

# VAMPIRE GIRL

By Karpov Kinrade

## Chapter 2

### LIKE RAPUNZEL

*"My brothers and I have been around a very long time. You couldn't even fathom how long if you tried."*

—Fenris Vane

**My last words** silence Asher. He sits across from me, waiting for me to speak, to make some kind of decision about what I will do. I'm not in a position to escape at the moment—in my barred prison cell, so I must make do until an opportunity presents itself. If that means I must play this game for now... I will.

"I don't know what to believe, Asher. But if you swear to me this will continue to fulfill my contract, that my mother will be safe, I will spend time with you. I can't promise it will sway me to do what you want. But I won't spit in your face again... unless you really deserve it."

He chuckles, standing as well. "Fair enough, Princess. Fair enough. I swear your mother will be safe, the contract fulfilled."

I cock my head at him, a hint of a smile on my lips. "Wasn't Dean supposed to have his turn with me? He won't like this."

Asher smiles, displaying adorable dimples. "It's good for him to have his desires thwarted once in a while." He holds out his arm. "Would you like to see more of your current home? I believe you have a destiny to fulfill and Madrid and Durk are waiting."

I take his arm but crinkle my nose. "I don't like Durk."

Asher smirks. "No one likes Durk. Durk doesn't even like Durk. Just ignore him."

I nod as we walk out of the bedroom and into one of the most magnificent hallways I've ever seen. A crystal chandelier shines from the ceiling. Purple rugs cover the floor. I place my hand on the black marble wall erupting with clear gemstone. "What is this place?"

"It is what remains of the Crystal Palace. It was built inside a mountain," Asher says.

We walk through the stone hallway, into a passage built from glass. Small waterfalls fall behind the clear walls. At the end of the hallway Madrid and Durk meet us.

"I was just telling Ari about the palace," Asher says. "But you know more about it than I."

Madrid nods and leads us past giant doors, outside the palace, and into the giant cave I glimpsed before. All around Fae go about their business. One man, giant and coiled with muscle, works at a forge, crafting a sword. It makes me miss my own sword, Spero. I'll have to find a way to get it back.

Another Fae, small and with long blue hair, tends to injured men and woman lying in cots along the side of the cave wall. "What happened to them?" I ask.

"They were injured fighting the vampires," Madrid says.

So they are the Raiders. They don't just keep to the Outlands like Fen thinks.

"This is our capital, where the High Fae once ruled," Madrid explains. "It has since fallen into disarray. Into chaos and ruin."

Durk snorts. "It's turned into a shithole, is what she means."

We walk deeper through the caves, and I see the truth in their words. A hopelessness clings to the people here. The shiny wonder of the crystal loses its luster when you look closer and see the dirt and cracks. Before us a chunk of crystal rests on its side, the ruined top of a palace tower. Few Fae occupy this area, and no children. They are the homeless, the vagabonds, the nameless. The broken. This is no city, but a carcass slowly rotting. Once it would have been magnificent. I glimpse the beauty in its shadows. In its memories. But now it is nothing but food for the crows.

We exit the caves and climb a long staircase with clear walls. Through them, I see the palace carved into the mountain like an old sculpture worn away by time. "This is where my father lived, isn't it?"

Madrid nods. "Not only him, but your entire family once called this home."

I turn to Asher, frowning, as the bigger story takes shape in my mind. "And you killed them. You and your kind, you wiped out the Fae, the royal family."

Asher turns his head, a look of shame on his face. "That was a long time ago."

"I don't understand," I tell him. "You speak of peace, but you almost destroyed an entire race... What makes you different now?"

Asher's jaw hardens, and he turns to me, his voice resolute. "I never... I never wanted war. But I didn't do enough to stop it. I failed." His hand balls into a fist. "I won't fail again."

Wait... He didn't want the war?

I sigh. There's still so much I don't know about Asher, Fen, their history. This world. I want to ask more questions, but then we step through a door at the end of the staircase, and the cold wind strikes my face.

We are outside, near the top of the snow peaked mountain. Lands of green and blue spread before us.

I shiver, trying to stay warm as my eyes adjust to the brightness.

Asher wraps his coat around me.

I don't want his help, but... it is a warm coat. "Thanks."

He smiles. "See, we're getting along already."

I shake my head. He's still my captor. We are *not* getting along.

