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HAWK'S WARDEN

MINA CARTER

Hawk's Warden

By

Mina Carter

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Hawk's Warden

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Dedication

To Micheal, the real hero in my life.

Chapter One

Today sucked. In fact, on Hawk's list of days that sucked, it was right up there at the top.

First it was the bunch of kids causing a racket outside his motel room and waking him up. "Only three bloody hours of sleep," he grumbled to himself as he walked down the night-darkened street.

Oh, he'd tried to drop off again, but today must have been *let's make a damn noise outside Hawk's window and keep him awake* day. Hawk didn't do too well on little sleep, which was one reason for his scowl.

The other was the fact he'd just gotten his ass handed to him by a bunch of demons. Even worse, a bunch of Keres demons. *Girl* demons with blood-encrusted fangs and claws, but *girls* nonetheless. Like their human counterparts, they travelled in packs, a fact that slipped Hawk's mind when he'd caught a couple harassing a lone human guy in a park.

Winching at the memory, he turned a corner and spotted a late-night diner up ahead.

He'd taken some hits from the deadly duo before the rest turned up, and after that he'd been lucky to escape with only the deep clawing he had.

Lesson learned. Never mess with a bunch of women...of any species. Pulling his jacket tighter around himself, Hawk headed across the parking lot to the diner. If he was lucky, he could get a mug of coffee

before the blood seeped through and forced him to move on.

* * * * *

Why are the hot ones always weird?

Lyssa looked up from cleaning tables as the door opened. It was a slow night, and the diner was getting ready to close. They were just waiting for the normal stragglers from the clubs before they did. Like this one dressed head to toe in black. But with his short hair, he didn't fit any of the normal stereotypes. Just about pale enough for a Goth...maybe. After finishing up her table, Lyssa stowed her cleaning gear and grabbed an order pad to head over.

He was cute; tall, dark and handsome. Just Lyssa's type. *Yeah, yeah, who are you kidding? Like you've got a type. You need a love life to have a type!*

Ignoring the little voice jeering in the back of her mind, Lyssa let her gaze linger while his head was bent. Over six-foot tall, he had a heavy build, which dominated the booth. Broad shoulders filled the ankle-length trench coat, and a black tee stretched over the muscles of his chest underneath. His long legs stretched out under the table and half into the walkway, the fabric of his tactical pants pulled tight over the muscled thighs.

She cleared her throat and plastered a bright smile over her face as she waited for him to notice her. "Heya, I'm Lyssa. Can I take your order?"

Hawk's heart sank at the chirpy tone. The last thing he needed was someone—a female someone—taking an interest in him at the moment. He was wearing illusion pendants and other charms, but magic could only do so much. Shifting in his seat, he wrapped his coat closer around himself and hoped to hell the blood hadn't started to seep through.

His jacket and shirt were black, so he might get away with it. Blood didn't show so much on dark colors, a fact he knew from long experience. But he could do without her calling 911 and ending up having an in-depth chat with the paramedics and cops to explain why he was carrying more weaponry than a small army.

He should have checked the joint out more than he had, but the only person he'd seen through the window was the middle-aged guy behind the grill and, still leaking the red stuff, he'd needed to park his ass in a hurry. A case of sit down before he fell down.

Hawk looked up straight into clear violet eyes, ones with a hint of amusement in them, as though she could read his thoughts and didn't think much of them.

He extended his senses. Violet wasn't a human color for eyes...more pixie or dryad. They weren't that uncommon, but they didn't generally wait tables.

Pixies were too unstable, too given to practical jokes, to get employment on a long-term basis, and dryads...well, there weren't many trees in this part of town.

"Ready to order, sir, or do you need more time?" Her patient voice brought him back to the present, her long-suffering tone telling him she was used to people ignoring her.

"Yeah, coffee. Black and strong," he ordered dismissively. Hopefully she'd take the hint and leave him alone; he wasn't in the mood for chit-chat.

Well, wasn't he the charmer? Face of an angel, manners of a warthog. Typical man. Lyssa stalked back to the counter to get his coffee, entertaining thoughts of dumping it over his head when she went back.

"No manners," she grumbled as she poured coffee into one of the diner's signature chunky mugs. Ignoring the cream on the side next to the coffee machine, she loaded the single mug onto a tray and headed back to the table in the corner. Actually, it was a good thing he was a rat. The way he looked, if he had an ounce of charm in his body, he'd be lethal.

Even with the touch-me-not attitude he exuded, Lyssa could feel herself reacting to him. Especially with him sitting the way he was, head leaned back against the wall. The strong line of his throat was just too inviting... He'd smell of warm man and that faint woodsy scent she'd caught when she took his order.

"Your coffee, sir," she announced as she set the tray on the table.

He didn't move, and Lyssa frowned. Had he gone to sleep, or was

he just ignoring her? Then he opened his eyes and reached forward to wrap his hand around the mug with a grunt.

You're welcome, she thought in irritation when no other reply seemed forthcoming.

"Would you like anything else with that?" she asked. *Like maybe a personality transplant?*

"No, thank you. I like my personality just fine, thanks," he drawled, a sardonic tone in his deep voice.

Lyssa's heart stopped. *Ohmigod, please tell me I didn't say that out loud!*

The color fled from her face as she opened her mouth. Nothing but a strangled croak emerged, her mouth opening and closing soundlessly. Then embarrassment burned across her cheeks as she finally managed to snap her mouth shut and scurry to safety.

Hawk's lips quirked in amusement as the waitress grabbed a spray bottle and a cloth to attack the already spotless tables. He really should tell her she hadn't said that aloud, that her mind was clear and focused enough for him to pick the thought clean out of her head, but that would lead to interesting questions about exactly how he'd been able to read her thoughts.

Her thoughts were too clear and precise for her to be pure-human. Usually their minds were cluttered, a thousand things going off at once in their heads. He didn't know how they managed to think at all given the noise their minds created.

Hawk frowned as he looked at the sugar, then sighed as he ignored it and pulled the coffee closer. He reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a small vial. With a moment's hesitation, he emptied the contents into the mug and watched as the fluid—an earthy, apple green—swirled and disappeared into the darkness of the coffee.

His last healing potion, saved for an emergency. He seriously needed the shit not to hit the fan before he could find another Haven and hit them up for supplies, but the way his luck was running at the moment, he wouldn't hold his breath.

Picking up the doctored coffee, he took a swallow then grimaced as

the bitter taste hit his sensitive palate. Determined, he carried on drinking, ignoring the small flash as the empty vial lost its form and was absorbed back into the witching. Usually he took his coffee liberally laced with milk and sugar, but both would interfere with the potion, so he had to suffer the bitterness.

They did say though that the best medicine tasted the worst, and if this got him back on his feet and combat capable, then he would live with it. After another long swallow, Hawk sighed in relief, his eyes half closed as he felt the wounds start to close.

Did he have time for another mug? This time with sugar and cream to wash the bitter taste away, and perhaps even a pastry... As soon as the thought came to him, he dismissed it.

He'd been bleeding, and even though the potion had closed his wounds, he had blood on his clothes, blood that would act as a beacon to every vampire and flesh-eating demon in the area. He might as well put a flashing light on his head and a sign around his neck that said, *All you can eat buffet*.

He cradled his mug in his hand and glared at the liquid left inside. He'd have to make it last as long as he could, then move on and find some place to sleep. Somewhere that didn't have a dawn chorus like this morning. He was tired. No, exhausted. He was no fool, and he'd long since grown out of the *I am invincible* stage most Warriors went through. He was dog-tired, clawed up, and in a mood. And if he didn't get a decent night's sleep tonight, his next fight might well be his last.

The waitress with the sassy turn of thought was by the door, still scrubbing the tables and trying to pretend she wasn't watching him. Deliberately, Hawk caught her eye, grinning when she flushed and looked away. His attention wandered, taking in the curve of her ass as she bent over the table.

She was slender but curvy. His gaze travelled up the seductive curve of her spine and latched onto the thin sliver of skin that showed between her T-shirt and her trousers. Then he saw it, and the world stopped.

Half hidden under the fabric was a small tattoo. An unmistakeable

tattoo if one knew what he were looking at. Not the sort of tattoo one could wander into any tattoo parlor and pick either. It was the sort of tattoo one had to be born into a certain sort of family to have. Less a form of body art, it was more a permanent, magical protection. It was the sort of tattoo a Warden, the wizards of the paranormal world, wore. Which meant his sassy little waitress was just the sort of woman Hawk was looking for, on more than one level.

He studied her movements over the rim of his mug. Warden blood explained the color of her eyes. Although they looked human, walked and talked human, Wardens were born with the ability to manipulate the witching, the magical layer in everything around them. Calling a Warden human was like calling a lion a housecat. Same basic description, but he wouldn't like to tease one with a ball of string.

She scrubbed the tables until they were clean enough to eat from. Hawk was about to make a comment about avoiding him when she straightened, squared her shoulders as though preparing herself to run the gauntlet and walk down the aisle past him. She could wimp out and go the long way around, and he could tell she was considering it when she glanced that way.

Come on, sweet stuff, that's too obvious. You're made of stronger stuff than that. Hawk held his breath as she made her mind up, only releasing it as she started up the aisle toward him. He put his empty mug down as she drew level, knowing the waitress in her wouldn't be able to resist. Sure enough, she checked and reached out to snag the empty cup.

"Can I get you anything else, sir?" Her voice was controlled and perfectly polite, toeing the line after her slip earlier.

"Nothing on the menu, no." Hawk moved his leg and blocked the aisle to stop her escaping wherever it was waitresses escaped to. "But I've got a few other needs..." He dropped the timbre of his voice to husky, his manner flirtatious.

Hawk was Warrior-born. The flipside of the coin to the Wardens, his sole purpose in life was to fight the things that went bump in the night. Some, like Hawk, lived long enough to get good at it. Not that one would realize it from his pathetic performance tonight, but fighting and

killing demons was what Hawk was all about. What spare time he had he spent training, healing, or finding opportunities to sire the next generation of Warriors.

And he considered all essential to his wellbeing, especially the last one.

Anger flared in her eyes at his words. "You've got some bloody balls," she hissed.

Hawk was glad he'd drained the mug. Otherwise, he was fairly sure he'd be wearing the contents by now.

"Yup, two of. Care to view them?" His grin was unrepentant. He didn't think she was the type, but it was hard to tell with Warden-women. Some of them could be kinky bitches at times, more than happy to take a tumble with a rough-and-ready Warrior. It was all that repression from their overprotective families. Give them a little freedom, and they were wild. Probably why they weren't let out often.

Which begged the question as to why a Warden-woman was waiting tables—it wasn't as if any Warden families needed the money—but Hawk shoved the question to the back of his mind. He was having far more fun watching her try to frame a response to his question through her anger.

"No!" she managed after several moments of opening and closing her mouth in a bizarre but amusing impression of a goldfish. "I'm not *that* kind of girl. If you want that then head over to the other side of town. Looking the way you do, the girls on South Street'll fall over themselves to offer you a good time."

Hawk's grin widened. "So you think I'm good looking then."

She gave him a sharp look. "I didn't say that. Move your leg please. You're blocking my way."

"I know." Hawk's smile faded a little as his side reminded him that it had holes in it. This one was damn hard to charm. Normally all he had to do was flash a smile, twinkle the old baby blues, and it was instant panty remover. Perhaps she batted for the other team? He tried again, his tone more serious.

"Thing is, I have some very specific needs."

