But even as he'd stood watching her he'd felt her fighting it, struggling her way back to consciousness. "Hi," he said quietly. "How are you feeling?"

His voice filled the room and Maria shivered, the deep sound stroking along what felt like every nerve ending she had as her waking brain latched onto the truth in front of her. He was a warrior. Even standing in the deep shadows by the curtains he couldn't hide the distinctive markings covering one cheek and temple then disappearing under the collar of his shirt, markings stark against his skin. Hell, even his aura screamed 'warrior' and from the way he looked, held himself, he was hard core to boot. One of the dinosaurs her father and his cronies complained about.

"Like I got hit by a bus," she retorted, nerves bringing out the sassy attitude she used to keep the world at bay. She winced, rolling her neck and feeling some soreness from the encounter with the Rogue. She didn't remember much after her throat got slashed, the trauma blanking her mind, just a deep red haze of pain remaining when she probed the memory. There were voices, deep male voices. Comforting voices that made her feel safe. And arms holding her against a powerful chest... She shivered as the pieces of her dream resurfaced in her memory. So vivid and detailed, even down to the faint musky scent of the guy holding her as he sank his fangs into her neck. It had to be a dream? Didn't it?

Marak moved closer to the bed, his eyes riveted on her. Awake she seemed so much more vital, bigger than the petite curvy form he could see with his eyes, as though the force of her personality were somehow making her larger than life.

"Uhm, you had a bit of an accident," he started and then paused, kicking himself. What a dumb-ass comment. 'Accident' was the understatement of the year! An accident was cutting yourself on the

bread-knife, not having a rogue vampire tear your throat out.

"You bet it was an accident," she said, her voice a little husky still from the damage and fatigue. "If I'd been on my game tonight that Rogue would have been toast. And what the hell happened after that?" she said as she checked herself quickly. Her jacket, weapons...all gone. Wariness entered her eyes again. "How did I get here? And who took off my clothes?" she demanded.

Marak blinked, he hadn't been expecting her to come out with that. "On your game? Lady, are you shittin' me? He'd gotten conversion shakes and he *still* ripped your throat out," he told her bluntly, his voice a low growl. Did this insane woman have *no* sense? "You're damn lucky. If he'd been fully turned there wouldn't have been anything left of you to save. And I was just trying to make you more comfortable," he added, shifting a little uncomfortably at her last comment. Removing a woman's clothes in the heat of passion was one thing. Taking them off when she had no say in the matter... He might be a warrior, generally credited with no manners and less morals by the rest of the Kyn, but he wasn't a rapist.

"Right..." she droned at his last statement, narrowing her eyes suspiciously before going on the attack again. "And you call that a rescue? If you figured I wasn't up to it, what took you so long? And by the way, the biker gang/pirate/black leather look is so passé," she drawled. "If you wanted to go retro, spandex and leisure suits were the way to go. In bright pastel I might add."

Spandex? Pastel? What was she on about? Marak didn't bother to answer, shaking his head a little. "Well, you're breathing, aren't you?" he threw back as he stalked towards the edge of the bed, his eyes glinting dangerously. Actually he was beginning to think he preferred her asleep. She was definitely less sassy. "Passé, huh? So...what look were you going for? Goth?"

"Big fan of KISS," she retorted, lying through her teeth as anger coiled low in her chest. How dare he dismiss her so easily? She'd just been caught by surprise. "Was on my way to a fan meet when he jumped me. I would have had him if I hadn't been so distracted."

Marak couldn't help it, watching her with a sort of fascinated

horror. It was like a train crash, you just couldn't look away. She looked so cute sitting there in the middle of his sheets, but she opened her mouth and... It was like talking to a smaller version of Vixen. Mentally he made a note never to introduce the two women. The world just wouldn't be able to take it. He shook his head. "You do realise what he was, don't you?" he found himself asking, not quite sure now whether she was even aware she'd faced off against a vampire.