"Keep up," yells Durk. He and Madrid lead us up a winding stone staircase carved into the side of the mountain.

"Where are we going?" My voice is nearly lost on the wind.

Asher points, and I look up. Three great beasts fly towards the top of the mountain. They each have the body, tail and back legs of a lion, and the head, wings and talons of an eagle. One is covered in white feathers,

its paws and fur gold. The other is black and red, and the third is silver. I gasp. "Are those... "

"Gryphon," Asher says. "We must travel to the Air Realm, and this is the only way."

I gulp as we reach the summit of the mountain. "We're going to ride that?"

King Lucian waits for us at the peak, and when he sees me, he climbs atop the black gryphon, pulling on the reigns of the wild beast clawing into the snow. Madrid and Durk climb atop the silver gryphon, whispering to each other. Asher guides me to white and gold one, holding out his hand. "After you, Princess."

The beast is huge, magnificent, and entirely intimidating. Each of its claws are the size of my hands. The saddle is giant and embellished with gold. If I was scared to ride a horse, I can hardly register what I'm feeling right now.

Asher leans in, his hand on my waist. "I won't let anything happen to you. This is entirely safe," he says against my ear. "Well... usually."

His teasing only gives me more resolve. I straighten my back, square my shoulders and mount the gryphon. Asher follows suit, wrapping his arms around me and pressing his body against mine. "At last," he says, "I get you all to myself."

I can't help but laugh. His flirtations feel so artificial, but his affection is genuine and so harmless, fun, innocent. I don't know how I know this, but I do.

I lean over the beast's neck and pat its head. "Hey there, buddy. I don't know how to do this, but I just want to thank you for taking us

where we need to go. Please don't drop me, and I'll do my best to ride you gently."

I turn to Asher. "So how do you control one of these—"

Asher pulls on the reigns, and the gryphon leaps off the mountain and into the air.

I scream.

I feel like I'm about to die.

And then, then I feel more alive than I've ever been.

I'm flying.

On a creature that shouldn't even exist.

It's a cool day, and the air hits my face hard, and I breathe it in deeply and smile, holding on to a leather strap that's harnessed around the gryphon.

We fly higher and higher, and I let out a call of sheer joy as we soar into the sky, white clouds swirling around us. I no longer feel the pressure of Asher at my back, or the heavy stares of Durk and Madrid flying next to us. I no longer fear the long fall below me, or the weight of the choices weighing on my soul. I just feel free. Happy. Alive. Airborne!

But as the Crystal Palace fades from my view, worry sets in. I called Fen with his blood mark at the palace, but if he comes for me, I will no longer be there. I must find a way to call him again, once I get where I am going.

I note any landmarks below us, in case I need to find my way back: a giant brown tree cascading over a forest, a long gleaming river.

I don't know how long the flight lasts, but soon I see a floating island in the sky, surrounded by clouds that look more corporeal than I know

them to be. The gryphon land on the edge of the island, in a clearing surrounded by silver trees. Above, on ragged cliffs, other gryphon roar. They have chains around their paws, tying them to the mountain.

"This must be like a Fae airport," I say to Asher. "Gryphon International, maybe?"

He just rolls his eyes. Silly vampire. No sense of humor.

As Asher and I slide off the gryphon—me with as much grace as I can muster—a group of Fae dressed in white and blue robes approach us. The man leading them has long white hair and a very long white beard pulled into three braids with feathers woven into them. He scowls at us. "Madrid, Durk, you are not wanted here. And how dare you bring these..." he sneers, waving his hand at Asher and Lucian... "these creatures here.

"They are on our side, Norin," Madrid explains patiently. "They found her." She pulls me forward. "The Midnight Star."

The group of Fae behind Norin come alive in hushed whispers, staring at me, but the man stays quiet, glancing my way for the briefest of assessment. "The last High Fae? She looks too human to be of any use. But we shall see." He looks back at Madrid. "You may stay three days. If she can summon the Midnight Star, we shall reassess."

"Dana and Dala will show you to your quarters," he says, gesturing to the two women at his side. They are twins, identical in every way, from their long sapphire hair to their matching robes. "Be advised, we are a peaceful tribe. There will be no violence of any kind tolerated here." He glares at the vampires. "We wish no part in this war you have thrust upon us."

