

MIDNIGHT STAR

Vampire Girl, Book 2

By Karpov Kinrade

Chapter 1

DEAD KING

"Our father, King Lucian. He could be... difficult, at times, but he was always fair."

—Asher

Lesson number one in making a deal with the devil... never trust the devil. Asher charmed me. He made me believe his lies. And now he stands here before me, with his infuriating smirk and a mouth full of deceit, expecting me to trust him. Again.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice. Just, no.

"Ari, please allow me to explain," he says, his words like soft caresses.

I am not swayed. "I can't believe anything you say, so why should I listen?" I cross my arms over my chest, hiding the fresh blood from my

wrist wound. I try to keep from trembling, and I try to hide the demon mark I drew in blood on the wall behind me. Fen is summoned. He will come. Now, I can only hope I live long enough to see him. I sneeze, and groan with the realization that being stuck in a frozen cave with a sick vampire gave me the flu. My head is heavy and my skin is hot. Still, I must keep my wits about me.

The walls are dark and rough, dimly lit by torches casting blue light, flicking sinister shadows on the cold bare floor. In places, white crystal erupts from the stone, as if threatening to consume the entire room.

Asher steps closer. "I can understand why you distrust me, but I promise, it's not what you think."

His father, King Lucian, who was supposed to be dead, sits quietly, drinking from a silver goblet. Grey lines streak his black hair. A red cape falls from his shoulders. Black armor clads his body. The king studies me like men study horses, his dark blue eyes cold and calculating. His lips betray no emotion. He lets his son do all the talking.

"So you didn't lie to your brothers?" I ask. "Didn't hide the fact the king still lives, or let Fen investigate a murder that never happened? You didn't conspire to kidnap me and bring me here?" There's a tone to my voice my mother would have called snarky. And it's the thought of her that sends chills up my back. "What will happen to my mother?" I yell loudly, harshly, spit flies from my mouth. I can no longer fulfill my bargain of spending time with each prince. I can no longer choose one to marry.

Asher doesn't respond.

I ask again, slower, my eyes drilling into his. "What. Happens. To. My. Mother?"

He holds up his hand and takes a step toward me. He has his father's blue eyes, his black hair. "She will be safe. I give you my word."

I laugh. "As if your word means anything right now."

"Ari, please—"

"How could you do this?" I hiss at him. "Fen trusted you above all. And you betrayed him. You betrayed *me*."

Asher sighs. His hand falls to his side. The playfulness is gone from his face, replaced by something darker. "Things aren't always black and white. Not in your world, and certainly not in mine. My brothers want war. They want to enslave the Fae. *Your* people. Is that what you want?"

I pause, struck by his words. I haven't even had time to consider the implications of what they've told me. I'm Fae? How?

Asher takes another step forward, and I adjust, keeping my body between him and the demon mark. I need to—

"Move out of the way, girl," Lucian says.

I don't obey.

The king stands. When he walks toward me, I can almost feel the room shake from his heavy iron boots. He draws a sword from his side, giant and grey. A horned skull of some beast makes the guard of the blade, and foreign symbols engrave the steel. The king lifts the sword one-handed and points it at my neck. It must be three times the size of Spero. How can this man lift it? And then I remember... this is no man. This is the monster who drove the Fae from their world and enslaved their race. This is the monster who claimed my mother's soul.

"Move," the king commands.

I shuffle to the side, and the sword presses against my throat, drawing a speck of blood.

Asher's eyes land on the mark. He looks to me, sadness on his face. He says nothing.

For the first time, Lucian's lips show emotion, curling into a grimace. "You summoned the Prince of War? Do you have any idea what he would do to this kingdom, these people, if he finds a way here?"

I don't respond. He will have no pity from me.

"Asher, take this... *Princess*... to her quarters. Until she knows the truth, she must be kept under guard."

I ball my fists, my knuckles turning white. "You will not keep me here. You—

He whips his blade forward. The blunt side hits my ribs, throwing me back. I crash into the wall, the air leaving my lungs in a rush.