"I don't want to hear about your fetishes. Excuse me." Her lips pursed tight as she made to brush past him. He shot his hand out and grabbed her arm, stopping her as he flicked his jacket open to reveal the ripped T-shirt and the deep, barely healed wounds furrowing his side. "I need a Warden. Seen one hereabouts?"

Shit, he was injured. A gasp and a wince of sympathy escaped Lyssa before she could stop them. Her gaze flicked from his wounded side back up to his eyes. They were a deep, crystalline blue, as clear as a winter's sky. She always thought the eyes were the most attractive and revealing thing about a person. Having seen the damage on his side, she now noticed the lines of pain and fatigue etched amongst the tiny laugh lines.

"I'm not a Warden," she said on automatic. Which was true. She might be Warden-born, but that didn't mean she had an ounce of magical ability in her.

"You got a mark on your back which says otherwise, sweetheart. And I *really* need a Warden right about now." His voice was tight but not begging. Lyssa didn't think a guy like him was capable of begging—too much male pride—but there was a tone there she couldn't ignore.

Her fingers tightened around the empty mug, and she nodded. "Okay, I'm almost done here. Meet me outside. But I can't promise much, understand?"

* * * * *

In the shadows outside the diner, Hawk eased into a more comfortable slouch against the wall and waited for the Warden. He propped one foot against the brickwork and thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

He shook his head slightly as he recalled their conversation. She'd been so open, every emotion visible on her delicate face. Irritation with him, and an interest she'd tried hard to conceal, seemed to be the main contenders.

There had been something else though. An odd pull, as if he recognized her somehow, which was madness since he knew he'd never

seen her before in his life. He put the thought to the back of his mind for now. All that mattered was that his little waitress was a Warden. He'd always believed the Fates were total bitches, eager to screw any guy over, but here they were, dropping a Warden in his lap right when he needed one.

The door opened, and Hawk looked up, vision sharp in the darkness of the shadows. His little Warden stepped out the door of the diner, looping her purse over her shoulder until it lay across her body. She was a pretty little thing; slender and petite with an ethereal air that did things to him on a very male level. An image flashed in his mind. That dark hair spread in a halo around her on the bed, and those violet eyes dark with passion....

One night, she'd said. Sanctuary. She couldn't refuse him; it was what Wardens did. Warriors fought the things that went bump in the night, and Wardens took care of the magical side of things. They pedalled protection spells, amulets and potions. If one needed a magical circle, and a circle of salt just wouldn't cut it, one called a Warden in. They came, they saw, they left graffiti all over the floor. Painted, carved into stone or wood, nothing got past a Warden's circle, and that was just a magical circle, a temporary protection. Havens—a Warden's home ground—were reputed to be unassailable, the magical equivalent of Fort Knox.

"Car's this way," she said as she passed him and headed for the alleyway at the side of the diner. Hawk pushed off the wall with a grunt and followed her, his gaze dropping to admire her ass. It was an automatic reaction; he was male—very male—and she had a great ass.

His brows snapped together as they turned the corner and into the darkened alleyway. Typical of the inner city, it was an oddly shaped gap just large enough for a couple of Dumpsters and a small car. It was saved from being badly lit by not being lit at all. The single lamp over one of the doors was out of action and had been for some time if the bird's nest in the broken cover was any indication. Instead, the alleyway was shrouded in darkness and tucked out of sight of the street. All in all it was the perfect place for an attack.

Hawk's scowl deepened as his companion searched around in her

purse for her keys. He couldn't believe this. Did the woman have no bloody common sense whatsoever?

"You should have found those before you left the diner," he said in disapproval. It was a good job he was here with her. Distracted like that, she'd make an easy target for any random nut wandering the streets.

She shot him a look through her bangs. "Who do you think you are? My bloody father?"

Hawk sighed. This was why he was glad he had no family to speak of. *Stupid I can look after myself even though I obviously have no clue how to females*, who didn't have the common sense they were damn well born with.

"No. But I pity the poor man with a daughter like you," he snapped back, exhaustion and pain making his tone sharper than he intended. "You do realize you could easily be attacked down here and no one would know?"

She shrugged, a dismissive gesture, and carried on with her search. Hawk ground his teeth in frustration. He wasn't used to being ignored, especially not when he was trying to tell her something for her own benefit.

"Aha! I found them. They always hide in the corners for some reason." She pulled the keys from the tiny excuse for a purse in triumph. Hawk looked at it. It wasn't big enough to get a decent sized...well, anything...in, so how she could lose anything in the damn thing was beyond him.

"Did you hear a word I just said?"

"Hmm?" She bent her knees, ducking down and squinting as she tried to find the keyhole in the door. Hawk prayed for strength.

"About being attacked? Here? Don't be stupid. It's far too close to the diner for anyone to try anything here," she said with a small chuckle, managing to get her keys in the lock finally and started to open the door.

Hawk lost his temper and reached out to slam it shut. She needed to be taught a lesson about personal safety before she got herself hurt for real. And he was just the guy to do it.

Lyssa jumped at his sudden movement and started to back away.

All of a sudden he looked very dangerous, the expression on his face grim and forbidding. She tried to dodge away, but he was too quick. A hard hand closed around her upper arm and hauled her up against him.

"Is that so?" he muttered, his lips inches from hers.

Lyssa lost the ability to think or breathe as her eyes locked with his. Darkness swirled in the blue depths joined by a heat that made her go weak at the knees. To her shame, her body reacted in seconds, the nipples beneath her cotton T-shirt tightening to hard beads, and a flutter starting deep in her abdomen.

Oh god, I'm a tart.... Please let him kiss me...so close, he has to! She should have felt threatened, but she didn't. One look in his eyes just inches from hers, and she knew he wouldn't hurt her. Not physically anyway.

"S-sorry, you were saying?" she asked, belatedly realizing he'd spoken.

A slow grin spread over his lips and took her breath away. Snarling and surly he'd been cute as hell, but smiling? He was drop-dead gorgeous. Lyssa barely managed to restrain a whimper as he leaned down, his lips almost brushing hers.

"Doesn't matter...." His voice was a soft whisper, lost to Lyssa's ears as soon as his lips touched hers. Not the demanding, hard touch she expected but a softer, gentle exploration. His lips slanted over hers, his hand sliding to the nape of her neck and tilting her head to just the angle he wanted.

His lips wandered. Softly at first, sliding caressingly before his tongue brushed against the full curve of her lower lip. She gasped, opening instinctively for him, and moaned as he deepened the kiss, his tongue teasing along hers in a slow, sensual mimicry of love-making.

Oh, hell, can this guy kiss or what? Lyssa had never been on the receiving end of such an explosively sensual kiss before. She stood on tiptoes, pressing herself against him and wrapping her arms around his shoulders. A small sound of frustration broke from her throat as he lifted his head to look down at her.

"Oh...wow," she managed, blinking in surprise. She opened her

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mouth again, but before she could speak, all hell broke loose.

Chapter Two

Hawk sensed the attack less than a heartbeat before it happened. His normally sharp instincts were dulled, all wrapped up in the tempting little package in his arms. He had a fraction of a second to react, wrapping her in his arms and turning toward the car, protecting her with his body as he ducked his head. The fireball hit, and his spell shield flared brightly as the alley lit up like daylight for a second.

Hawk opened his eyes. He didn't have time to think about the curvy figure pressed against him, nor the response of his body, a heavy need for her, which was edging near obsession. A feeling made worse as she squirmed against him, oblivious to his distress.

Not making a comment, he told himself firmly. A promise that was easy to keep as he saw the fear in her eyes.

"You're up, sweetheart," he prompted. She was the Warden here after all; spells and hocus-pocus were right up her alley, quite literally in this case.

Lyssa looked up at him, a blank expression in her eyes. "Huh? What do you expect me to do?"

Another spell broke across his back, and Hawk grunted as he braced his legs against the force. "Much as I like getting all up close and personal, my back is getting a little toasty here, and that shield's not going to hold out much longer. You want to make it snappy with the abracadabra?"

"I *told* you I'm not a damn Warden!" she snapped, panic and

confusion in her voice as she flicked a glance over his shoulders.

Crr-aack! The shield took another hit. From the changing color surrounding him every time it got hit—moving from cool moss-green to sickly yellow-green—Hawk knew it wouldn't last much longer.

"Just get us out of here!"

She wasn't going to do anything. Shock filled Hawk as she looked up at him pleadingly, as though trusting him to do something to get them out of here. Trust, that's what did him. He was a Warrior; his duty was to protect those weaker than himself, and a terrified Warden-girl that looked as though she weighed less than a wet kitten definitely fit into that category.

Caught, he was mesmerised by her large violet eyes when another spell hit, breaking over his back with enough force to make him grunt and snap out of it. What maggot had got into his head? He'd never been bespelled by a woman, and if he didn't know better, he'd be checking her for a set of fangs.

"After the next hit," he told her. "It'll take him a while to set up the next incantation."

He winced and rolled his shoulders, trying to dissipate the heat. Whoever attacked them obviously wasn't used to dealing with the Warrior kind. The attacks—while numerous—were weak. Anyone with experience knew that if he wanted a Warrior dead, then to take him out in a single hit because a Warrior sure as hell didn't give second chances. Hit hard and fast, hard enough to break through all the magical protection a Warrior wore. And it was a known fact that was a lot.

Warriors invested in the best magical protection money could buy. Hell, half of them clinked when they moved, thanks to the sheer number of amulets and rings required to provide even the basic protection. Hawk wasn't a jewellery kind of guy, but his own fingers were filled with rings of every size and description.

The Wardens who made them, though, had a twisted sense of humour. Most of the high-level protection stuff Hawk and his brothers needed had a distinctly feminine look to them. Warriors and Wardens didn't get along too well, and since Warriors tended to be almost

exclusively male, Hawk suspected it was intentional.

They had no choice but to grin and bear it. The only other way was to have the wards tattooed directly onto their skin. Trouble was, it wasn't like getting a normal tattoo. A ward couldn't just be drawn. Well, they could, but all that would be was a drawing of a ward.

To make it work, to make any ward work, whoever drew it had to draw on the witching at the same time to infuse it with power. An ordinary tattoo artist just couldn't do that, and Hawk had never heard of an Ink Warden setting up outside the Havens. If one did, and Hawk heard about it, he'd make sure he was camped out on the guy's doorstep to get inked.

She nodded at his words, her eyes as wide as saucers. Then the expression in them changed, became more thoughtful. "Fourteen seconds is average to cast an incantation. Give or take," she whispered, surprising him.

How many people, even Wardens, would have known that? "What are you? Some kind of spell nerd?"

She flushed but didn't get time to answer as another fireball splashed across his back.

"Now. Go," he urged, hauling her by her arm as he yanked the car door open. Shoving her inside with more haste than finesse, he slammed the door shut and half vaulted, half scrambled over the trunk to get out of the line of fire. Even un-warded as the car was, it should still take one or two hits before they needed to worry and, all being well, they should be out of there before it gave.

He hoped anyway. The way his luck was going recently, he'd get into the car just as she dropped the keys and they ended up as crispy critter. To his relief, the engine fired as he opened the door. He slid into the passenger seat with seconds to spare as she slammed the car into gear and hit the gas.

The small vehicle shot out of the alley and careened across the small parking lot and took a corner sharply. Hawk closed his eyes for a second as he felt the car start to lift onto two wheels. He'd survived battles with the nastiest demons out there, he'd hunted vamps right into their

lairs, and he'd even baited a Valkyrie or two. But now he was about to get totalled by a maniac of a woman driver.