"We understand," Madrid says, bowing. "You will not have any trouble from us." She gives warning looks to Lucian and Asher, and I suppress a grin. I'm not sure the vampires are the problem in this scenario. They have brought me here against my will. It's the human girl they should be worried about.

Dana and Dala, who I can't tell apart at all because they sound and speak the same, escort us through the city. A gentle breeze blows through the streets, carrying the smell of exotic flowers. We travel through the town center, where the streets are full of Fae going about their daily lives. Children play some kind of air ball game in a small park between shops, while their parents browse the local wares. The path we walk is lined with tall trees decorated with bells and chimes that catch the wind, creating a song around us. Long banners of white and blue fall from two towers in the center of town. The spires are works of art, carved from stone and glass and glinting in the sun. There are holes carved into them, reminding me of abstract paintings, and I wonder how they manage to stand.

"Those are the main libraries," Dana, or Dala, says. "We are renowned for our thirst and love of knowledge. We collect the histories of our people, stories and tales. We study them."

The other twin speaks. "The Air Tribe produces the scholars of the Fae, the teachers and historians and storytellers."

We reach a tall tree with a staircase carved into the center and glass hallways branching off from the trunk. The twins lead us up the stairs and turn down one glass hallway toward a large bedroom.



It's made of wood and grey stone, with windows that take up most of three walls. Except they are not covered by glass, but by sheer white drapes that sway in the sweet-smelling wind.

You wouldn't want to be afraid of heights in this bedroom. A fall off the outdoor balconies would end in death or serious breakage of body parts.

My bed is situated in the middle of the room, a four-poster canopy bed with more sheer white drapes hanging from the carved wooden frame. They rise like tree vines from the floor and almost reach the tall vaulted ceilings.

Asher escorts me in. "I'll come by tomorrow. Be well, Princess. There will be guards at your door through the night to make sure you are safe."

Yeah right. More like, to make sure I stay put.

The prince walks to the door, then turns to look at me. "I think we can be of help to one another, Arianna. I think we can be friends, even. There is hope for this, after all. *Dum spiro spero.*"

He closes the door, and I wait for his footsteps to fade.

Alone in my room, I stand on the balcony of my bedroom, staring out at a picturesque vision of mountains and sky as far as the eye can see. No barred windows, but it's still a prison, nonetheless.

I feel like Rapunzel, trapped in a tower waiting for a prince to come save me. But the damsel in distress isn't a role I enjoy playing.

So I decide to take matters into my own hands. I'm not going to wait around for someone to save me. I'm going to save myself.

Time to think outside the box. Or rather, the gilded cage perched high in a tree.

I look over the balcony and estimate how much cloth I would need to climb to the ground. Then I pull drapes from the windows and tie them together. I may not have the hair of Rapunzel, but I'll make due.

Before I attempt this, I need a backup plan. I need a way for Fen to find me here, just in case. I search the room for something sharp. When I find nothing useful, I study the mirror above the vanity. That will work. I wrap some cloth around my elbow and use it to break the mirror. I grab a piece of sharp glass. With it, I cut my finger and use the blood to draw Fen's demon mark on the floor.

Now I'm ready. I throw my long makeshift rope over the balcony and tie it down to the bed. My heart pounds in my chest. My hands are sweaty. It's a long way down. But I can't sit here waiting for others to decide my fate.

The sun is setting, and I consider waiting until it's fully dark, but what if someone returns? I have no guarantee I'll be left alone for the night. I stand at the edge of my balcony, looking over the cliff my room is carved into. A forest of silver trees grows at the bottom. A long... long... way down.

Come on. You can do this.

I climb over the wooden railing of the balcony and use my hands and feet to move down the knotted cloth. I move slowly. I do not look at the ground. Breathe in. Breathe out. Focus. Relax. Just—

A gust of wind hits me, shoving me against the cliff. The stone scrapes my knees and elbows. The rope tears into my wrist, reopening my wound and coating the cloth in blood, making it slippery.

The wind passes. I grip harder, continue to descend. The grove of silver trees is close. As long as no one looks in my direction, I should make it okay.

Lower.

Lower.

I run out of cloth. The ground isn't too far away. I shouldn't break anything if I drop. I take a deep breath and let go, falling into a roll as I land, just like Fen taught me. A bit of air is knocked out of me, but nothing is broken and I can still walk—mostly, so I call it a success. It takes a moment to situate myself and figure out which direction I need to go.