"You are a dog," Lucian spits. "A dog. And you will know your place at your master's heel." He turns away, whispers something to Asher, and leaves.

The Prince of Pride reaches for me.

I pull back, cradling my sore ribs, rolling up into a ball. Tears sting my eyes from the pain.

"I am sorry, Arianna."

I spit at him.

He doesn't recoil. He doesn't even seem shocked. "Madrid and Durk will take you to your room. They will take care of you." He walks out, following his father.

The woman and one of the men—the short one—who helped kidnap me approach. Durk throws a bag over my head and ties it at the throat, making it hard to breathe. Madrid secures my wrists behind my back. They push me forward, and I nearly trip over my own feet as they roughly guide me through a door and down corridors I can't see.

I hear yelling. Asher. "I can handle the Princess."

Lucian. "You have grown too soft. Too fond of the girl."

"I have grown compassionate. Isn't that why we fight?"

"We fight for many. We need the Midnight Star, but we must stay in command. We must—"

I am thrown into a room. The door locks behind me. Madrid loosens her iron grip and leans in to speak quietly in my ear. "I apologize for this treatment, Your Grace. Soon, all shall be revealed, and you will understand how important you are to your people."

"My parents were human," I say through the bag. "I'm human. You have the wrong girl."

Durk laughs, but it's Madrid who speaks. "You are half human, which is a problem for some. For those who believe the throne should only be inhabited by the purest of our kind. But your blood is the most powerful, that of the High Fae, that of the royal line. You are heir to our lands, heir to Avakari. And everyone shall soon see that your human half has not corrupted what you are. You will wake the ancient powers of our kind and bring balance back to the Four Tribes. And then we will free our people and rule our world once again."

Her words are heavy with the promise of war, of bloodshed, of death. And I know whose death she calls for. The vampires. The demons.

Maybe even the Shade. Anyone who shares the blood of their oppressors.

My friends. The people I have grown to love.

My mind pulls back to her other words. "Half human?" I know my mother is human. Isn't she? But then, I thought I was human too. What of my father?

Click. Another door unlocks, and I'm escorted in. Madrid gently sits me down in a chair. She pulls the bag off my head, and I blink a few times to acclimate my eyes to light again. How could this be? This is no dungeon. No medieval torture chamber. I'm in a spacious bedroom suite complete with a blazing fire and plush four-poster bed. I sit at a small table with two chairs, and I study the light oak bookshelf, desk, dresser, armoire, and door, which presumably leads to a bathroom. The king treats me like a slave, and yet I am given the rooms of a princess.

My hands are still tied together. I check the window. Bars over it from the outside. So, it is a cage, a gilded one, but a cage nonetheless.

Undoubtedly, the door to my room will be locked from without.

Madrid leans over to untie my hands. White furs cover her body, and brown leather covers her legs. A red cord is tied around her waist.

Durk grumbles. A brown bear pelt spills over his shoulder. "Should keep her locked up. No telling what she'll do."

Madrid clucks at him. "She's already done the worst, summoning the Prince of War. She doesn't have her powers yet. She's harmless. And we need her to cooperate."

"We only need her blood to cooperate," he says.

Madrid ignores him and takes the chair opposite me, forcing Durk to remain standing. Her light blue hair is long, nearly touching the floor, flowing down her back in several braids. "Haven't you figured it out yet?" she asks.

I shake my head, because though pieces are clicking together, the picture they make is too confusing for my pounding head to make sense of.

"Your father was High Fae. He was in line to be king. This was thousands of years ago, of course. Back when there were any royalty of our kind left. Back before the princes and their kind destroyed everything, killing into near extinction our very race, wiping out the royal line entirely."

"Except my father," I say, my throat dry.