"Wheels. Road. More contact would be good," he managed as another fireball hit the side of the car. The flames splashed across the side windows in a display that would make a pyromaniac wet with need. "Try and keep us in one piece?"

"Who's driving this bloody thing, me or you?" she snapped, squeaking and ducking to the side as the flames curled around the windshield.

Then they were gone, the magic burned out before the fire could gain purchase on another fuel source. Hawk turned in his seat as the diner disappeared into the distance. Two fireballs splashed across the asphalt behind them, but they were too late. The car was already out of range.

"Take a left," he ordered. "Random changes of direction and we should lose him, even if he's got a Hermes charm."

She nodded and threw the car into the next turn as if all the hounds of hell were after them.

"Hey, hey, might want to slow it down a little. Gonna do us no good to get pulled by the cops now. We'd be sitting ducks if that spell slinger catches up with us."

Lyssa nodded and slowed the car. It wasn't easy. The skin between her shoulder blades itched with the need to stomp on the gas and get them to safety as quickly as possible. But he had a point. They couldn't afford to get the human cops involved in all this, and that was what would happen if she carried on speeding.

"The thing I don't understand," she said after a few more changes of direction, "is why a Second Sigil would want to attack me and a Goth?"

"You and me both, babe."

Lyssa slid a glance sideways, still confused by the whole turn of events as her savior shrugged his coat to a more comfortable fit on his shoulders. Then he stopped and half turned, craning his neck to look down his back.

"Great, it's toasted the leather. Do you know how difficult it is to get a jacket like this these days? Hang on, Goth? "

Lyssa waved her hand at him, indicating his appearance. Honestly, had the guy not looked in a mirror recently? "You. Pale skin, all the black, and you're wearing more jewellery than a Wiccan's market stall. Goth," she said as he shook his head. "And then there's the leather thing you got going on...biker then?"

"Do I look like the sort of guy that wears makeup to you?"

Lyssa shrugged. "So sue me. You certainly fit the stereotype. You sure you're not wearing makeup? No one's naturally that pale."

"I'm pale because I work nights; I don't get out in the sun much." He folded his arms over his chest and stared out the windshield.

Lyssa stole another glance as she changed lanes. He was pale, too pale, he worked nights by his own admission, and he was stronger than anything she'd ever seen. Her mind raced, making all sorts of connections. Trouble was, sometimes she looked at two plus two, and made a hundred and seventeen.

"Oh shit, you're a vampire," She said on a breath and slammed on the brakes.

The car slewed to a stop in the middle of the road. Luckily it was a residential area and the road was deserted at this time of night. Lyssa scrabbled with the door handle and was out of the car in seconds.

"Huh, what? Vampire?" Hawk asked, confused, as she shot off like a hound after a rabbit. Vampire? Just where the *hell* had she gotten that one from?

"Just my freaking luck. I find a Warden, and she's bloody nuts," Hawk muttered as he threw the door open and set off after her.

It took him less than the width of the street to catch her, her shorter legs no match for his, and within moments he was struggling back up the road with a kicking, squealing bundle.

"Just put me *down* you...you...bloody Brad Pitt wannabe!" She still struggled as he dumped her rather unceremoniously in the passenger seat and leaned over her.

"Look, I am *not* a vampire! If I was, I'd have ripped your throat out already just to shut you up." He was curt, needled by the Brad Pitt comment. "I'm a Warrior, and one that's *really* interested in why the

Wardens want one of their own dead."

Lyssa froze, her eyes wide. If there was anything worse than a Vampire, it was a Warrior. To a Warden, anyway.

Then things started to make sense. All her life she'd been fed stories of the darker side of her world and the Warriors who kept the creatures of darkness at bay. Born to fight the darkness, preternaturally strong, as fast as a vampire, they were little better than the creatures they hunted. Bloodthirsty and violent, they were known to stalk Warden-born women and drag them off...

Lyssa shivered. *Drag them off where, and do what to them exactly?* Now that she was faced with a real live Warrior, the prospect wasn't all that terrifying. Of course, it helped that he didn't have horns and a tail. Still, old habits died hard, and all she could do was stare at him.

"Wardens? I haven't a clue what you're on about," she said and then kicked herself as she remembered she'd already identified the spell caster as a Second Sigil.

He grinned and leaned forwards. "Nice try. In that case, tell me, Little Miss I'm not a Warden, why are you wearing a Warden symbol on the skin of your back?"

"Ok, so I'm Warden-born, so what?" She admitted, on edge after being attacked with magic and by being in the presence of a Warrior. Particularly one that was quite so...unsettling. "I don't know why he attacked us. I don't live in a Haven. So you could say I'm a little out of the loop."

He frowned, the expression making his features darker. Lyssa shivered again. She sure wouldn't want him pissed off at her.

"You're kidding me." He dropped his head, his dark hair falling forward as his shoulders slumped. "Great, the one Warden I find doesn't live at a damn Haven. I suppose you changed your mind then."

"One night." Her voice brought his head up, an expression of hope and relief in his eyes that speared her right through. "But you get the couch, and you go in the morning, okay?"

He nodded, a small smile playing over his lips. "You're an angel..." He sighed. "Hey, what *is* your name anyway? I can't keep calling you

Warden-girl, can I? I'm Hawk."

"Lyssa," she said, an answering smile on her lips as the moment stretched between them, a moment of companionship and reaching out.

"And I know what you guys are like. Any funny stuff and I'll turn you into a frog, okay?" She wriggled her fingers at him as though to cast. It was an empty threat, but he didn't know that.

"Yeah, but frogs get kissed, don't they?"

* * * * *

Once they'd traded places and set off again, it didn't take them long to reach Lyssa's block. "I'm just up the road here," she said as they turned onto the road.

"Slow down a little. Don't pull up right in front," he said, his voice serious as he leaned forward to study whatever it was men like him needed to study out of a windshield. Lyssa shrugged but did as she was told and pulled the car into a spot a couple of hundred yards down from her building. The street light there was out, so it was a natural pool of darkness.

"This good?"

"Yeah, perfect. Looks clean so far. Make sure you've got your door key ready," he ordered, doing the whole male-in-charge thing that made Lyssa grit her teeth and fight the urge to slap him upside the ear.

She turned the engine off and pulled the keys from the ignition to jingle at him. "Right here. Anything else, Dad?"

He shot her a dark look. "Just watch it, missy, or I'll have you over my lap to paddle your arse."

She chuckled, unfazed by the look, and slid out of the car. Anticipating the comforts of home despite the disturbing presence of the Warrior at her side, she moved to step out of the shadows only to have an arm clamp around her, pulling her back into the cover of darkness with a forcefulness that made her gasp.

"Hey, mister, it's just frogs that get kissed..." She struggled against his arm, struggles that were pointless. His arm was like an iron bar, his

warm breath brushing gently over the side of her neck as he held her still. Her body threatened to melt into a small puddle of need. "...and you're more of a toad."

"Shut up. Look, over there by the door, and there on the corner."

Lyssa frowned and looked in the directions he pointed out. As she watched, the shadows formed figures just where he said. Figures with faces she recognised as one of them stepped forward under the light of a street lamp just opposite them, holding a cell to his ear.

"No, boss, she gave us the slip. Got some help. Looks to be a Warrior. Big bastard, leather coat.... No, he shouldn't be a problem. Don't worry; she'll be dead by morning. Okay, okay! Gotcha. Dead before dawn."

Chapter Three

Dead before dawn....

"Dead?" Lyssa whispered. "They're here to kill *me*?" Her voice echoed with disbelief and hurt, the merest whisper in the darkness as Hawk pulled her deeper into concealment. His body was taut and alert behind her, a fact Lyssa barely registered through her shock. She was too busy watching the guy opposite. He flipped the phone shut and slid it into a pocket before turning and walking toward Lyssa's building.

"That's David Trent. He cried on the first day of school."

She rubbed her abdomen with one hand, feeling sick to her stomach. Which had always seemed a silly saying, but now she knew exactly what it meant. A clawing sick feeling coiled in the pit of her stomach like a pit of hyperactive snakes before trying to crawl up her throat and out.

She'd been tolerated in the Havens. She knew that. She was a null—a Warden born without power, a freak of nature, which made her something to be feared. She'd tried once to point out that it just made her human. After all, Wardens had been human once upon a time, before they got their magical abilities.

But it was to no avail. In the eyes of Warden Society, a null was something sub-human. Mothers had even snatched their children away if Lyssa walked by, as if her lack of power was somehow catching.

But to kill her because she was different?

"This is an execution squad," she realized, her gaze flitting from

one figure to another. She recognized each of them and, like her attacker in the alley, not one was above a Second Sigil. Just as she'd suspected, no Warden would use that particular fireball spell once they'd learned something more advanced. So they were Wardens in training, ones she knew were destined to be Battle Wardens. Anger shook her.

"No, not an execution squad. This is a *training* exercise," she spat, contempt in her voice. "They're using killing me as a damn training exercise! How freaking low can you get?"

Hawk nodded. His heart, an organ he'd long thought dead, wrenched for her as she worked the situation out for herself. It had been obvious since the diner attack that someone wanted her dead.

Those spells hadn't been strong enough to take out a Warrior. Not without a sustained attack, anyway, which wasn't something the average Warrior tended to allow. Attacks like that ended one way and one way only—with the Warrior's blades buried firmly in the spell-slinger's throat. Which meant he'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and they were after her.

Although they hadn't been spotted yet, a quick twist of his wrist dropped a blade into his palm. Even recently injured and exhausted as he was, he'd still fight the lot of them to protect her, as any Warrior would for his woman.

Whoa.... Where had *that* one come from? Hawk blinked in shock. She wasn't *his* woman. Not in any way, shape or form. He'd only just met the girl, and within the last hour someone had tried to fry them to death, and he'd heard a bully boy Warden mark her for death.

Hawk didn't think much of the so-called Battle Wardens. They might carry some fancy-ass weaponry, but it was all for show. He doubted any of them ever drew a blade in the heat of battle. After all, why bother when they could just wiggle their fingers?

But still, the Wardens wanted her dead. And there were an awful lot of them compared to just one of him. If he had any sense, he'd dump her pretty little ass right here and get the hell out of Dodge.

Then she turned to him. Her eyes glittered in the darkness, their glorious color bright with unshed tears and hurt. Hawk's heart lurched

again. *This is such a bad idea*, he told himself as he drew her away from the car.

"Leave it; they'll have a trace on it soon. Come on, sweetheart, let's get out of here."

* * * * *

It didn't take long for Hawk to find them somewhere to stay. Within minutes he was opening the door to a motel room and urging Lyssa through it ahead of him. Closing it, he threw the lock and bent to look through the blind at the window. The parking lot outside was empty. Good, they hadn't been followed.

Lyssa wandered around the room, deliberately not looking at him. He watched her for a long moment, confusion filling him.

"What?" she asked, putting her hand up to her face in a self-conscious manner. "Have I got a mark on my nose or something?"

"Aren't you going to ward the door and the windows?" Nothing about this woman made sense. She was Warden-born but didn't live in a Haven, she'd frozen at a magical attack, and the rest of the Wardens had signed a death warrant on her. There was something else going on here, something Hawk wasn't seeing.

"How the hell do you expect me to do that? I'm a bloody null, ok? No...magic," she said, her breath catching on a sob as she ran for the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

Hawk blinked in surprise, staring at the door as the lock clicked.

O-kay, that explains a few things. He shrugged to himself, experience kicking in. Secure their bolthole first, and then work out what the hell was going on.