"He was a Rogue vampire. Newly turned...a few hours at most, which was fairly obvious from the 'shakes'. Shouldn't you warrior types know all this?" she asked, arching a delicate eyebrow at him in query. "Isn't there like 'warrior school' you boys have to go to? Or are you still in training or something?" she asked derisively, knowing this was a fully trained and able warrior but a little devil was riding her shoulder hard and egging her on nonetheless. Rule one of sass, never let them know you were scared. Which she was, scared as hell, and on her own with a warrior who looked like he didn't know whether to strangle her or laugh. It was a reaction Maria was used to. She had a habit of rubbing most people up the wrong way. But never anyone as...dangerous looking as this guy though.

"And I was counting on them...the shakes I mean. Like I said, I would have had him but you decided to drop in and distract me. The rest you know." She carried on, ignoring the tiny tendrils of fear trying to crawl up her spine as her tongue subtly checked her fangs. Was it her or did they feel a little bigger than normal? "I don't heal this fast," she announced suddenly. "I mean I heal fast, faster than a human, but not this fast. So what the hell did you do to me?"

Marak was struggling to follow the twists and turns of her conversation. Did all women talk this much? And this fast? Being an only child and having lost his mother at a young age Marak wasn't really familiar with women's conversation. He avoided the chattering groups at court functions like the plague and the only other woman he had a lot to do with was Vixen. Whose conversation wasn't exactly typical for the female of the species being mainly concerned with the different ways to inflict large amounts of damage on or otherwise kill Rogue vampires. That and guns. Big ones. The bigger the better. "Huh? What? What do you

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mean, you don't heal this fast?" he asked, latching onto what she'd said as a sudden suspicion formed in his mind.

She speared him with a sharp look, a hint of humor in her eyes. "You really haven't guessed it, have you? Are you always this dense or did your momma drop you on your head when you were a baby? I'm a Dhampir, handsome, a half vampire."

Chapter Five

Marak looked at her, a sinking feeling settling in his gut. Dhampir. Of course she was a Dhampir, she had to be! There was no other explanation. The speed and reactions she'd displayed in the alley, just shy of a fully blooded Kyn, she couldn't be anything else. Then there was the strength of mind, the way she'd fought his compulsion, eventually overcoming it. And her fangs...oh hell, those little fangs. He should have realised at the time. A human wouldn't have developed fangs so early in the conversion process. And she hadn't, she'd already had them. Tiny, delicate fangs that felt so good in his skin... He scowled and shifted his stance subtly, fighting his body's instinctive reaction to the memory.

But the reaction rapidly became a non-issue as another thought occurred to him. Dhampirs were rare. The Kyn race as a whole had trouble with procreation. Most couples tried for years without success, only a rare few being blessed with the patter of tiny feet. Even with two Kyn parents, conception was difficult and viable pregnancies few and far between. Miscarriage and stillborns were common, a problem Kyn scientists had been studying for years, aware they were working against time as, if the current trend continued, the Kyn were on the endangered species list. But despite that, there were two Dhampir Marak did know about and, as he thought about it, the sinking feeling in his stomach worsened. If he was right, he'd just bitten the daughter of a Vampire Lord.

Shit, can anyone say shotgun wedding? Biting *any* Kyn woman the way he had, on the soft delicate skin of her throat, was tantamount to

going down on one knee and pulling a box out of your pocket containing a rock the size of your fist. Or you'd better had done it by the time her male relatives caught up with you!

"Hello? Still with me?" Maria asked, waving her hand to get his attention. "Lights on but no one home over there?" she added, when his gaze shifted and locked onto her. The shell shocked expression in them quickly disappeared, his expression hardening as though he realised he'd given too much away.

"I apologise, Lady Ravensford," he said, those deep tones filling the room and doing things to Maria's insides she really didn't want to think about at the moment. It was as though her body knew his voice, was reacting to it instinctively.

"Shit," she breathed, her eyes widening. "It was you, wasn't it? You bit me..." she breathed, her hand coming up to smooth over her neck, unerringly finding the spot he'd buried his fangs.