"Except your father," she says. "He had already been banished from this kingdom and sent to your world as punishment, to live amongst humans, forever hiding who he was. He was meant to live in the shadows, to scrape by in obscurity for what he did. But it seems he couldn't behave, even there. He fell in love. With a human. He tarnished his bloodline and created a child who was half human. And then he got himself killed, and you and your mother disappeared. Until now."

"My father was Fae? Royalty?" My fever is spiking. Everything feels disjointed. Unreal. I shiver, but I am so hot I want to peel my own skin off.

Madrid responds, but her words blur together, like two composers playing different songs at the same time.

My eyes close, and the world turns upside down. Something hard hits my head. Someone yells. Hands on my body. Cold. So cold on my hot skin.

I'm being lifted and carried and I don't care because all I want to do is follow the darkness into nothingness.

And so I do.

When I wake, I'm wrapped in layers of blankets and wearing a long cotton gown. My hair is a nest of tangles spread over my pillow, and my head still aches, but at least I'm not hallucinating. I try to sit up, but a voice stops me. "Take it slow. You're still weak."

Madrid comes into my view, her flawlessly youthful face juxtaposed against her long light blue hair and ancient eyes. Her pointed ears are tipped with silver earrings shaped like waves, and she wears a long sea foam green gown pulled at the waist with a thin silver tie. Silver and blue designs cover the hem and chest, and a blue cape falls over her shoulder.

"How long have I been here?" I ask.

"You slept through the night and most of the day. I gave you medicine to heal your illness. Still, you'll feel tired for a few days." She slips a hand behind my back and helps me sit up. The room is warm, the fireplace blazing. I've soaked through my clothing and sheets, and my skin feels clammy but not nearly as hot as before. "My fever broke," I say.

Madrid nods. "I should have seen how sick you were, but there were other matters to focus on. It was careless of me. You're too valuable to lose."

I look around to make sure the creepy man isn't around before I ask my next question. "Durk said you just needed my blood. Why?"

She hands me a cup of water and sits on a chair by my bed as I drink greedily. I didn't realize how thirsty I am.

"The magic of our people is dying," she says. "When the demons came from the sky and slaughtered the High Fae, the spirits left us."

"Spirits?"

"There are five, and they go by many names. We call them Riku, Wadu, Teran, Zyra, and Yami. Riku is fire, passion, and the shaping of truth. Wadu is water, peace, and healing. Teran is earth, strength, and life. Zyra is wind, knowledge, and wisdom. And Yami... Yami is all of them, and none of them. Yami is life. Death. Balance. Hope. He has more names than the others. One you may have heard... the Midnight Star."

She stares into the fireplace, her eyes distant, lost in some faraway memory. "When the last High Fae died, Yami died with her. Our magic began to fade. The other spirits grew weak and turned to slumber. They were locked away, hidden over the world, to be kept safe for when..." She stares into my eyes. "For when Midnight Star returns."

I swallow the lump in my throat. "I can't help you."

"You can. You will." She grabs my hand. "If your blood is strong enough, and I believe it is, you can reverse our plight. You can bring back the ancient ones and restore our magic. Only then can we survive. Only then can we *live*."

I pull my hand away. "I'm the wrong girl. Find someone else."

She smiles, and it's a sad, wistful smile. "There is no one else. We Fae are bound to our magic. And when our magic dies, we die."

I say nothing. I can't tell her what she wants.

Madrid sighs. She opens her mouth, as if to say something, but then she stands and heads to the door. "I'll leave you to bathe and dress. Now that you're awake, we mustn't lose any time."

Before she leaves, I have one more question. "Did you know my father?"

She pauses. "Yes, I knew him well. You have his eyes."

"What was he like?"

She cocks her head, thinking. "He was impetuous. Reckless. Careless. But he was also kind. He was a good man who didn't deserve his fate." With those words, she closes the door, and I hear the lock click.