* * * * *

Hate to break it to you, honey, but you look like shit. Lyssa stared at herself in the tiny mirror in the equally tiny bathroom. Some women looked wonderful when they cried. Their eyes sparkled as tears filled

them, tears that streaked artfully down their cheeks accompanied by small, delicate sobs.

Lyssa wasn't one of them. When Lyssa cried she sounded like a cross between a pig and a donkey, her eyes went bright red, and her nose ran so much it could double as an Olympic contender. Which was a bitch, she decided as she patted at tear-puffed eyes with a wad of wet tissue in the vain hope it might bring the redness down.

It didn't. The tissue broke up and left her with scattered bits of toilet paper on her face instead. "Typical," she grumbled, swiping the flecks off with a shaky hand.

Sighing, she tried to repair the damage as best she could, wishing she hadn't left her purse in the other room. So she did the best she could with what she had, which was nothing. But nothing short of a full makeover was going to help her out much here, she thought as she studied her reflection and put off the moment she had to emerge from the bathroom.

What on earth had possessed her to blow up at him like that? It wasn't as if any of this was his fault. In fact, if he hadn't been around, she'd be dead in that alley, or another along the route, her body burned to a crisp. She shivered, swiping at her eyes again.

Gathering her courage, she threw the tissues in the wastebasket and unlocked the door, closing it behind her as she looked around the small room. Her attention was drawn to him, and she admired his broad shoulders as he bent over at the window. Didn't he ever take that bloody jacket off?

"What are you doing?" she asked, her gaze wandering over the crude designs he was drawing in the salt. They almost looked like...

"Are those supposed to be wards?" She chuckled. "Sorry to break it to you, handsome, but those wouldn't even keep a Boggart out. Where'd you pick them up? A book on old wive's tales?"

"If you think you can do better, you do it!" he snapped and stalked away to drop into the chair by the bed.

Lyssa cast a glance over her shoulder, trying to see if he was making fun of her. The null trying to draw a ward? What could be more

ridiculous?

She looked at the designs in the salt and shook her head. Well, she couldn't do any worse. At the least she could use the basic, passive wards that would keep things like Boggarts and other little nasties out. She reached out and brushed away the designs Hawk had drawn, levelling the salt to start again.

She was beautiful. Hawk watched her from the other side of the room, slouched in the chair, his chin propped on his hand. Her slender finger sketched in the salt with delicate movements while her other hand traced absently in the air, her lips moving silently.

As he watched, the potential of the wards took shape in the air above the salt. His eyes narrowed. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. *Was she...?* She *was*! She was sketching in the witching *itself*.

Stunned, Hawk shook his head. Whoever had told her she was powerless didn't have a clue. He could feel the power in the room, the witching *itself*, reacting to her. And the witching was a fickle thing at the best of times. Hawk had seen fully trained Battle Wardens struggle with it as they tried to bend it to their will and force it to comply. Which was just plain stupid. Forcing the witching was like trying to plait jam—impossible.

However, it wasn't evading Lyssa. It was reacting to her lovingly, all but wrapping itself around her and begging for attention. But she ignored it, as though she didn't or couldn't see it.

Hawk frowned.

Why had the Wardens told her she was powerless when she obviously wasn't? Why had she never been taught?

He searched his memories, finally latching onto something. A half remembered conversation that rapidly became suspicion as she moved around the room, warding all the entrances, even the little window in the bathroom.

He swallowed hard as she finished the last of the wards, feeling like doing a little begging himself. She turned, wiping the loose salt from her fingers, and caught him looking at her.

"What's up with you? Show's over, buddy."

"Are you a virgin?" His question was abrupt and to the point, accompanied by a direct look from those dark eyes.

"What? Yes...no! What the hell's it got to do with you? You running some sort of survey on Warden sexual habits or something?"

Instantly defensive, Lyssa went on the attack. Something she'd learned early in life. If she didn't have anything else to fight with—strength, magic, family connections—then she fought with words.

"I bloody wish! You people are that far up your own bloody arses these days a Warrior can't even get into a Haven half the time, never mind anything else."

That was when she realized how stiffly he was holding himself and remembered he'd been wounded. "Are you ok?" she asked, quite unprepared for the reaction she got.

Hawk's expression turned dark, pinning her with a hot, hard glare.

"Oh, yeah. I'm just bloody fine. I'm stuck in a motel room until dawn, temptation staring me in the face, and claw marks up my back to boot! So yeah, I'm tip-top. Thanks for asking!"

Lyssa's heart lurched. She'd only seen the nearly healed wounds on his side, but he was saying he had more?

"Where?" She demanded, marching over and matching him glare for glare. "Show me."

"Bossy mare," he grumbled but did as she asked, shedding the heavy jacket and sitting on the bed. Lyssa gasped when she saw his back. The black shirt he was wearing was virtually shredded and the fabric soaked in drying and not-so-dry blood.

"Oh my god, what happened?" she asked, kneeling on the bed and trying to see what sort of damage she was dealing with. "These...hell, you weren't joking, were you? These really are claw marks!"

"Demons," Hawk replied. His eyes were closed, and the soft touch of her hand on his shoulder was more soothing than he'd admit.

It had been a long time since any woman had looked at him in concern, with worry in her voice. A little of his anger, his frustration, drained away.

"Used a heal-all potion back in the diner so most of it should be

closed up now. Just didn't have enough juice for the worst of them. Got mauled pretty bad," he admitted, although that wasn't the half of it. Only his training and years of experience had kept him on his feet and alive tonight. He was damn lucky to still be breathing. But she didn't need to know that. She seemed worried enough already.

"Ok, stay there. I'll get something to clean you up."

He nodded and dropped his head forward, resting his elbows on his knees. The bed behind him dipped as she disappeared off into the bathroom for the second time that night.

Hawk, how do you get yourself in these messes? Resignation and frustration warred in him, all centred on his beautiful, sexy companion. Her instinctive reaction had been too telling.

She was a virgin.

At least he knew now why she hadn't come into her power. If he didn't miss his guess, she was an Earth Warden, drawing her power from sex. So, no sex, no power. And, even though they needed a fully charged Earth Warden right about now, he knew he couldn't take her innocence. Not a man like him. She needed proper courting, flowers, and all that mushy crap. It wasn't something Hawk had in him.

Lyssa was gone less than a minute. She returned with a wet washcloth in her hand and crawled onto the bed behind him. She winced at the sight of the claw marks, mostly silvery scars now, thanks to the heal-all potion. As gently as she could, she started washing his skin down, cleaning the dried blood and avoiding the marks that still looked raw.

Silence stretched between them as she tended to his wounds. Who did this usually? Was there a Mrs. Hawk who usually did this, waiting for him to come home from a hard night of battling demons and who tended his weary body when he did? Had she just been a moment's temporary diversion in the alley? Jealousy shot through her, making her hand a little heavier as she scrubbed at a particularly stubborn spot of blood.

"Oi!" He flinched away from her. "You're not scrubbing tables now, so take it easy, would you?"

"Sorry." Lyssa bit her lip as she swept the cloth over his skin again. All the blood was gone, but she liked touching him, so she kept going, her

strokes getting lighter and lighter...

"That'll do now. Stop." The growled order took her by surprise, and her hand stilled for a moment.

"I'm not done."

"Yes, you bloody well are!" he snapped, twisting around and grabbing her wrist. The next moment Lyssa found herself flat on her back, pinned under a hard male body. A very hard, very aroused, male body.

"I said...stop."

His voice was dangerously low, but nowhere near as dangerous as the look in his eyes. What she read there took her breath away. Frustration, anger, and a deep burning need. She'd thought he was indifferent to her, that the kiss in the alley was just his way of proving a point. Now that his guards had been stripped away, she could see what it cost him not to touch her, could see the control that was so close to breaking. A thrill at her own feminine power filled her.

"Why?" she asked, her eyes wide and oh-so-innocent.

"Don't play games with me, little Warden," he bit out. "I don't play by the rules, and you won't like what happens."

"I might..." Her voice trailed off as she reached out with her free hand to touch his chest. She didn't know what was driving her, she *never* acted like this, but there was just something about him. Something about the expanse of skin across his chest that demanded she touch it, stroke it.

He moved like lightening, his hand snapping out and strong fingers closing around her wrist. First one, then the other, capturing both and stretching them above her head where he held them easily with one hand.

Excitement shot through her as she felt the small tremble in his hands. He was so close to snapping. She should stop, not push his control any more, but she couldn't help it, couldn't resist baiting the tiger.

"Don't," he repeated, although with her hands above her head like this there was no way she was doing anything. She just looked at him, her eyes wide with mock innocence.

"It's a bad idea." There was an edge of frustration in his voice as he answered, and they both knew he wasn't talking about her cleaning his

back. They'd gone way past that.

"Why?"

"It just is, okay?"

Spread out on the bed, her dark hair fanned around her delicate, heart-shaped face, she was every guy's dream. She was *his* dream. He groaned as his cock jerked, and he closed his eyes for a moment as he prayed for strength. "You have no idea what you're saying."

Lyssa matched him look for look. "We're both above the age of consent here. So what's the problem?"

"You're a virgin."

"And?" she asked, and then laughed. She couldn't believe this. "Ok, so I'm arguing with a hot guy about whether we're going to have sex... Time out! I thought it was supposed to be the other way around? Would it help if I promised it won't take long?"

Hawk's eyes blazed, making her smile die on her lips. It was a look so hot she was surprised the air between them didn't pop and crack—sizzling as it burned up. Her body agreed, responding wordlessly as a wet heat slipped between her thighs.

"Not sex," he growled. His hands tightened on her wrists, his anger visible as he moved over her, the hard wall of his chest brushing her breasts.

"Well, what would you call it? Surely we don't need to go through the birds and the bees here."

Her sassy attitude faded as his hand closed around her throat. Heart lurching, she felt the latent strength in his fingers and realized just how strong he was. He could snap her neck like a twig if he wanted to.

Hawk cursed himself as fear replaced the teasing in her eyes. It was enough to gentle his movements, and he used his thumb to turn her chin, brushing the sensitive spot just under her ear and making her shiver.

"Because, sweetheart," he said on a breath, their eyes only inches apart, "we won't just be having sex, we'll be fucking like bunnies. And I promise you, it won't be over quickly."

Chapter Four

Ohmigod.

The look in his eyes caught her off guard; a promise of dark heat and passion that had her heart stuttering in her chest. Her body got in on the act and clenched tightly as her clit throbbed in response.

"Not over quickly?" she managed to respond. How, she had no clue, but there were words coming out of her mouth without the apparent intervention of her brain. Since it was better than her standard, "Errr..." in situations like this, she didn't try to stop them. "If that's your way of trying to dissuade me, then I'd say you failed on an epic scale."

Hawk had meant to shock her. By showing her a little of the dark passion currently tying him in knots, he'd hoped to scare her feminine sensibilities, hoped that her natural caution of the unknown—what with her being a virgin—would do the rest for him.

No such luck.

He hadn't counted on the response being interest. An interest that lit up her violet eyes and had him hard and aching. As if he hadn't had that damn problem already. He was so hard he was sure he was going to burst the zipper of his pants at any moment. He'd already ruined his jacket; he could do without having to fork out for new pants as well.

Damn Sex Wardens, he cursed, stuck between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, a roll in the hay with an Earth Warden would be beneficial. The magical fallout from her pleasure would heal all of his wounds and other aches and pains. But on the other hand, she was a

virgin, and Hawk didn't do virgins. He didn't have the patience to be gentle and mollicoddle them. Not when he just wanted a good, hard fuck, like now.