She looked up, catching the quick flash of guilt in his eyes, a bolt of awareness passing between them, electrifying the very air. It *was* him! The guy who'd pulled her into his arms, against his broad chest, holding her and protecting her. It hadn't been a dream at all; a fantastic, fabulous dream which called to all the secret yearnings and fantasies she'd kept locked within her. Never voiced, rarely consciously thought about desires to have a Kyn-male look at her as though she were worth something, as though she were something more than the half-human daughter of Ravensford. Just like the way he was looking at her now; heat in his eyes and need written on his face. No, not need, something deeper...more primal than need.

Hunger. He hungered for her. She knew instinctively that with the slightest encouragement he'd have her in his arms, his fangs buried deep. Probably with her stretched out naked under him as well, feeding on her. Loving her... *And you'd let him, beg him too*, the little voice in her head piped up again. *Look at him. He's the hottest thing you've ever seen...and he'll know how to please a woman, make her purr*. She blinked, shaking her head a little to clear the sudden erotic images. Even though it had been a deep secretly held fantasy of hers for years the reality, here and now, was *very*

different to what she'd imagined. Now she was confronted with it, the look of interest on the face of a Kyn male but a Warrior rather than the noble knight she'd imagined. It was as scary as hell!

"I did," he said simply, still standing by the bed, an immovable wall of leather and muscle. He had that utter stillness which some of the older Kyn had, the ability to cease to move completely, to become a living statue. All apart from those blazing silver eyes that were tracking every movement, every breath she made.

"Hmm, why?" she asked, a frown creasing her brow.

Marak shook his head slightly, not sure why she needed to ask that one. It was a no-brainer, at least to him. "It was my fault. I should have put that Rogue down straight away. I didn't, I left you in harm's way too long..." *Mainly because I was too busy watching your ass and getting turned on by the way you move...* "...and allowed you to get hurt. Nearly killed."

Her response, when it came, was short and clipped. Voiced calmly, it was the sort of response the male of any species instinctively knew meant he'd screwed up somehow. "Uh-huh," she said, running her hand pointedly over her neck again. "And biting me here?" she prompted.

Marak cleared his throat, had the good grace to look a little discomfited. "Ahh yes, that. I apologise... I will of course be speaking to your father about recompense."

"Recompense?" Even to her own ears Maria's voice sounded slightly strangled, a sure sign that she was getting wound up. But to her intense irritation the warrior studying her with single-minded concentration seemed not to notice. *This* was why she was glad Kyn-males didn't look at her as a possible mate! One bite and they thought they owned you!

"Yes, to your father for sullyng his daughter," he explained, "You will—"

Maria cut him off mid-sentence, before he could suggest what she *knew* he was going to suggest. Sullyng indeed! It was like something out the last century and if he uttered the word 'recompense' again she was going to do some serious damage with... She looked around quickly for a suitable weapon and came up blank.

She shook her head, irritation written across her expressive face. "Look. I'm sure you did what you thought was necessary at the time and I'm very grateful that you saved my life and all... But I'm fine now. You're fine. No harm done. Let's just forget this happened, call it quits and move on. OK?" she said, starting to climb off the bed, intent on just getting out of here now and away from his disturbing presence. Because she was beginning to remember more about that dream and just how good it had felt when he'd bitten her...and now she was aching to do the same to him! Wrap herself around him, mould herself over that hard body and bury her lips on his neck, trailing kisses along the skin before she found the right spot...

"I was going to say, we'll get married," he ground out, breaking her out of her little reverie, the sentence little more than an order, uttered with an arrogance and conviction that left Maria in little doubt that he was used to giving orders and having them obeyed instantly.

"Look," she tried again, grabbing her boots from the floor and jamming her feet in them. She had no clue where her socks had gone but at this moment she didn't care. She just had to get away from this madness! Zipping them up she stood, the few inches they added to her height giving her extra courage. Of course, she still didn't come past mid-chest on the big male who stood at the end of the bed but hey, a girl had to work with what she had. "There's no need to go that far. You're a warrior, I'm sure you don't need a wife hanging around your neck like a millstone." *And I don't need an arrogant, sexy as all hell, hottest-thing-on-the-planet husband dictating my every move!*