I carefully lift my body out of bed, testing my own weight on my shaking legs. The cold stone floor is covered in carpets that cushion my steps and keep my feet warm. I walk slowly to the door I assume is the bathroom and find a large tub in the center filled with steaming water. There is a robe draped over a chair by the bath, and jars of scented oils and soaps sit on the ledge. I step in, testing the heat with my toe, then pull off my gown and sink into the hot water.

My body is full of bruises and aches, and the heat steals some of them away, at least for a time. I sniff at the bottles of soaps and pick one that smells of roses to drop into my bath.

Then I lean back and close my eyes. I wish I could escape for a moment. Pretend I am home with Fen, with Baron waiting for me on my

bed. Or more likely sitting by the bath with his head leaning on the tub's ledge for me to pet.

Home. Is that what Stonehill is to me now? Home? Not Oregon? Not my mother? But Stonehill Castle and Fen and Baron and Kayla and...

Daison.

Daison is dead.

How could I have forgotten? How could his death have been locked so deeply into my mind that I'm just now remembering? Does Kayla know? Have they found his body? Do they even know where to look?

The Fae. Their attack killed him. He was Fae. He was one of them. Shade or not, he was Fae too. And they think I will help them? That I will forgive and forget what they've done to my friends?

But Fen has Shade slaves. Fen is part of the system that destroyed and killed Fae and took over their world. Fen must have known who I was and he didn't tell me. Fen lied to me just like everyone else.

If I was Fae, I might want all the vampires dead too.

If I was Fae, I would want to free my people.

And I am Fae, I realize. It's still such an odd thought. I'm Fae. And I do want the Fae and the Shade freed.

But I don't want to kill the vampires. I don't want to help people who think it's okay to kill the innocent.

I sink down, submerging my head. Underwater, the sounds of the world disappear. Only the thrum of the water itself fills me. I hold my breath as long as I can and squeeze my eyes shut, trying to empty my mind of everything but the moment.

When I rise to the surface and suck in air, I am no closer to any answers. I don't know what is right and what is wrong. I don't know who is lying to me and who is telling me the truth.

If there's anything I've learned in life, it's that reality is never black and white. And I have to muck through a lot of ambiguous grey to figure out where I stand.

I sigh and climb out of the tub, the water and bubbles dripping off my body. I shiver, already missing the warmth, but I'm not going to get any answers here.

Once I'm dry, I search my room for suitable clothing. How many times can a girl find herself in a strange castle stocked with strange clothing that happens to fit? Too many times, apparently.

I don't find any badass leather pants and tunic that Fen would grin at.

I find plenty of outfits Asher would like, which makes me extra grumpy. Reluctantly, I slip on an ankle-length black dress with long flared sleeves and a silver tie that wraps around my waist. Like Madrid's dress, this one has silver embroidery at the hem and neckline and features a cape sewn into the back. I can't place the fabric. It's soft, silky, but more durable than silk or satin. I must admit it's comfortable.

I find a pair of shoes, something less functional than my boots but more functional than heels, and slip them on. There's a mirror here. I haven't seen a proper mirror in a long time, not since I entered Hell. It's strange seeing my reflection so clearly, rather than catching glimpses in water or reflective cutlery. It's not a great ego boost. I'm too pale with dark circles under my eyes, and my hair is a tangled mess even after my

bath. I dig through the dresser to find a brush, then do my best to tame my hair until it falls over my shoulders. Nothing can be done about my complexion except some sun and time, so I give up on that and check the door in my room. Locked.

I expected that, but still... even the princes of hell—demons of legend—didn't keep me locked up like a prisoner. This is how the people who think I'm their long lost Fae Princess treat me? I'm not impressed.

I check the window, pulling on the black bars that block my escape. Too hard. My hands ache. And if I did get out, where would I go? Could I find my way back to the elevator?

I sit down on bed, planning out my next move. When Madrid returns, perhaps I can push past her and escape. Maybe I can—

The door opens, and it's not Madrid. It's Asher, looking contrite and entirely too apologetic. He brought food. With chocolate.

How devious.