His lips hovered mere millimeters from hers. How he'd gotten there without noticing, he didn't know. Just one kiss, he told himself. Just one taste, and then he'd let her go and tell her she needed to find a nice little Warden-boy to shag and release her abilities.

His lips brushed hers once, twice... He groaned, a needy sound deep down in his chest. She tasted wonderful. Cinnamon and vanilla with a hint of something else...something exotic. His tongue stroked out and teased along her upper lip to get her to open up for him. As soon as she did, he deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue along hers to plunder the sweet recesses beyond her lips.

She was soft, sweet, and more responsive than any man had a right to. Her tentative response fired his possessive nature. Not just her first Warrior, but the first man to ever touch her.

Hawk stopped suddenly, his head bent over her neck as he tried to get control of himself. Christ, he hadn't felt this out of control since he'd been a lad with his first woman. *Or quite so close to spending himself in his pants either*, he admitted ruefully.

Bracing his arms on either side of her head, he sighed. She was an innocent. He could quite easily keep her distracted and off balance until she was begging him to take her. But would that be fair? He wasn't quite that much of a bastard.

"If you don't want this, move. Now," he ordered gruffly, his instincts screaming at him for giving her the choice. All he wanted to do was strip the clothes from her and bury himself balls deep in her soft body.

She didn't move; just lay under him, her hands unmoving on his shoulders.

Hawk opened his eyes and pulled back to look at her. "Didn't you hear me?" he asked, his brows pulling together. "If you don't want this, then you need to say now."

"And if I don't move?" She arched an eyebrow at him, the pulse in

her neck fluttering rapidly. She was nervous as hell, but the stubborn little look on her face said she'd never admit it.

Hawk gritted his teeth as his cock jerked. He held his hips still through sheer willpower, stopping them from grinding against hers. "Then I fuck you. Good and hard, all night. You want that little Warden? To get screwed by the big, bad Warrior?"

Hawk's crude words sent a thrill through Lyssa, one that intensified the ache at her core. A tremble ran through her body as the butterflies in her stomach went into full-scale riot. She wasn't afraid, despite his harsh words and the forbidding look on his face. She knew he wouldn't hurt her. Besides, most other men would have just carried on, not given her the choice when she was incapable of putting a stop to this herself.

"Yes," she surprised even herself with the sudden answer. "I'm damn well fed up. Not good enough for the Wardens because I've got no magic. Not good enough for you because I'm a virgin. Well, I'm fed up of it. Just fuck me and let's have done with it."

Hawk's lips quirked a little, a grin he quickly hid. "Then I suppose you're going out there and laying the smack-down on those Wardens?"

Her violet eyes were hard as she replied, deadpan. "Damn straight. If I had an ounce of power, I'd make them wish they'd never been born. Do you know what you get to study if you can't cast?" She didn't give him chance to answer. "Spells, wards. The history of wards. I can tell you how to cast pretty much every damn ward there is, but I can't cast the bloody things myself."

Hawk's smile grew. "Good, now that we have that settled, can we get back to the sex?"

Lyssa's smile was slow but broad, transforming her face. Hawk sucked in a breath. He'd known she was beautiful, but like this, pinned under him on a bed with the promise of sex hanging in the air, she was glorious.

She was going to be the death of him. The thought came out of nowhere. Hawk ignored it, the needs of his body overpowering all else. He wanted her, needed her, and he was going to have her. *All of her*, he

decided. Everything that was male about him wanted to stake a claim and make a mark on her.

He bent his head and took her lips in a searing kiss. One that lasted an eternity yet was over too soon all at the same time. His lips trailed down her neck, leaving a line of fire in their wake.

Lyssa caught her breath as she registered the change in him. It was as if he'd been playing before but now he'd made the decision they were going to do this.

He found the sensitive spot under her ear and nuzzled it. A moan broke from her as pleasure cascaded through her body. It was new and at the same time familiar. How could it be familiar though? She'd never done this before. Rolling her hips, she pressed against him as frustration mounted within her. It wasn't enough. She needed more, much more.

Large hands smoothed across her waist, pulling her shirt up so he could reach her skin. Warm breath puffed against the side of her neck as his hands spanned her waist, smoothing and caressing the curves there.

Their eyes locked as, wordlessly, he pulled the top up, revealing more of her body. Lyssa caught her lip at the sudden, feral need that flared in the blue depths of his eyes. It was almost a relief when the T-shirt swept over her face and blocked her view. It gave her the few seconds to catch herself without that intent gaze on her.

He stopped, not pulling the fabric clear as she expected. It slithered over her face but stopped just as it cleared her nose and mouth. She stilled, surprised by the move, then his lips were on hers again and demanding her response.

Without her sight, all Lyssa's other senses went into overdrive. The sensation of his lips on hers, the heat of his body above hers, and the slight scent of citrus aftershave over warm man all conspired to make her light-headed.

A moan broke free from her throat, and she opened for him. She wasn't an expert by any stretch of the imagination, but she'd read a lot of erotic romance, even full on erotica. It was her guilty little secret, something she had never been able to resist since she'd found out about it after leaving the Haven. So she had far more of an idea about sex than the

average twenty-something virgin, if such a thing existed. And this was hot. It was hotter than hot. It was bloody scorching.

"Stay there." His whisper was a soft order as he pinned her, her arms lifted above her head and caught in the garment that covered her eyes.

Sucking in a breath, she jumped a little as he moved down her body. His hands stroked over her sides, tracing the lines as her ribcage flowed into her waist then rounded out to her hips.

"Just relax. It'll be good, I promise."

His soft words were the most reassuring thing in the world but did nothing except agitate the restlessness at her core. His hot breath fanned over her cleavage, and she whimpered. His lips were mere millimeters above her skin, almost brushing her. At the thought, her breasts tightened, her nipples hardening under the fabric of her bra as though begging for his attention.

She opened her mouth to respond, to say something, anything, but his long fingers hooking under the clasp of her bra between her breasts silenced her. He didn't waste time in teasing her, just unclipped it. She bit her lip again, mangling the soft flesh of her lower lip as the fabric fell away and left her breasts free for his attentions.

Her nipples puckered as he blew a cool breath across them. Without warning, his lips latched around one, his tongue rolling it against his teeth for a long moment before he suckled it into the warm cavern of this mouth and pulled.

"Aieehhh!" The pleasure was intense, arcing straight from her nipple to her clit, and her hips bucked in helpless need against his. Hell, she'd nearly come there and then, and she was still half dressed. What would it be like when he got her completely naked?

The thought was accompanied by a rush of heat as his lips moved, lavishing attention on first one breast and then the other. A mindless heat that suffused outward through her body. She'd never considered her breasts—or any part of her to be honest—to be particularly sensitive. But she was fast discovering that her own inept explorations of her body, while informative when it came to anatomy, were a world away from the

way he touched her. Where her hands merely brushed and touched her skin, his brought it alive. Alive and needing more of his touch.

His hands, callused and rough from his weapons, moulded her breasts, touching and caressing as he alternated his kisses and suckling between one nipple and the other, his touch almost reverent as he paid homage to them with his lips and tongue.

He moved again, and hard hands efficiently stripped off her clothes and shoes. Seeing her chance, Lyssa took the opportunity and pulled the T-shirt the rest of the way off. She needed to look at him, needed to see what they were doing.

"Oh my."

The exclamation dropped unheeded from her lips as she got a look at him. Her first *proper* look. He'd not only stripped off her clothing, but somewhere along the way he'd managed to get naked himself. With one knee on the side of the bed, he had his cock in his hand, his gaze intent on her as he slowly pumped his fist over the stiff shaft.

Lyssa's breathing stuttered as her gaze flicked from his face down to the rigid, purple-headed cock in his hand. As she watched, he pumped a couple more times, and then used his finger to spread the bead of moisture seeping from the tiny slit over the swollen tip.

Lyssa wet her lips nervously. Sure, she'd read a lot of erotica, but she'd never actually *seen* a cock up close and personal before.

Hawk groaned as her pink tongue snaked out across her lips. His hand paused as his attention riveted to her mouth and his mind presented dozens of scenarios. Most of them included her pretty mouth and his cock, but then, he *was* male. It went with the territory. Any woman could have licked her lips and he'd be thinking the same things. He ignored the small voice inside him that argued this was different, that she was different.

It was the witching, he decided. Already he could feel it gathering, could feel its interest as sexual tension filled the room. It was as though it was watching and waiting for her to notice it.

Amazement filled him for a moment as he refocused his eyes and looked directly into the witching. The Warriors weren't a race in their own right, anyone could feel the call to fight the darkness, but almost to the last

man they had some sort of paranormal blood. Hawk's was from his fae mother, which meant he could *see* the witching. Which could be a useful talent at times.

And at times—like now—it was just damn unsettling.

Her tongue snaked out again, and Hawk bit back a groan. All thoughts of the magic gathering around them disappeared as arousal punched him hard in the gut. Looping his free hand around the ankle nearest to him, he pulled her closer. Not hard but not gently either. He wanted her, and he wanted her now.

Lyssa squeaked as she was half dragged across the bed and under the well-built Warrior who dominated not only the room but what seemed like her entire existence. He used one hand to spread her legs wide, and the feral look on his face made her shiver, and liquid heat pool between her thighs.

His hand slid up her thigh to the center of her body. She should be embarrassed but couldn't make herself listen to the small voice nagging in the back of her head. Not with him looking at her that way. Not with his hand stroking closer to the place she desperately needed him.

His fingers reached the juncture of her thighs and curled inward to cup her. Parting the soft folds of her body, he ran a finger from her pussy right up to her clit, making her buck in response. She moaned as her body made demands she wasn't sure how to deal with.

"You're wet."

His voice was a deep rumble as he leaned over her, a different note in it, as though her response had both surprised and pleased him. Then, without warning, he slid his finger deep inside her.

Lyssa gasped as her body all but went into shutdown. Tight internal muscles clamped down hard on the invading digit for want of anything more substantial, like the thick cock he was still working with the other hand. He pulled his finger from her in a slow, delicious movement and added another before sliding them both back inside. Lyssa almost bit through her lip as his fingers rubbed against nerve endings no man had touched before.

"Tight and wet. Perfect."

He moved his fingers inside her—thrusting back and forth, twisting and then spiralling, stretching the delicate flesh of her feminine sheath.

“You’re perfect,” he said on a breath. “You’ll feel like heaven...all tight and wet around my cock.” He leaned over her again. “But first I want to taste you.”

“W-what?” Lyssa’s eyes shot open, but before she could marshal more of a response he’d moved, slithering down her body and coming to a rest between her parted thighs.

His mouth latched onto her, his tongue parting her folds easily. Lyssa groaned, the sound loud in the silent room as he licked from her slit right the way up to her clit. He didn’t let up there though. He nibbled, licked, and sucked at the delicate nub of flesh and nerves until she was almost insane with need.

“Hawk...” she begged as he held her thighs opened wide so he could get better access to her body. A rumble of pleasure emanated from his broad chest as he lapped at her sopping pussy. It was pure sensory heaven, and with each stroke of his clever tongue, her body tightened further, until it was so tight it was almost painful.

She jerked and shuddered under him. Each soft moan and stifled curse was an audible treat to Hawk’s ears as he pushed her closer and closer to the edge. That she was a virgin was obvious. Her responses were untutored but honest, responding to his touch as though they’d been lovers for years rather than strangers who’d just met.

