

# Midnight Star

## (Vampire Girl, book 2)

By Karpov Kinrade

*Chapter 3*

LOST CITY

*Fenris Vane*

*"Fen is a good man, but he is myopic in his focus."*

—Kayla Windhelm

**Her blood pumps** through my veins, like fire and ice. My demon mark burns with her call, a demanding pulse that beckons me, drawing me forth, through the layers of fresh snow and ice, through the carcass of winter left behind by the storm.

I am not a man accustomed to fear, but I feel it now, filling me with its poison of doubt. What have they done with her? What will they do? What if I never see her again?

Kayla lays a hand on my arm. "I see the worry on your face, brother. Ari is strong. And if they wanted her dead, they wouldn't have gone to such lengths to keep her alive."

My half-sister is not wrong, but it does little to temper my rage. I should have kept her safe, instead, she saved my life and risked her own.

I had hoped for some clues at Stonehill Castle, but of course there were none. And despite the refugees of my capital city swarming to the castle for safety and help, despite the chaos caused by battle and death, I left the moment I felt Ari call for me with blood.

Kayla insisted on coming, though I know she worries for her charge, Daison, who didn't make it out with the others. She worries for the people under my care. But she too loves Ari, I remind myself. She wants her safe and home almost as much as I do.

"There is nothing out here," Kayla says as we walk further into the wildness that is the outer edges of my realm. We are coming close to the Outlands, where rebel Fae likely gather to strategize their next move.

They must have her there, in the Outlands, on the edge of our world. Where else could they have taken her? Certainly not to one of my brothers—none of them would work with Fae. And if the raiders still have her in my realm, they are more foolish than even I have given them credit for. I already have what scouts I can spare searching my lands. With orders to kill.

The pulse in my wrist changes and I stop, looking around at the withered trees and old stones. "She's close." The white wolf at my side sniffs at something in the air and growls. I rest a hand on Baron's head. "Find her, boy. Find Ari."

He howls and leaps through the snow. Kayla and I follow behind. In moments, Baron turns into the mountain and disappears.

A cave, nearly hidden by snow covered vines, is carved into the stone, and Kayla and I duck to enter, both of us pulling our swords out in preparation.

Baron doesn't waste time checking to see if we're following. He shoots through the darkness toward a destination only he can smell. Kayla flicks her hand and a glow of soft white light appears before us, illuminating the darkness—she knows she can use her magic with me, if not with anyone else. We creep forward, Kayla's light and our enhanced night vision guiding us.

We travel through narrow passageways guarded by stalactites and stalagmites that threaten to impale us with one wrong move, until we reach a cavernous space with two towering blocks of rock standing as sentinels at the corners of a stone door. In the middle is a spiked imprint in the shape of a hand.

My mark blazes. She has to be here somewhere.

Kayla walks up to the door and examines the markings carved into stone. "This is Fae magic," she says. "Only a Fae can use this, I think."

"Do it," I say.

"I'm only half Fae, Fen. It might not work." But she puts her hand over the spike and shoves her flesh into the door until her blood covers the imprint.

Nothing happens.

I curse and punch one of the stone pillars.

"That's not helpful," Kayla says, tearing a piece of fabric off her shift and wrapping it around her bleeding hand.

I walk over and stick my own hand over the spike. I hear something, the faint sound of metal grinding, but then nothing. Using sheer strength, I attempt to open the stone door, but despite my considerable power, I cannot budge it.

"Go back to Stonehill," I command Kayla. "Put together a crew. Find Ace and get his help. Tell him we need something that can open this. I'll wait here. I will break down this door and dig my way to the center of hell to save her, if I must."

Kayla hesitates, and Baron glances between the two of us, waiting. "Fen... " her voice is soft. Conciliatory. And I know what she's going to say before she says it. "We don't even know where this door leads. If it leads anywhere at all." She lays a hand on my arm, as if to soften the blow of her words. "Let us research. Let us think this through. And let us go back to Stonehill. Your city is burned. Your people displaced. They've lost their home. Their loved ones. They need their prince."

"Ari needs me more."