He hands me the platter, and the smell makes my stomach rumble. Sautéed vegetables, fresh green sales, warm bread with honey butter, fresh berries with cream, and a slice of rich chocolate cake drizzled with a white cream sauce. I scowl at him, but take my food to the table and sit. I must eat to regain my strength.

"No meat?" I ask, needing more energy before I dive into the hard questions.

He shakes his head. "Only the Fire Tribe eats meat. It's frowned upon by the other Tribes."

I nod and dig in, savoring each bite. Asher wisely stays silent until I've licked my fingers clean, and I sit back in my chair, my belly full and my mood much improved by the sustenance. "You faked your father's death." It's not a question, because in this I feel certain.

Asher laughs. "I wondered if he had told you... no..." he mumbles, speaking half to himself. "No... I suppose he didn't trust either of us." The Prince of Pride stares back at me, his voice clear and cold. "Fen poisoned our father."

I tremble. "Another lie."

He leans forward, smiling. "Oh no, dear Princess. This, I assure you, is true. Our father told Fen of his plans to free the slaves. In return, your precious demon poisoned his own flesh and blood. I don't believe he planned to kill our father, only lock him up, interrogate him, possibly overthrow him altogether."

"But he didn't," I say, looking for holes in his lie.

"He never got the chance. You see, father told me he has always been cautious with poisons. He has built a resistance to many of them. After Fen completed his dirty deed, he left father alone, likely to fetch chains. But it only took a moment for Lucian to reawaken. He realized what happened. His own son had betrayed him. Fen, the kind, honorable one. How would Levi or Dean react? Niam? No. He knew then he could never free the slaves as King of the Vampires. He had to leave, go into hiding. He had to join with the Fae. So my father took one of his own concoctions, one he had used during the invasion, one that feigns death."

"But I saw his body—"

"You saw the remains of a dead vampire Lucian placed in his grave after his potion wore off and he left the mausoleum."

His story makes sense, except Fen is no poisoner. "How do you know all this?"

"Because Lucian told me. He needed someone still on the inside. So, he came to me, said I was the last one he could trust."

Images flash through my mind. Fen glaring at Asher. Fen upset. Lucian always trusted Asher more. Did he... did he really poison his father?

Asher raises an eyebrow, seeing the uncertainty in my face. He holds a silver goblet to his lips, drinking. "I want peace, Ari. I want the Fae and vampire and Shade to live side-by-side without war, without slavery, without hate. Yes, I knew you were a Fae Princess, but I never lied to you. I never told you anything that wasn't true. My father's will did demand your commitment to marry one of us. It came into effect when he resigned his crown, even though my brothers thought him dead. He knew he couldn't make a deal with you himself, not while in hiding. He knew he needed you on this world. Your mother set this up sixteen years ago when you died, and she sold her soul to bring you back to life. My father took the deal and waited. We couldn't force you here. You had to come willingly."

He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes for a long moment before opening them again. He speaks softly, without the typical arrogance I'm used to. "You're the only hope this world has of surviving."

I shake my head, stunned by his calm demeanor. "So this is all justified in your mind? You just did as you had to?"

"Yes. Maybe there was a better way, but I don't know what that would have been. Ari, I'm begging you, please believe me. I'm not your enemy. I care about you."

He reaches for my hand and I don't pull away. My mind is filled with too many conflicting emotions.

"I won't lie," he says. "I want to be king. Out of all my brothers, I think I would be the best choice. Out of all of us, I alone want peace. I alone want to end this war. And with you, I know can."

His eyes fill with sorrow and something else... hope. "Give me this month, Ari. Your mother will be kept safe. The contract will not be broken. You will visit your world. You will fulfill your obligation by spending time with me. Give me this month to prove I'm the best choice for this world. Give me this month to win back your trust."

I suck in my breath, then pull away my hand slowly. "Do you know what Fen told me after I found out who he really was?"

Asher shakes his head.

"He said not to trust anyone, least of all him or his brothers."