Her pleading whisper got his attention, and he eased back and looked her over. Her skin was flushed with arousal, and her breasts rose and fell in an erratic rhythm as she tried to get her breathing under control. Breathing was compromised again when he slid two fingers back inside her, teasing and testing her.

She was ready for him. He stroked her inner walls for a few seconds and smiled as her hips bucked, instinctively seeking a relief she wouldn’t be able to attain on her own.

She was an Earth Warden. Earth Wardens drew from Mother Earth herself, from her power and fertility. The fertility aspect of it in particular,

which meant she needed sex, and lots of it, to fuel her abilities. If she was a virgin—well, no sex meant no power—which accounted for her inability to cast wards. But what Hawk couldn't work out was why she thought she was a null.

It wouldn't be a problem for much longer. All she needed to kick-start her latent abilities was sex. Not sex with the average garden-variety human though. That wouldn't cut it. No, she needed to screw a guy with paranormal blood.

Hawk's cock jerked to attention at the thought, reminding him of its presence. Not as if he could forget it with the savage ache in his groin tormenting him. She needed a guy with paranormal blood. A fact his brain easily translated into her needing *him*.

Far more gently than he ever thought he was capable of, Hawk lowered himself over her. He parted her legs further with his knee so he could fit his hips between them into the soft cradle of her pelvis before he rubbed the swollen head of his cock over her clit.

She bit into her lower lip again, a lip already swollen from his kisses. Shifting his hips, he fit the head of his cock against the slick entrance to her body and leaned down to claim her lips in a demanding kiss as he started to push into her.

Her moan was lost in his mouth as he moved, her tight heat enveloping him like a glove. Fire clamped down in his core, blood racing to his cock as his balls tightened fiercely. All he wanted to do was grab her hips and shove himself inside her as far as he could go. Then fuck her so hard and thoroughly she'd never forget her first time.

First time. It was her first time. He was her first lover. A sense of pride and triumph filled him at the thought, his movements slowing and becoming gentler. He didn't do virgins normally, but surely just this once he could manage gentle and considerate? It wasn't as if it would kill him.

He rocked his hips back and forth, sliding a little farther into her with each thrust. God, she was tight. He pressed his eyes shut until he could see stars in an attempt to ward off the release that threatened to crash over him.

Gritting his teeth, he concentrated on everything but the way her

hot little body held his in a silken vice and the maddening little sounds of pleasure that went straight from his ears right down to his cock buried deep inside her, making it jump and pulse. It was amazing, the myriad of sensation enough to crack a saint's resolve. Despite the fact he was trying to be gentle, he was definitely no saint.

Then he was in her completely, sliding to the hilt with a small sigh of satisfaction. With a control he didn't know he possessed, he stopped stock still and whispered soothing sounds against her hair as he waited for her body to adjust to him.

Lyssa let out the breath she'd been holding at the unfamiliar intrusion as he stilled. She'd been expecting pain, had steeled herself for it in fact, but it didn't arrive. There was just an incredible feeling of fullness as her body stretched around him, adapting to his length and breadth inside her.

"It's okay, sweetie. It'll be okay in a moment, I promise. Then it'll feel good."

His voice was so tender and concerned, Lyssa smiled. But the expression was short lived as the needs of her body took over. The urge to move filled her, and she shifted her hips to try and relieve it. Pleasure arced through her, electrifying each and every cell in her body.

"A-actually, that feels pretty damn good."

Hawk groaned, her unexpected movement had almost tumbled him over the edge, and he clamped his hand down on her hip to hold her still. "Hey, slow down a little there."

He pulled back a little to check her face. She was a virgin for heaven's sake. She shouldn't be comfortable with this already, surely? But all he saw was a sexy, sultry smile and her eyes filled with pleasure rather than the tension and nerves he'd expected.

He groaned as she rolled her hips again.

"Slowly, or this'll be the quickest fuck you'll ever have."

Lyssa didn't know what had come over her. Far from shocking her and making her stop, his harsh words only spurred her on. She grinned wickedly and nipped his earlobe. "So fuck, don't talk. Then we can do it all over again."

That did it. Hawk growled as he let go his control. Grabbing her wrists, he dragged them above her head again as he pulled back, until he was almost out of her. Then he surged in again, driving into her with a force that took her breath away.

He didn't stop there, setting up a powerful rhythm that had the ancient bed squeaking. His lean body, marked with the scars and marks of his Warrior's calling moved over her, and within her. With each hard thrust, with each slide and slap of skin on skin as his hips met hers, Lyssa felt the tension in the room and in her body increase. Tension that coiled tighter and tighter until it was almost unbearable.

Why had no one told her sex would be like this? It was fantastic, the best feeling in the world. She freed a hand from captivity to run it down his face, marvelling at the stubble-roughened skin under her fingertips.

Hawk turned his head and kissed her palm. Such a simple gesture, but low down in her body something tightened until it was almost painful. Her back arched in response, her hips meeting his stroke for stroke and silently demanding more.

"Oh god, yeah babe, that's it. Let it go. I'll catch you," Hawk whispered in her ear, sounding so close and yet so far away. Then his lips brushed the sweet spot behind her ear, and she was lost.

Crying out, she shattered apart. Sharp spikes of pleasure radiated out from her core and claimed her completely. Her body tightened, clamping down around his in rhythmic waves as unstoppable as the tides as her climax ripped through her.

It was too much for Hawk. Her cries of fulfilment, the feeling of her body around him and the magical backwash of an Earth Warden's pleasure all wrapped around him like a silken net from which there was no escape. With another growl, he increased his pace, slamming into her brutally now. Once, twice...on the third thrust, his cock tightened, blood rushing to his groin as his release hit him like a tidal wave.

He tightened, his muscles locking until he was as stiff as a board. His cock jerked and pulsed, spilling his hot seed into her silken depths, and with a groan, he rolled over to pull her tightly into his arms.

Chapter Five

Lyssa awoke slowly, hovering in that comfortable place between asleep and awake for the longest while, content and happy because she'd had the most marvellous dream. An erotic dream where she'd been in bed with the sexiest guy she'd ever seen; all lean, hard muscle, and dramatic good looks. Looks that belonged on a catwalk rather than in bed with her.

And the things they'd done... Image after erotic image flashed over her mind's eye. Oh god, they'd done *everything*. Lyssa's cheeks burned as she came fully out of sleep. She'd had sexy dreams before, but never one so vivid and rich. What the hell was the matter with her?

Groaning, she dragged the pillow over her head. Perhaps if she kept her eyes shut she could escape back into dreamland and rejoin her phantom lover. Her gorgeous, sexy phantom lover, the sort of lover she had no chance of attracting in this lifetime or the next. Not dull, plain little Lyssa the null.

There was movement on the bed next to her, and a hair-roughened calf slid against hers. Under the pillow, Lyssa's eyes snapped open. There was someone in the bed with her.

She snatched the pillow from her face and looked around with wide eyes. Hawk lay stretched out full length beside her, his arms folded behind his head and his chin covered with the dark stubble of morning.

Lyssa's eyes widened even farther. It hadn't been a dream at all. They really had done all those things. Hot and cold washed over her skin, her body coming to life again at the memory.

In his light doze, Hawk felt the slight movement of the bed and the stirring of the witching around them as it, too, became aware she was awake.

A deep sense of contentment filled him. He hadn't felt this good for a long time, not deep down good like he did now. All the aches and pains he'd accumulated over the years had disappeared overnight. Washed away as he wallowed in the frenzy she'd whipped the witching into. That was the thing about Earth Wardens; there were benefits to having sex with one. Unless the magic was channelled into some sort of ritual or ceremony, the healing energy was up for grabs, and last night his weary body had lapped it up.

He felt the weight of her interest on him and cracked an eyelid. Wide violet eyes considered him from over the edge of a pillow. Beautiful violet eyes. Eyes Hawk remembered darkened with pleasure last night. His body stirred, instantly awake as he rolled over to wrap an arm around her and drag her into his side, pillow and all. He wanted her again.

"Morning, beautiful," he murmured, pushing the pillow aside and rubbing his nose gently against hers. He couldn't remember the last time he'd awoken so content and pain free. It was a nice feeling.

Don't get used to it, he told himself firmly. *You'll be out of here before the day's done.* Which was true. All he had to do was get Lyssa to a safe place and he was gone. She was Warden-born, so she was sure to have some family kicking about somewhere who would take her in and look after her. Protect her from those maniac Wardens who were trying to kill her.

That was the bit that didn't make sense to him. Why try to kill an Earth Warden? They were rare enough that for a Haven to have one was a huge status symbol. Most Havens tried to cultivate them. Yet, hers hadn't recognized her as an Earth Warden and was trying to kill her? It was all too odd and something Hawk really didn't want to get into.

He was a Warrior. He killed things that needed killing, protected the average Joe-human, and left the politics to other people. It was a win-win formula and one he didn't intend to change any time soon.

She closed her eyes in response to his caress and lifted her lips in

silent invitation. An invitation Hawk couldn't, nor intended to, resist. He murmured low in his throat, a sound of pleasure, and took her lips in a long, slow kiss that fanned the embers of passion burning in his gut back into full flame.

He rolled onto his back and took her with him, his hands sliding through the silken fall of her hair so he could explore her lips at his leisure. An unhurried exploration as he pulled her closer, his free hand trailing down her soft curves as he prepared for a re-run of the night before. Although he was fully healed and well rested, it was as though he couldn't get enough. There was something about her that affected him on a primal level. A level that needed to claim and possess her. A level that railed at the idea of letting her go later.

"Warrior, we know you're in there. Give up the girl and we'll let you live."

Lyssa stilled at the harsh shout, fear cascading through her like a cold waterfall. Hawk lifted his head, his blue eyes distant as he listened. Wrapped in his arms and still naked beneath the sheet, Lyssa held her breath. Was he about to give her up to the Wardens outside?

She met his eyes hesitantly, aware of the fear filling them but unable to hide it. If he handed her over then, she was dead. No ifs, buts or maybes about it. She was deadier than a dodo. The attack in the alley and that overheard conversation made that as plain as day.

Dimly, she wondered why they hadn't just barged in. After all, it wasn't as if one Warrior and a null were much of a challenge for a group of magical assassins, even if they were only in training, and that door wouldn't hold out very long against a determined physical assault.

"Warrior! We know you're in there."

Hawk looked down at her, and their eyes met for a long second in silence.

"You should take their offer," she said finally, biting her lip. The backs of her eyes prickled with hot tears as she realized there was no way out of this. Not for her, anyway. But she was determined not to take him down too. They only wanted her; they'd made that clear. He could still walk away from this.

Hawk's lip curled back, a look of disgust entering his eyes. "You expect me to just hand you over to them, knowing they'll kill you? What sort of man do you think I am?"

"They'll kill us both if you don't."

Hawk snorted. "They can fucking try." He smiled, a feral expression that transformed his features and proved that at least some of the blood that flowed through his veins wasn't human. "I'm hard to kill, and I get pissed off when people try. About time our friends out there found that out."

Dropping a quick kiss on her lips, he rolled off the bed and scooped his pants up off the floor. Although Lyssa knew she should be moving already, she couldn't help but watch him. He moved so gracefully, each movement of his body filled with lethal grace.

A body marked by violence. Scars covered his back, all old and well healed, but each spoke of the violent life Warriors led...fighting the nastier things that went bump in the night, keeping humans—and the magically useless like her—safe.

Three marks on his side caught her attention as he bent at the waist to pull the pants on then started to button them up. He went commando. If she wasn't so distracted, she'd have commented on that. But as it was...those scars looked suspiciously like the claw marks he'd had last night. But no one could heal that quickly, could they?