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I consider staying. But Kayla's words haunt me. What would I do alone in the cave? Beat my stubborn head against the stone waiting for it to break? I will be more useful in Stonehill, so I leave with Kayla, even as Baron dances in circles around the strange door, howling and growling and sniffing and wagging his tail in distress. He can feel her. Smell her. He knows they took her this way. But neither of us can crack the code of how this door opens or where it leads, so we have no choice

but to head back to the castle. The sun is near setting by the time we return.

We walk through the city more slowly this time, taking in the damage. The burned houses and destroyed food stores and fallen trees. The bodies that litter the streets. The stench of burnt flesh that still lingers in the air despite the storm.

"We will need to put together work groups to collect and bury or burn the dead," I say as we walk.

Kayla nods, but says nothing.

Until she sees something within the ruins of a collapsed and burned building. She cries out and runs into the ash. I stop and wait, my heart heavy when I see her return with a charred body in her hands and tears running down her dirt-smudged face.

"It's Daison," she says. "He's dead."

"I'm sorry, sister." It is all I can say. Ari would know how to comfort her, how to share in her sorrow, but I have had to lock my heart against the cost of war, or I could never do what I do. Still, I understand. Her pain is raw, her grief deep. She raised that boy, trained him as her apprentice in blacksmithing, loved him as family. The wall around my heart cracks a little for her as we walk.

She carries the boy's body all the way back to the castle, and I set about having the city cleared. The vampire remains will be burned in funeral pyres, as is our way. The Fae slaves who died will be buried, as is theirs. The Shade can go either way, depending on their next of kin preference. Tonight, the sky will burn with the fires of sorrow.

I have Kal the Keeper send out six ravens, one for each of my brother's realms, with orders to hold a Council meeting immediately. I'll need their help if I'm to find Ari and pull my realm back together after the Outlander attack.

Waiting is the hardest part. I don't spend a lot of time in the human world, but I do envy their technology and rapid communication methods. A cell phone would be particularly useful right about now.

To stay busy, I make my rounds through the refugee camps that have formed within the castle walls. Funeral pyres have already been constructed, and many have begun the process of burning their dead and whispering goodbyes. Vampires don't much believe in an afterlife. We are immortal. If we die, that's the end. But Fae have different beliefs, of resurrection, of living beyond. The Shade often straddle the fence on what happens after death.

I stop at each ceremony, giving respect to the dead before moving on to the next. I ask myself what would Arianna do to help the people heal, and I try to offer her words, her kindness, through my body. It's not the same. She's so much better at this than I am, but it's the best I can do.

When I reach the pyre for Daison, I stop and stand next to Kayla. I do not touch her, or hold her, because I do not feel she wants those things. Instead, I offer her my strength silently with my presence.

She speaks an old Fae blessing and lights the flames to set Daison's body free. I'm surprised she chose the vampire way rather than Fae, and I tell her so, when it's over.

"He and I lived by the fire of the forge. It seemed fitting he should leave this world by fire as well."

I nod and then finally pull her into an embrace. Baron howls as the fires fade and the ashes are all that remains of Daison. Kayla weeps silently.

There will be many pits of ash this night. Many new graves dotting the landscapes beyond, some marked, others not.

Many empty homes and hearts that once were full.

And in the end, there will be more war. This is what I have wrought. I am the Prince of War. I am the Prince of Death.

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Marco and Roco, two of my most trusted soldiers, intercept me as Kayla and I make our way back to the castle under moonlight.

"Sir, we need you in the city," Marco says. He has dark circles under his eyes and looks as if he's aged ten years in the last few days.

"What's the problem?" I ask.

"Lord Salzar is torturing and executing the Fae rebels captured in the battle. He has them strung up in the city center."

I curse under my breath. "By whose orders?" I ask.

Roco scowls. "By his own authority. He says he's supported by your own law."

Kayla and I turn and follow Marco and Roco to Stonehill. The sounds of shouts and screams grow as we near the city center. A throng of people has gathered around the square, howling for blood. They spread apart before me, and we make our way to the center, where Salzar reigns like a king, his enemies hanging on hooks behind him. His face is

red, and spittle flies from his mouth as he shouts to the excited spectators. "And what shall we do with this one?" He slashes a blood soaked whip into the air, and it tears open the back of a woman hanging before him. She is topless and fighting against her restraints. Her long blue hair is matted with blood and dirt.

"Gut her!" Someone screams from the crowd.

"Beheading!" Someone else shouts.