I hear someone above me, at my balcony, and I hide in the shadows, half running, half limping towards the mountains with the gryphon. The sun has set. The streets are nearly empty.

It doesn't take me long to find my way to Gryphon International. I need to fly back to the Crystal Palace, using the landmarks I remember, and take the elevator back to the seven realms.

I climb the stone steps and seek out the gold and white gryphon I rode earlier. It's resting like a cat against a tree. I move closer, cautiously approaching the magnificent beast. It notices me and jumps up on its back legs, roaring at me as it bears down its claws. I raise my arms in defense.

And the talons tear into my flesh.

It's a deep, burning wound across my forearm, and I bite my lip to avoid crying out from the pain.

The gryphon steps back, cautious of me. But at least he's not attacking anymore.

I hear yelling from behind me. Someone is coming. I have to act fast.

I step forward, my good hand outstretched, and make soothing sounds as I approach.

The gryphon allows me to draw near, and I pat its head. "Good boy. Can I ride you now? Would that be okay?" The gryphon seems to think about my request, then lowers to the floor, bowing his head. I pull off the shackle around his leg and climb onto the saddle more gracefully than before.

The yelling grows louder.

I grab the reigns and tug, and the gryphon launches into the air.

We dive off the island, fast, the wind tearing at my wounds and the night freezing my bones. The ground comes closer and closer.

I tug on the reigns. "Up!"

But my gryphon keeps flying straight down. We need to level out. I pull harder, and he surges up, pushing me back in the saddle so fast I lose my grip and fall to the side. My leg catches in a leather strap, and I flip upside down, dangling like a rag doll off the saddle. The gryphon lurches wildly in the sky, confused without his rider guiding him.

I reach for my leg, trying to pull myself up, but my one arm is nearly useless from the cuts and blood, and it's hard to find purchase. I catch my ankle and attempt to leverage myself into a better position, but my bloody hands slips. The leather strap breaks.

And I fall.

The earth rushes up to greet me, and I know in this moment I am going to die. I will be a splat of blood and bone on a world I don't understand.

I close my eyes. I don't want to see when death steals me. Instead, I think of my mother, how she sang to me when I was little. I think of Fen, how his arms felt around me, how tight he held me when he was sleeping.

And then I feel arms around me. Real flesh and blood arms.

I no longer fall. I float through the sky.

I peel my eyes open, his name on my lips. "Fen?"

Asher smiles down at me. "Not quite, love."

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We fly higher until we land on a cliff far above the Air Island. Asher carries me off the black gryphon he guided and sits me down against a silver tree. My arm burns with pain, blood dripping everywhere from my wrist and forearm.

He doesn't speak, just rips strips of cloth off his nice suit and wraps them around my cuts until they stop bleeding. When he's finished, he sits in front of me, his face hard. "You almost died!"

I rub my arm, flinching from the pain. "I'd rather die than be a prisoner."

He pauses then, the anger draining from his eyes. He falls back to sit on a stone, the moon bright behind him. "I never wanted you to be a

prisoner. I wanted to tell you the truth... have you join the Fae willingly. But my father, he doesn't trust you."

"You don't have to follow him," I say. "You are your own man."

Asher looks at me with more vulnerability than I've ever seen in him. "He's my father. He's the King. He's taught me all I know."

Despite my anger and pain, something in his eyes tugs at me. I put a hand on his. "You're the better man."

He snorts. "I've had a millennium of people telling me otherwise." Asher's eyes drift to the sky above us, a sky full of stars. "Sometimes... Sometimes I just wish for home."

"Your realm?"

"No." He shakes his head. "Home. My true home. Where my brothers and I played in the crystal gardens. Where my mom sang me songs of the angels."

I close my eyes, picturing his words in my mind. "Tell me about your home. The house you lived in."

"It's... it's hard to remember." He chuckles, but it's not a happy sound. "Gifted with immortality, but no great memory. There are only flashes left. Only dust I try to grab in the wind. I remember... I remember a palace of white and gold. I remember spires that glow like the sun. I..." he grows teary, then swipes at his eyes. "I'm sorry."

I squeeze his hand. "We all miss home."

He smiles. "Thank you. For helping me remember."

"Asher, let me go home. Let me go home back to Fen."

He looks at me deeply, a great sorrow lurking in his eyes. "Sometimes, we can never go back."