"I mean, no one really knows that much about Dhampir anyway," she pointed out in what she thought was an extremely reasonable tone of voice. Especially considering the agitation that was running rampant through her body at the moment. She tore her eyes away from his strong throat, looking somewhere, anywhere else. She needed to get out of here and fast, before she did something stupid. Like plaster herself all over that gorgeous body and beg him to bite her again. Or let her bite him. At the moment, her body practically hummed with need and she didn't care much which it was. She studied the floor and did her best to conceal her

reaction to him. Unfortunately, being able to conceal her feelings and reactions weren't Kyn abilities that were strong in her. That or the ability to lie well. It had taken her a *long* time to practise either well enough to get out of her father's court and start her crusade against the Rogue. A crusade which she knew was in danger again right now, if he decided to push this marriage thing. As soon as her father found out she'd been bitten her fate, and his, was sealed.

"Hey, what is your name anyway?" she asked suddenly, realising she had no idea what his name was. He had to be an older warrior. His eyes were too grave, too knowledgeable to belong to a youngster. Absently she cursed herself for not studying the Warrior Caste more. After all she had tried to emulate them in her own training, using similar methods to hunt and kill Rogue. Well, ok, to *try* and kill Rogue she admitted. Up to now her track record wasn't looking so hot.

Marak shrugged at the question, hiding his wariness behind a stoic mask. "What does it matter?" he countered, a little stung by her rejection. A rejection that had come before he'd even gotten the question out properly. She was from a noble house. She obviously didn't find the *mere* warrior he appeared to be good enough and Marak didn't want to find out if her answer changed when she found out who he really was.

And everything she said made sense. She was half-Kyn, not some new human convert. She'd been brought up in their world, knew the rules that governed them all. Didn't have to be watched and taught... "I'm just some warrior doing my job," he said dismissively, turning his back on her. "Go if you want to."

There was silence behind him, then rapid footsteps across the room and the sound of the door opening and closing quietly. "Shit," Marak breathed, leaning one arm and his forehead against each other on the heavy bedpost, eyes closed as his hands clenched into fists, the knuckles whitening. "Marak, you're an idiot." His voice was little more than a whisper in the darkness of the room. All his instincts raged at him to follow her, not to let her get away. She was his! His female! He'd bitten her, brought over into the night-world. Admittedly she'd only needed that last little step but it still made her his. His instincts screamed at him to go

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after her but grimly he ignored them. She didn't want him. She would go home to her family and find some nice Kyn guy to settle down with...a safe, pleasant guy a world away from the Warrior who had saved her life. Another guy who would provide for her, give her the blood she needed. Maybe even children.

That did it. The image of her luminous with happiness, her belly swollen with child, someone else's child, snapped the last of Marak's control. He opened eyes blood-red with rage and roared, the primal beast within breaking its bonds as he moved, crashing through the door and going after her. "Mine!"

Chapter Six

Maria hurried across the large lobby, heading for the front door. Navigating on instinct she was thankful that the place was simply laid out and, more importantly, pretty much empty. Apart from the one human maid she saw, who took one look at the bloodstained and torn state of Maria's clothes and hurried past quickly, the former Dhampir saw no one else. She'd always wondered what it would be like to be fully Kyn, what the difference would be...and well, not much really. Her senses were a little shaper, but they'd already been sharp. Her hearing seemed to be more acute though, picking up the maid's heartbeat easily as she disappeared off down the corridor. But the main difference was hunger. A deep clawing, gut clenching hunger.

She rubbed her stomach uneasily. She needed to get home and feed. Pronto. Her father kept bagged supplies in the fridge for just such a purpose. Well actually that was in case he fancied a snack but Maria knew the rules. Newly turned Kyn did not feed on humans, not until they'd learned to control themselves and their hunger. That wasn't going to be a problem for her she decided. The very thought of biting... feeding from a human made her feel slightly sick. Pressing her hand harder into her stomach to try and settle the feeling she reached out and started to turn the handle.

She didn't complete the action. A large hand reached over her shoulder, slamming the door shut with a resounding crash. Maria whirled around, a retort ready on her lips, a retort that died unuttered as her eyes

collided with warm quicksilver. Before she could move he crowded her against the door, his hard muscled body pressing against hers. His hand drove into her hair, holding her still at the nape of her neck. "You're not going anywhere," he told her softly as he leaned down and kissed her.