She reached out and ran a hand down his side, using the pads of her fingers to trace the lines of the scars. "Are these the cuts from last night?"

Hawk twisted to look over his shoulder, and then he grunted. "Uh, yeah, guess so. Get up," he ordered, recovering his T-shirt from the lampshade. "We need to move. When that lot out there don't get an answer, they're going to come crashing through that door. We need to not be here when they do."

Lyssa gaped at him for a moment then slid off the bed as he made irritated little shooing motions with his hands. Locating her clothes, she rapidly started to dress.

"Okay, Mr. Clever Dick, just one question," she dragged her T-shirt

over her head and flicked her hair back, hoping to god she didn't look too much like she'd been dragged through a hedge backwards. "Just how do you plan on doing that? Wave your hands, say abracadabra, and we disappear in a puff of smoke?" she asked sarcastically, trying not to ogle his body as he strapped on enough weaponry for a small army. "Do you really need all that?"

"Do women really need the crap you clutter your makeup cases with?" he shot back, sliding a small knife into a sheath on his thigh. "Yes, I really need all this. They've all got different wards on them for killing different critters and no, I don't plan on any abracadabra. Unless it's the sort which accompanies a swift exit through the bathroom window."

His teeth flashed white in a grin at her surprised look. "What, you think I'd get caught anywhere without an escape route?"

He tisked as he pulled his jacket on, covering most of the weapons, then bent down and scooped her bag up to throw it toward her. It landed on the bed and bounced slightly. "Come on, we're leaving. Now."

"You always this bossy?" Lyssa complained as she shoved her feet into her shoes. As much as she was arguing, she wasn't slow to follow him as he headed for the small bathroom. There was no way she wanted to be left on her own in here when those Wardens got in.

She scuttled through the doorway to find Hawk opening the window. The impossibly small window.

"Oh, you've gotta be kidding me." Why had she not noticed last night how small it was? There was no way she'd fit through it, never mind Hawk. He was easily twice her size.

He caught her look and grinned again. Lyssa blew out a breath of frustration. Damn the man, he actually seemed to be enjoying himself. "There's a technique to it. Watch."

There was indeed a technique to it, but if asked later Lyssa wouldn't have been able to say what. First off, all her attention was hijacked by the sight of Hawk's firm, toned butt waving in the air in front of her, and then she was too busy being pushed and pulled about as he literally pulled her through the window to join him on the metal fire escape outside.

"Come on, we don't have much time before they realize," he said, his voice the merest whisper in her ear. "And I want to be long gone before they do."

She nodded and followed him down the steps, trying to be as quiet as she could. But whereas Hawk's footsteps were nearly silent—the man himself little more than a dark shadow moving in front of her—Lyssa's sounded as if a herd of tap-dancing elephants were clattering down the steps.

In front of her, Hawk paused and sighed, the curve of his jaw visible as he looked over his shoulder. "Can you *be* any louder?" he asked, exasperation clear in his voice.

"It's not my fault," Lyssa whispered back, feeling herself go hot with embarrassment. So she wasn't the most graceful of women, on top of everything else she didn't need that pointing out as well. "These steps are noisy."

"Sure, the steps. Right."

"Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, you know?"

"So people keep telling me," he replied, his teeth flashing white in the darkness in an unrepentant grin. "Still doesn't explain how you can be half the size of me and make twi—"

"Here! Over here, they're on the fire escape!"

A shout sounded behind them as they reached the bottom of the steps. Lyssa gasped, her breath catching as fear raced through her again.

"Move. Now." Hawk grabbed the back of her jacket and hauled her along at a dead run beside him. It was all Lyssa could do to keep her feet under her as he dodged and weaved between the cars in the parking lot, heading for the industrial buildings on the other side as fireballs exploded around them.

They ducked down the side of an all-terrain vehicle to dodge one, only to have another hit the truck head on. Lyssa screamed and ducked as the thing exploded, glass flying everywhere. They weren't going to get out of this. There were too many Wardens and, fast as Hawk might be, there was no way they could dodge everything. Sooner or later someone would get lucky, and they'd be a double order of crispy duck.

"You have to leave me," she told him, yelling over the sound of another explosion as they scuttled between the cars, bending low to stay out of the line of fire. "They only want me. You can get out of here."

Hawk turned, fury in his eyes as he grabbed her and pulled her close. "Listen to me. I am *not* going to leave you. No one dies on my watch, understand?" He glared at her until she nodded, her heart in her throat and eyes wide.

"Good." He relented a little, releasing his hold, and smoothed down the bunched fabric at the neck of her jacket.

"We just need to get into that estate there. If I can get them to come at me one on one, in a bottleneck, there's no way they can take us." He nodded toward the nearest alley. Between two factory buildings it was covered over and, from the butts decorating the ground, used by the workforce smokers. "On three, make for that, I'll be right behind you. Okay?"

Lyssa nodded her head, locking her fear away. She could do this, she *had* to do this. There was no other option. She had to trust they would get out of this, had to trust Hawk would get them out.

Flicking a glance sideways, she studied the man crouched at her side. He wore a determined frown, his sharp eyes noting the positions of the Wardens around them. Lyssa didn't bother; she already knew what pattern they would be arranged into. Like all magic, there was a pattern to these things, and they would set themselves up in the best configuration to channel the witching through the ley-lines.

And there seemed to be a lot of those about here. Lyssa frowned and held her hand over the ground, palm down, as she concentrated. She'd always been a null, yes, but she'd always been sensitive to magic. She always knew where to set a circle for the best draw on the witching, or for maximum protection, she just couldn't power the damn things.

She yelped as the power rose, sharp and immediate to bite at her fingers like an over-eager terrier. "Bloody hell!"

"What? What's the matter? Are you hurt?" Instantly Hawk was by her side, his expression anxious as he checked her over.

A chuckle startled out of her as she slapped his hands away.

"Gerroffme, I'm fine, you big lummoX. Just got a belt from a ley-line. They're strong around here. Never felt one that powerful before." Lyssa frowned, shaking the last of the sting out of her fingers. She looked up and smiled. It was a reassuring smile, or tried to be. They were both rumped, stressed, and running for their lives. So why did the look of worry in his eyes strike her to the core?

"I'm fine, so come on. We need to move before they manage to barbeque us properly."

Hawk smiled. Not an expression she'd seen before. At least, not this one where his eyes were warm with something she didn't want to name and crinkled the tiny creases in the corners of his eyes. He reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "So we should...three."

He launched himself into movement, hauling Lyssa to her feet and shoving her ahead of him. She squeaked once but then saved her breath for running, hearing Hawk pounding concrete behind her as she raced for the alleyway. Fire erupted around them as the Wardens shouted their battle cries and did their level best to make sure neither Lyssa nor the Warrior behind her made it to their objective alive.

"Keep going," Hawk yelled as she thundered into the alleyway and started to slow. "Far as you can."

There was the sound of steel being drawn behind her, and Lyssa risked a glance over her shoulder. Hawk stood in the center of the alleyway, blades in both his hands as he prepared to take on the Wardens who followed them. From the grim picture he presented, she almost felt sorry for them. Almost. Her lungs burned as she burst out the end of the alley and into a small courtyard between the buildings.

She wasn't alone.

Her eyes widened as she skidded to a halt in front of another group of Wardens. But these weren't Wardens in training. No, these Wardens were something far more powerful and dangerous. These wore the gray of the Haven Master's personal guard and, in the middle of them, resplendent in his blood-red robes, stood the master himself.

"Hello, Lyssa. A merry little dance you've led us, haven't you?"

Chapter Six

"Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me."

Lyssa's voice was full of disbelief as she looked about the semi-circle facing her. Forget the group behind her that Hawk was valiantly fending off—or making mincemeat of if the sounds coming from the alley were any indication—the real danger was right here in front of her.

Her gaze flicked along the line of silent, gray-shrouded figures. Again, she had a name to go with every face. But these weren't kids. These weren't Second Sigil Wardens with their eyes on the elaborate triple swirl of mastery; these were full on Battle Wardens. Masters in their own right but in service to the Haven Master—the guy who led the whole magical shooting match in this area.

The fear trickling down her spine slowed to an icy crawl. She couldn't out-run them—there was nowhere left to run. She couldn't fight them—the null against the masters? A snort escaped her. She was mad to even consider it as an option.

And even Hawk's weaponry would be useless against them, she realized as the Warrior emerged from the alleyway at a run, skidding to a halt exactly as she had done.

"You've gotta..."

"...be kidding me." Lyssa finished the sentence for him, unable to help the small smile pulling at the corners of her lips. "Yeah, we did that part already."

Hawk wasn't even half as amused as she was though, his face grim as he stepped in front of her and raised the blades in his hands.

"Can't you lot take a fucking hint and back off?" he snarled. "I'll take on all of you if I have to, and carve you up into chunks even your mothers wouldn't recognize."

"Ahh, the valiant Warrior and the last piece in the puzzle," the figure in red drawled. His voice was smug and condescending, the tone making Lyssa's flesh want to crawl off her bones and go hide somewhere safe.

Pulling the deep hood back from his face, he smiled at them. If anything, that made things worse. A kindly looking man, he could have been anyone's uncle, father, or even grandfather—if not for that smile.

A smile that was all wrong. It didn't reach his eyes, or at the least, it wasn't amusement or kindness that lit them. It was something darker and more dangerous. Something oily and unpalatable, evil even, which made Lyssa feel as if she needed a month-long shower just for him looking at her.

"Good to know I'm not losing my touch. You can put those toys down, young man. I assure you, crude blades will have no effect on us."

Hawk snarled. Within a heartbeat, he had a throwing knife in his hand, the movement so quick it made Lyssa blink. "We'll see about that."

The knife shot through the air, right on target to hit the red-robed Master. Lyssa caught her breath, hardly daring to believe what Hawk had done, and hardly daring to hope it would work. It couldn't be that easy, surely?

It wasn't. With a small hand gesture reminiscent of Obi Wan Kenobi, the Haven Master deflected the dagger, and it clattered noisily to the ground a few feet away.

"Brave, but stupid, as Warriors have always tended to be. Luckily your numbers are easily controlled by selective breeding. A dying race now, thankfully. There are much easier ways to deal with the darkness than merely hacking at them with crude blades." His lips curled into a sneer.

As far back as Lyssa could remember, he'd preached about the

dangers of the Warriors, refusing to allow them into the Haven even though the old pacts granted them the right of Sanctuary...and that of Hospitality, a ritual where Haven women would seek out visiting Warriors, hoping to conceive a child with greater magic running through their veins.

Hawk didn't bat an eyelid. Another blade appeared in his hand from the multitude about his person. This one, though, hummed with power, the wards across it blazing in the early morning light.

Lyssa frowned and looked at him with new eyes. She'd watched him take the things off, then kit up again this morning, and she hadn't noticed the magic about them before. And she should have. The weaponry he carried was packing a hell of a magical punch, the wards blazing like fairground illuminations if she looked in the right place.

"Perhaps you guys could clear something up for me." Hawk said in a calm voice—as though they weren't staring down their deaths in the half-dozen, gray-shrouded forms.

"Of course. A dying man should always be granted a last request." The Haven Master's voice was magnanimous, and why shouldn't it be? He'd won after all. Hawk and Lyssa were trapped with no place to go, the remnants of the Second Sigil group crowding into the courtyard behind them and cutting off any escape.