The suggestions become more and more gruesome, more violent and twisted. Kayla sucks in her breath beside me, and I know this site must shock her.

Next to the woman, another man hangs naked. He is already dead, but it wasn't an easy death. His guts have been torn from him violently, and dangle from his limp body.

"Stop!" I shout in a loud, commanding voice.

The crowd falls silent, and Salzar finally notices me. A red cape falls down his back. His hair is short and black. He doesn't cower. He sneers. "Greetings, Prince Fenris. So glad you could join us in exacting justice on the monsters who ravaged this realm."

"This ends now," I roar, working very hard to reign in my own temper. To refrain from bashing the man's face in with my fist.

The crowd grows uneasy at my words, whispering.

Salzar raises an eyebrow. "Would you deny the people their due victory? Would you spare the rebels who destroyed your city and killed your citizens? Are you not the Prince of War?"

There's a shift in the air. Everyone is listening, but they are unsure of who to follow.



Baron stands by my side, alert and ready for battle. "I am the master of this realm, Salzar. Not you. You have no authority here, and no right to decide the punishment of prisoners of war." My voice is low, but it carries through the crowd.

"They killed our families," Salzar says. His voice is compelling, passionate, a master manipulator riling the crowd's thirst for vengeance. "We cannot let our enemies live. You taught me that, Prince of War, when you killed my son for attacking your princess."

And now we come to it. I knew Salzar would be a problem, and he picked the worst time. Rodrigo deserved his fate after attacking and attempting to feed on Arianna, but this crowd will not understand why the Fae who killed their families don't deserve the same fate. I'm losing control.

"Take the remaining prisoners to the Keeper," I command my own soldiers. "Get them food, aid and rest." The crowd is shocked into silence, then that silence breaks in a wave of outrage.

"Consider this," I say calmly, quieting them once more. "How do you want the Fae to treat any hostages they might have taken from our side?"

Salzar sneers. "They took no prisoners. All have been accounted for, dead or alive."

I turn to him, digging into him with my gaze, showing the wrath in my eyes. I walk up the steps of the stage, shaking the wood beneath my boots. "You're wrong, Salzar. They took one. They took Princess Arianna."

There are gasps in the crowd, a shocked pain that grows. I was counting on this response. In the short time Arianna has lived here, she has worked her way into the hearts of these people. They love her.

Salzar is at a loss, so I press my advantage. "You have already killed several hostages who might have had information about where Princess Arianna is being kept. Your reckless disregard for the authority of this realm might have cost the princess her life!" I can only hope my words are exaggerations meant to stir the emotion of the crowd, and not prophetic. "Guards! Take Lord Salzar to the dungeons to cool his tempers and remind him who rules here. Three days should be sufficient."

Marco and Roco grab the struggling man and drag him through the streets as he shouts profanities and swears to end me. I would laugh, but there is still the matter of finding Ari.

"To the rest of you, focus your energies on rebuilding your homes, your lives, your city. The prisoners will be questioned, and I will find the princess."

I leave then, with Kayla and Baron by my side.

"Careful, brother," Kayla says, once we are out of earshot of anyone. "You cannot make too many enemies and still rule."

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Word will get out now about Arianna being kidnapped, and my brothers will panic. I need to find her.

Now.

I storm back to the castle and make my way to the Infirmary. Kal is tending to three prisoners who are much the worse for wear. He doesn't have them chained to the beds, which concerns me. Marco and Roco stand guard, and I order two more men to join them in securing the prisoners and keeping Kal safe.

"I need to question them," I tell Kal.

"You can try, Your Highness. But they are not very coherent."

Kal is almost as tall as me, but more slight of build, with a long white beard and long white hair. He might seem old, aged, but for the unlined skin. He is ancient, however. Only Fae who live many hundreds of years or more grow hair so white. He is also someone I trust, despite his heritage and our current war with his people.

"Have they said anything useful?" I ask.

"No," he says simply.

I walk over to the woman who was being whipped when we arrived. She is moaning in pain, and I crouch next to her bed. "What's your name?" I ask.

Her eyes are glassy and lids heavy. She's too pale and clearly doesn't comprehend me.

I move on to the next prisoner, an older man with thick arms and chest and a bright red patch of hair on his head that falls to his shoulders. "Where are you from?" I ask him.