It was the hottest kiss Maria had ever experienced. No gentle exploration but a deep and darkly dominant kiss, plundering her soft lips and demanding entrance to the silken depths of her mouth, his tongue brushing over hers as he thrust seductively, pressing his body into her until they were both moaning, their breathing ragged.

And then, when Maria didn't think she could possibly take any more he lifted his head, eyes boring down into hers. In them she read everything; burning need, hunger, loneliness, fear, hope, desire... She caught her breath, the sheer depth of emotion there shocking her to her core. Eyes wide, a stunned expression at what had just happened, she lifted her hand to smooth gentle fingers across his cheekbone. A lover's touch as inside her, her soul stirred and called out to him, recognising a kindred spirit.

He turned into her hand, nuzzling for a second before he captured it with his. Eyes never leaving hers he nipped the soft pads of her fingers, the thrill that shot through her making her catch her breath. He kissed the palm of her hand before dragging the tip of a fang across the sensitive flesh on the inside of her wrist, a look of such erotic promise in his eyes that she groaned, leaning her head back against the door, surprised she hadn't just melted into a puddle and slithered to the floor at his feet.

So caught up in their own sensual world neither of them heard the sound of a door opening somewhere down the corridor, nor the sound of approaching footsteps. "What the hell? Marak, kindly explain yourself!"

They both froze at the imperious voice, his lips still pressed into the delicate skin of her wrist. The sultry look in Maria's dark eyes faded, replaced by a look of shock which was swiftly followed by the heat of embarrassment. Deep color washed over her cheeks as she realised they'd been caught in the middle of a delicate situation. *Ohmygod*, she moaned silently. A few more moments and they may have been actually going for it up against the damn door! Because, despite her convictions about

needing no man, all it had taken was one hot kiss from the right warrior to have her whimpering in need and about begging him to take her, to make her his.

Marak closed his eyes, his body taut and virtually shaking with the control he was exerting not to just haul her out of there back to someplace silent and act on all the dark impulses surging through his mind. Most of which involved both of them getting naked and acting on the desire that even now stretched taut between them.

"Elsveth, your timing, as usual, is impeccable," he drawled through gritted teeth, casting a glance over his shoulder. It was as bad as he feared. The entire Lord's Council was assembled behind them watching with interest and, in some cases, satisfaction. Of course they would be satisfied. They'd just caught him in a compromising position with a female. He wouldn't be surprised if Elsveth wasn't already mentally rehearsing the words for the binding ceremony.

He sighed in resignation, pulling her closer to him to shield her from their curious gazes as long as possible. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head, "I'm sorry, little one," he murmured, aware that he'd removed all her choices now. Even if she refused him, which he had no intention of letting her do after the way she had just responded to his kiss, the Council would still put pressure on her for this union. But try as he might, even the shield of his larger body didn't last long.

"Oh my god! Maria, is that you?" another voice demanded, echoing sharply around the large lobby. "Is...is that... That's blood! What the hell have you done to my daughter?"

Maria closed her eyes as she recognised her father's outraged voice. *Typical, just bloody typical. Could this day get any worse?* "Dad! I can handle this!" she insisted, pushing at Marak's broad shoulder so she could peer around and look at her father. He didn't move, their eyes locking for a moment in a silent battle, the primal Kyn-male in him protecting what it perceived as his. Finally he nodded, and relaxed a little, moving slightly to the side so she could see what was going on. His arms slid around her and pulled her against him possessively, his hard gaze sweeping the assembled lords, daring any of them to argue his claim.

“You’re fine my bloody arse!” Garen Ravensford retorted. “You’re covered in blood, your *own* blood! Marak,” he said, his tone low and threatening. “Let her go or so help me god, I’ll kill you with my bare hands.”

Marak’s grip tightened, his lip curling back in the faint hint of a snarl as he locked gazes with the Kyn lord. He wasn’t giving her up. They’d have to take her over his cold, dead body and the look he gave Ravensford stated that clearly.