Lyssa flicked them a fear-filled glance but they didn't move. In fact, they didn't even look at her but stared straight ahead with blank expressions. The frown between her brows deepened. What the hell was going on here? It was almost as though they were zombies, incapable of independent thought.

"You want to tell me why you're trying to kill a female Earth Warden? You see, in my experience, Havens normally want that sort of magical firepower around."

Silence filled the courtyard for a second. Hawk's expression was expectant, eyebrow half raised in question, as he looked at the figure in red.

"E-Earth Warden? Me?" Her tone was incredulous as she looked between the two, forgetting for a moment the danger they were in.

"I wondered how long it would be before you worked that one out. Yes, my child, you're an Earth Warden, just like Daddy Dearest. Which is why I had to kill you both. Only *you* wouldn't fucking die," the master snarled, his genial face contorting with anger and allowing them a glimpse of the monster inside. "We had it all set up, had you and your parents surrounded, but your father did something I didn't expect. Death magic. He used his and your mother's death to shield you, a ward so powerful I haven't been able to break it. Until now."

He grinned and motioned around them at the assembled figures. "Months of work to corrupt them—controlling wards, binding wards—so that when the planets were aligned just right and your father's ward began to weaken, I'd be ready. Ready to send you to join your *darling* parents in the afterlife."

Lyssa stared at the master, her mouth agape. Her...an Earth Warden? She shook her head. "But I'm a null...always have been."

"No, we told you that because we couldn't break the ward your father put on you. And it was easier to have you think you were a null because, frankly, I didn't want you coming into power without supervision."

Lyssa raised an eyebrow, but Hawk beat her to the question. "So what would have happened if she had broken the ward and come into power?"

The red-robed figure shrugged. "Makes no difference. She'd still be helpless. Unless there were extenuating circumstances, her power would just trickle in after the ward broke."

Hawk's voice was flat and unemotional. "Humor me. What sort of *extenuating circumstances*?"

Lyssa held her breath, her gaze going from one to the other as if this were some sort of crazy tennis match. She didn't know Hawk very well, but she still knew him enough to see the tension in his body. For some reason, he wanted the answer to that question. For some reason it was important.

The master blew out a sigh, his expression becoming irritated. "Okay, she'd have to not only come into her power but be charged up.

Usually that involves a complex ritual, or a lover who knows how to perform a sex rite. Then she'd have the power and the control over it, a sexually inactive Earth Warden is little better than useless, which is why we put a suppression ward on her. She's never so much as looked at a man that way, have you sweetheart?" He turned his attention to Lyssa, his smile more of a leer as his eyes travelled down her body. "Not a problem though, because after I've stripped your power, you're going to be seeing a *lot* of action. Can't let the boys here leave without a little treat, now can I?"

Hawk's grin spread at the same rate Lyssa's anger simmered, coming to the boil within seconds and going past merely angry into incandescent rage. For years she'd thought there was something wrong with her, both as a Warden and as a woman, and now she found out it wasn't her after all. There were *wards* on her? She'd been treated like shit and a pariah most of her life because she'd had *wards* on her?

Everything started to slot into place. Why she could see the wards on Hawk's weaponry, and why she'd felt the ley-lines earlier. Why she could still feel the ley-lines now, humming with power beneath her feet, and the soft touch of the witching as it coiled against her skin like a lover's caress.

"Oh no, we can't let the boys leave without a little action. Definitely not." Lyssa's voice was low and dangerous, a new note in it. A new, more confident note. "Step aside, Hawk. Let the dog see the rabbit."

"You always were a sensible girl, Lyssa. You get that from your mother. Such a pity she took up with your father. That girl had a bright future." The Haven Master shook his head mournfully and unfolded his hands from the deep cuffs of his robes.

Before he started to move, Lyssa knew the wards he would cast. The thing about Warden children was that they were educated in the Havens. The communities had their own teachers and conformed to all the rules of the world outside regarding education, but they also ran their own, magical curriculum as well. One that started when the pupils reached puberty and started to manifest Warden-like abilities. When Lyssa hadn't manifested those abilities and had been confirmed as a null,

she'd had whole chunks of time to herself. Time she'd spent in the Haven libraries researching, among other things, the history and theory of wards.

"Somehow, I don't think she's the rabbit here," Hawk added helpfully and stood aside as all hell broke loose.

Lyssa spread her hands, feeling for the unfamiliar sensation of the witching between them, like a fine silk sheet running through her fingers. She grabbed and twisted, forcing it to assume the shape she wanted. The shape of a ward, the most powerful ward she'd ever seen in the library.

Sword fights between masters were often decided with the first blow, that first strike indicative of the fighter's abilities and experience, and magical duels were no different.

Lyssa didn't have much in the way of ability, and she had zero experience. But what she did have was power; the power of a fully charged and ready-to-go Earth Warden.

Humming through her body, it made her hair stand on end as she twisted the last curve of the ward into place. There was a soundless click, more a feeling than a sound, but one only the magically sensitive would experience, and a complex Sigil hung in the air over Lyssa's upturned palm, glittering in all shades of purple and lilac.

"Wha—" The Haven Master's eyes widened, first in shock, then with the beginnings of fear. "How? That's not—"

"That's not possible?" Lyssa cut him off, her eyebrow rising slightly as she sketched another ward in the air with her left hand. It formed quickly, the witching leaping to do her bidding, and with a flick of her wrist, she set it free to zip around the assembled Wardens. As it touched each of them lightly on the brow, they shivered and the blood-red control wards that bound them fell away.

"What th—"

"Fucking hell!"

"What's going on?"

Lyssa ignored the confused questions of the Wardens behind as she watched the Haven Master frantically try and finish his wards. He'd picked over-complex and technically difficult wards she realized; ones that didn't require a lot of juice to power and provided a lot of bang for

the buck. She'd always assumed that was because he was good, very good. A reasonable assumption given he was a master. He'd have to be to attain the triple swirl.

Her vision shifted, and she looked within him, and beyond, directly into the magical layer in everything. The flesh and bones of his body fell away, leaving just a ghostly outline of a body to mark where he stood. What was visible was the magic pulsing through the wards tattooed into his skin and the ones he wore about his body. Lyssa jerked in surprise. What was a master doing wearing ward charms?

Master's didn't need ward charms. That was the point of mastery, the point of years of study. Her eyes narrowed as she burrowed deeper, examining them with this newfound power.

He was a fake. All the ward charms were set to boost and enhance what little power he had. She traced them all back to his connection with the witching and found a tiny, sickly pulse, barely alive—certainly not enough to qualify for mastery, and hardly enough to qualify as a Warden at all.

Gasping in surprise, she dropped out of her trance. He was nearly done with his ward now, his fingers moving at a frantic pace as he eyed Lyssa's ward hovering there, all ready to go.

"Lyssa! What are you doing?" Hawk's expression bordered on panic as he looked from her back to the muttering Haven Master. "Hit him with it already!"

Lyssa smiled as time dilated around her. It stretched until Hawk's voice sounded like a DVD on slow playback and the master's hands took an age to move toward the last curve in the ward he was making.

She recognized it, of course. It was the *Genevas* ward, a ward not normally taught or even much known about in Havens. It was one of the darker wards and normally used by Justice Wardens, and then only in the worst cases where the offender needed to be stripped of their power and isolated from the witching.

Which was exactly what he'd been doing all these years; stealing the power of other Wardens. He had to have been. There was no way someone with that little natural power could have risen so high. Borrowed

power and a blackened soul, and she'd nearly become his latest victim.

"A *Genevas* ward. Interesting. Cowardly, but interesting. How many people's lives have you destroyed with that one, *Master*?" she jeered, flicking her completed ward toward him with a nonchalant movement of her fingers.

The purple magic sped toward him, knocking his ward out of the air and into a cascade of blood-red sparks. He squawked in panic and fury, back pedalling desperately, but Lyssa's fingers moved, and the witching caught him like a fly in a spider's web. He struggled, his red robes flapping around him.

"You can't do this! I am Haven Master here. Release me!" he demanded, his tone imperious.

"What the fuck? A *Genevas*?"

"Bastard's been using a Seranai charm as well to control us!"

"That explains a few things. I said, Johnathon Milcitt would never—"

Lyssa ignored the mutterings behind her and the building of power behind her as the startled Wardens realized the truth about the master, and concentrated solely on the man in front of her.

Her lips curled in a sneer as he started to cast again. "Oh, no you don't." Her hands moved as she completely opened herself up to the witching. The power in the small courtyard whipped into a frenzy and crossed over into the physical world as she pulled power hard and fast. A whirlwind formed around her, lifting her hair and whipping it away from her face as she raised her hands.

"If you're so much a master, release yourself!" she yelled over the magical storm. "If you're so powerful, strip *me* of power. The null you were so intent on destroying. Did you tell these people why?" Her voice echoed around the courtyard, the hum of power in the feminine tones.

She pulled more, the witching flocking to her and showing her the way. Reaching deep inside herself, she twisted something. It clicked and locked into place. She felt rather than heard the gasp from the Wardens around her and Hawk as, abruptly, she stole the power right out of their hands.

"I..."

Lyssa smiled, a terrible yet beautiful smile. "I didn't think so." With a flick of her fingers, she severed his connection to the witching forever.

She was wonderful, amazing, and beautiful, and any other combination he could think of. Now that the danger was over, the disgraced former Haven Master led away in chains by his own guard, Hawk leaned against the wall and watched as Lyssa was accepted by the people who'd once shunned her.

She still hummed with power, even though she wasn't actively using any, her magical aura so bright Hawk used a shield charm to look at her. Otherwise, he'd get blinded. His magical sight was more acute than most, but it had taken even him a while to see what was hidden in Lyssa.

His lips quirked as he watched the Wardens make their reparations. She didn't need him now. But he'd stay just long enough to make sure she would be all right. She deserved that much for the healing she'd wrought him last night.

The introductions over, the Wardens started to lead Lyssa away, so Hawk pushed off the wall and reached inside his jacket for his sunglasses. The sun was almost up now, and he needed to be moving. If he was lucky, he could sleep the rest of the day in the room they'd vacated.

His steps were heavy as he headed down the alleyway, away from the tiny Warden-woman he'd spent the last few hours trying to keep alive. Each step was harder than the last, as though he'd left a vital piece of himself behind.

He wouldn't go back to the room. Not to where they'd lain together and he'd taken her innocence. Hard-hearted he might be, but even his heart twisted at the thought of lying there surrounded by her scent and not being able to touch her. To know she was gone for good. He might have saved her life but the fact still remained; what did a Warden as powerful as Lyssa need with a battle-hardened, cynical Warrior like him?

"Hawk? Where are you going?"

He stopped at her breathless voice behind him and turned to look

Hawk's Warden by Mina Carter

over his shoulder. She stood framed in the entrance to the alley, the witching still lifting her dark hair in lazy coils.

His gaze latched onto the hand she extended, hardly daring to hope. Somehow she'd wound herself around his hardened heart and made herself more necessary than breathing.

"Please, I don't want to go without you."

Hawk hid his smile as he turned fully, his steps measured as he walked toward her even though he wanted nothing more than to break into a run. He stopped right in front of her, so close he could feel the heat of her body through their clothes.

"Thing is...I need a Warden. Seen one hereabouts?" he asked, unable to stop his lips from curving as he repeated lines from their first conversation hours and a lifetime ago.

"I'm not just a Warden." Lyssa smiled, sliding her hand into his as they turned to walk out of the alley. "I'm *your* Warden."

The End

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 business woman, 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 of 11, when she used a stationary 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 the romance is a must.

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