His eyelids flicker, but they do not open. He looks feverish.

The third man is entirely unconscious.

I sigh and walk back to Kal. "How long before you can have them healed enough for interrogation?"

Kal frowns. "It depends on how well their bodies respond to treatment. They were each badly wounded in the battle, and then tortured more after."

His voice is impassive, but I wonder what lurks beneath. Does he feel loyalty to the people he hails from? Does he abhor the violence perpetrated on them by my kind?

"Send for me the moment one of them comes to. If they know anything about the whereabouts of the princess, I need to know immediately."

Kal nods. He too loves Ari and worked closely with her over the last several weeks. She spent as much time in the library with my Keeper as she did in sword training with me and sword making with Kayla. It's astonishing she found any time to sleep.

As I leave the Infirmary, a messenger arrives with a scroll. The Council has been called. My brothers await my arrival.

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The six of them sit around the great round table in the Council Room. Their respective banners, mine red, Asher's purple, hang behind them. Blue torches light the black marble walls. I take my seat in the great wooden chair carved with wolves and swords. "Arianna has been taken by the rebels. She used her blood to call me through my demon mark, but it led to a dead end." I explain about the cave and the door. "My people must rebuild after the attack. I need forces from each of your realms to help me defend Stonehill while I search for Ari."

Levi snorts, flicking his long white hair away from his eyes. "You? Brother, you were responsible for keeping the princess safe and you lost her. We need someone more capable to save the princess."

"I hate to say this, but I don't disagree," Dean says. He wears no shirt. Not even to a meeting. "She was meant to be mine this month, when you took her. Now she's gone and I still haven't gotten my turn. Maybe someone else needs to take the lead in finding Arianna."

I growl at the two of them.

Niam stands and leans over the table, his eyes penetrating. His head is shaved clean, his dark skin gleaming from his moisturizer. He is dressed in the finest clothing money can buy, as always. Niam never lacks for wealth or the finer things. "Stand down, Fenris. They speak the truth, and it would be folly not to heed them. You have a city to defend and rebuild. A war to fight. You are needed to protect this entire kingdom, in addition to your realm. And your month with Princess Arianna is over. Let someone else take this mantel so you can handle your own affairs."

How dare they? I will find Arianna with or without their help, this kingdom be damned. I will—

"I will find the princess," Asher says calmly. His skin is dark under the eyes. He must not have slept for many days. "I know her best," he glances at me, "outside Fenris, who has had the most time with her. I recruited her from her world. I brought her here. She trusts me."

Levi chuckles. "And why should we trust *you*? You, who always side with the Prince of War?"

Asher turns to face Levi. "Do you think Ari will go with you, Levi? After what you did to her during the presenting? Do you imagine she wants anything to do with you now?"

Zeb smirks and runs a hand through his short dark hair. "Asher has a point. You were quite an ass to her, and she's human, not Shade or slave. They have ideas about equality and such. She's not a fan of you or Dean at this point. I second Asher being the one to lead the search for the princess."

Ace has been quiet this whole time, lost in his own thoughts, no doubt, but he looks to me, nods once slowly, then turns his attention to the group. "I also vote for Asher. He's in the best position to find the princess and bring her home, allowing Fen to defend the realm and kingdom."

Levi, Dean, and Niam vote against Asher. It's three to three. I am the deciding vote. It's clear if I do not side with Asher, Levi or Dean may be chosen instead. I sigh. "Find her, brother," I tell Asher. "Find her and keep her safe." The 'or else' is implicit in my voice, and he nods. I know he understands, and even though he lost some of my trust with his recent lies, I do believe he wants Arianna safe.

Dean shrugs. "Fine, Asher will do. Just get me my princess. I have plans for her that I'm sure will change her mind about things."

The bastard laughs, and I growl.

Asher places a cautioning hand on my arm. "Not now, Fen. This isn't the time."

I turn and rush out. I care little what the Council thinks. I'm going to find the woman I love.

As I leave the room, Ace's voice stops me. "Fenris..." We're alone in the hallway, but I do not turn to face him, fearful of the anger I will spew.

I hear Ace step closer. He speaks softly. "I know where you're going. And I know why. But consider this, before you act rashly. Your people have fallen. They need their prince. What will you choose, Prince of War?"

He steps closer. "Who will you save?"