“Despite the fact he *is* an irritating bastard I believe that’s called Regicide which I’m fairly certain is treason, not to mention being somewhat hazardous to health. Your health, Ravensford.” Kalen’s voice broke through the silence in the room as two tall figures stepped between the couple against the door and the assembled lords. Kalen and the female Warrior, Vixen. Their stances were passive, non-combative. But matching looks in their eyes said that could change without notice.

There was a furtive shuffling as the power balance in the room shifted, a subtle movement away from Ravensford as the Council made it clear if he went loco and attacked the three warriors, he was on his own. They might have outnumbered the warriors at least three to one but they all knew those were easy odds for the warrior-caste, trained killers in every sense of the word. Plus Vixen scared the lot of them, the female warrior a completely unknown quantity.

“I don’t care!” Garen’s face was tortured as he took a step forwards. It was obvious he cared deeply for his daughter, fear for her stark in his eyes as he looked past Kalen. “If he’s hurt her...”

Kalen’s grim expression relaxed somewhat, touched by the concern. He half turned, jerking his head towards the couple, who were wrapped up in each other again. The big Warrior-king’s arms were wrapped possessively around the slender figure of the woman in his arms, his stance protective as he sheltered her from everyone in the room with his own body. “Look at them,” he said quietly, feeling sorry for the older Kyn. It was always a hard thing to let your children go. Kalen knew that firsthand, he’d been a father once too. “He’s bonding with her already. At the moment, Ravensford, your daughter is the safest woman

on the planet.”

Chapter Seven

Regicide, wasn't that...murder of a monarch? Everything, time, the events around them slowed almost to a standstill for Maria as she looked up at the man who held her. She knew her shock was mirrored in her eyes, her ability to hide her feelings gone the same way as her self control, high-tailed it over the horizon where he was concerned.

Marak felt her freeze, knew what it meant and looked down at her, a question in his eyes. He didn't want to look but that was the coward's way out. He might be many things, but a coward wasn't one of them. He met her dark eyes and there it was, the look of realisation. Resigned, he waited for a look of calculation to join it, the same look he'd seen on almost every female since he'd been old enough to figure out the difference between the sexes. But it never arrived.

"You're Marak?" she asked, her voice little more than a shocked whisper, searching his face for the truth. He didn't answer, just nodded silently. He didn't need to. The answers had been there all along, his unspoken aura of command, his arrogance and order giving...and this place? How could he be anyone else? She bit her lip, nibbling it in her agitation, a bad habit. She'd only gone and gotten herself bitten by the damn *king*! The guy heading every matchmaking mama's eligible bachelors list for the last couple of hundred years... Hell, she could practically hear them gnashing their teeth at her already!

"Right, they're gone," Kalen's voice announced from somewhere over Marak's shoulder.

"Move, you great oaf!" Maria demanded, pushing at his brick wall of a chest until he moved a little and she could see the two warriors behind him.

"Now can you two *please* get a room? I have to see much more of this lovey-dovey mushy shit and I'm gonna throw!" Kalen grouched, a bad tempered look on his otherwise handsome face.

"So how about it, little one? You fancy taking this Warrior on?" Marak asked, turning back to her as the two warriors left, sniping at each other as usual. He ignored them, concentrating on the tiny woman in his arms. A woman watching him with a look in her eyes that made him catch his breath in hope.

"Why didn't you tell me you were the bloody king?" she demanded, one eyebrow arched questioningly.

"Would it have made any difference?" he countered, aware that somehow this was the most important conversation he would ever have as she watched him, the look in her eyes assessing. Trouble was he didn't want to talk. All he wanted to do was kiss her until she was breathless and begging him not to stop.

"Hell no!" Maria snorted, an inelegant little noise that fascinated him. "I'd have run faster," she added, a teasing light in her eyes that fed the knot of arousal deep in his gut.

"You know what'll happen if we go upstairs, don't you?" he checked, leaning in to drop a kiss on the soft skin of her neck, right over where he'd bitten her. He closed his eyes as he breathed in her scent deeply, the beast within roaring for him to quit the talking and get on with it, against the door if he had too!

This was it, crunch time, she realised. Did she play it safe or did she give into everything feminine in her and take the biggest chance in her life? "Err duh! Do I *look* stupid?" she threw back. "We go upstairs, get naked and screw each other's brains out. Sound about right?" she asked, making her decision, a giggle of mischief rising in her throat as she took in his stunned look at her blunt statement, revelling in the dark look that followed hot on its heels. "Actually...who says anything about going back upstairs?" she asked wickedly. "If I'm going to let you bite me again, I

know the perfect place..."

"Why did you want to come in here?" Marak asked a few minutes later as they slipped through the heavy door into the main hall. Shrouded in darkness, the heavy banners on the walls and the plush furnishings were rendered monotone in the moonlight that stole in through the high arched windows.

Maria smiled, reaching up to kiss his neck, open mouthed kisses and tiny little nips that had him growling at her. "I'll bet you never did it up there, did you?" she whispered wickedly, nodding her head towards the throne at the end of the room. His eyes widened a little, then immediately darkened. A heavy ornately carved piece of furniture it represented everything Marak hated about the role he'd been born into. Now though...it presented some intriguing possibilities.

"I think I'm going to like having you around, little minx," he told her, closing the door behind them and throwing the heavy bar across with a flick of his wrist, a negligent show of strength that stole Maria's breath away. But not nearly as much as the look in his eyes did as he backed her up across the room, shedding his jacket and shirt. Maria's eyes widened at the display of perfect male flesh revealed to her. His muscles rippled, toned to perfection, the intricate designs of his warrior's marks sweeping across one side of his body, just under the skin, inviting her to trace them with her hands and lips.

Then her heels hit the dais, and she carried on, stepping backwards up them in the dark.

"In fact...I'm going to like having you. Period," he added in a dark whisper, following her.

She stopped in front of the throne, no place left to go, Marak towering over her. His pale eyes windows to his soul, now almost black with need and hunger, the expression on his face almost cruel. "You want this, don't you?" he asked, a muscle jumping in his jaw as he looked down at her. "Because once I touch you I'm not going to be able to stop."

Maria nodded, a shiver going through her. "You gonna get on with it or just yap all night?" she asked, a challenging look in her eyes. He growled, dragging her to him and kissing her hard. She didn't argue,

fitting against him, her hands smoothing feverishly over his skin, revelling in the feel of hot satin skin over hard muscles.

Clothing fell away, stripped by impatient hands. Hers or his, she wasn't sure which but then he was urging her backwards, sitting her down as he knelt between her parted thighs, skin warm against hers. She moaned, biting her lip as his erection slid against the cleft of her sex, already damp with desire. He rolled his hips and the friction made her cry out, pleasure rolling through her.

He smiled in the darkness above her. "Oh you like that, do you?" he breathed, rocking his hips again and sending stars shooting into the blackness behind Maria's eyelids as she pressed her eyes shut, nodding silently. His lips caressed her neck, the tiniest nip of his fangs setting her hips jerking in response. "You smell so good...I want to taste you," he breathed against her ear.

Maria caught her breath as he moved, parting her thighs wider with his hands. Lifting and hooking her knees over the arms of the chair and opening her body completely to him, exposing her to his avid perusal.

"Knew this thing would come in useful one day," he murmured, shifting to trail hot kisses from one of her knees down her inner thigh. Anticipation coursed through Maria as he moved closer to where she wanted, needed him. "Perfect," he breathed, blowing a cool breath across the sensitive flesh of her sex, moist with her excitement. She bit her lip as he parted her folds with his thumbs, and then the warmth of his tongue slid along her, seeking the sensitive nub of her clit.

Maria's back arched, a soft cry on her lips as his warm mouth closed over her; nibbling, suckling, flicking her with the very tip of his tongue until she thought she was going out of her mind with excitement. Her body clenched, tension low in her belly and building between her thighs as she held him to her, her hands running through the short spikes of his dark hair.

She wasn't innocent, the naturally healthy curiosity of a human teenager had seen to that, but she'd never felt this way with any man before. But she couldn't really call the boys she'd been out with before men, not compared to Marak. His large hands stroked the insides of her

thighs as he worked her body with his lips and tongue, unbearably gentle touches that tumbled Maria over the edge without warning. Her body stiffened, hips jerking against him as the tension within her shattered into a thousand pieces. Pleasure rolled through her in a hard wave, taking her breath and her senses away for long moments.

“Oh wow,” she said, opening her eyes as it subsided slowly, to find him leaning over her. “You’re good. More!” she demanded, her eyes sultry and dark.

A surge of triumph hit Marak at the look on her face, the flush of arousal on her cheeks. “You want more? Then more you get,” he promised, not managing more than a low growl at the moment. His big frame was trembling from holding back this long. But now the wait was over. In a deft movement he shifted his hips and slid deep within her, seating himself to the hilt in one movement.

Their groan was simultaneous, masculine and feminine mixing perfectly as he froze, letting her adjust to his size. God she was tight, so tight he was sure he was going to explode. “Don’t move,” he ordered harshly, his hands hard on her hips as beads of sweat gathered on his upper lip.

Maria had no intention of moving at the moment, her breath catching hard at the invasion of his body into hers, feeling her body stretch to accommodate him. Her eyes fluttered half closed as she waited, fighting through the slight discomfort until it felt good, the burning easing, leaving just the sensation of being filled completely. More than she ever had been before. She arched her back, obeying an instinctive urging to move, rocking her hips against him, the friction of their bodies feeling good. So very good.

Marak growled, at the edge of his control and trying desperately to hold onto it. He hauled her closer, covering her mouth in a kiss that neared desperation. He wanted to make this good for her...perfect. But that was out of the question. He was too far gone for that. But good, it needed to be good. Bloody good. And that meant not coming as soon as he was inside her like some green youth! When he was sure he had himself back under control he started to move, slowly at first, each long

slide creating delicious friction between them.

But soon, slow just wasn't doing it for Maria. She needed more, needed that hard male body pounding into hers. Needed this more than her next breath. "Marak, *please!*" she begged, wrapping her legs tighter around his hips and pushing her hips harder against his. "I need...more," she whispered, her eyes dark, unfocused with need as she looked up at him.

Marak's nostrils flared as he moved, resting one hand above her head. Bracing himself he smiled in the darkness. "Always with the mores... Demanding, aren't you?" he breathed, hauling her hips to him as his pace changed. He drove into her, hard powerful thrusts that touched the very neck of her womb and forced the air from her lungs. Need, arousal, hunger spiraled through her as he pounded against her hips, each movement stroking nerve endings that cried out in pleasure. She moaned as she buried her face into his neck, pressing hot kisses against the strong column, tasting the sheen of sweat on his skin as she brushed her tongue over the powerful pulse that beat there.

"Oh god, Maria...*yes!*" he begged raggedly, a tortured sound as he thrust again, impaling her on his rigid cock. She smiled, swirled her tongue over his skin again, confident in her feminine hold over him. Then she bit, her fangs sliding through his skin gently, delicately. He groaned, pumping harder as his blood rushed into her mouth, the rich taste sending fire through her body, shivering over every inch of her skin.

Then it was all too much. Her body clenched around his, the strong muscles of her body gripping him hard as she came apart. Pleasure exploded in her, spreading outwards and filling her completely. She threw her head back, crying out, a cry that was lost in his mouth as he caught her lips in a hard kiss, his hips pounding once...twice before he stiffened, his body pulsing inside hers as his own climax hit him. Unbelievable pleasure, white hot as he spilled his seed deep inside her.

Slowly Maria opened her eyes, smiled as she found him looking down at her, his expression stunned and making no attempt to hide it. Then he smiled, dark amusement coiling in the warm silver depths. "Oh wow, you're good," he breathed, leaning down to kiss her, repeating her

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own words back at her. "More!" he demanded, leaning down to lave his rough tongue over her nipple.

She whimpered, arching her back to offer the soft globe to his lips. "Oh yes, definitely more..."

Author Bio

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

She juggles full-time motherhood, 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 (Which she's never been allowed to forget!!). 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.

Practically living online, Mina can usually be found lurking. For more information about Mina and her writing you can visit her web site at www.mina-carter.com. You can email Mina at mina@mina-carter.com.

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