

SILVER FLAME (Vampire Girl 3)

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CHAPTER 1

I've been imprisoned before, but those prisons were cloaked with finery to give the illusion of freedom. The Fae still treated me like a Princess, even while locking me up.

Now there is no finery, no illusion. The bars are steel. The hard-packed dirt beneath my feet reeks of urine and blood. The straw-filled mat that serves as my bed is covered in mold and insects. It's rough like sandpaper and worse than the floor. There's a pot for relieving myself in—the only "comfort" I'm afforded. My hands and face are coated with mud. My eyes ache from crying. I see no other cells past the bars. I hear no one but my guards—who do not speak to me. Even Yami has abandoned me. He has disappeared, and I no longer feel his presence.

I will spend the last of what remains of my life in this cell. Alone.

My mother will perish in hell forever.

And Fen.

Fen is gone.

Memories flash through my mind. The stone hallway. Ace and Levi on either side of me. Ace stepped back, protecting me with his frail body. "I believe I will be claiming my month with the princess, brother. From now on, she is under my protection. If you wish to kill her..." Ace paused, staring straight into his brother's eyes, "...you must kill me first."

Levi's ice-blue eyes softened, but only for a moment. He pointed his silver sword at me. "She is the enemy, brother. You must see this. You must step aside."

"No," Ace said with a power to his voice I'd never heard before. He ran a hand through his dark, messy hair, his eyes intent on the Prince of Envy. "The Princess is innocent unless proven otherwise in a trial." It was sometimes easy to forget the dreamy-eyed inventor was actually a powerful vampire-demon in his own right. Not someone to trifle with.

"I don't want to hurt you," said Levi, staring at his brother, his jaw clenched hard, a lock of white-blond hair falling across his forehead. I've seen how he is with Ace. Of all his brothers, Levi has a soft spot for the Prince of Sloth. He

shook with rage, but he did not attack. Not yet. Ace's presence was enough. Enough to give pause.

Ace limped forward, keeping his body between Levi and me. He stifled a moan from the pain the movement caused, and I could tell he was still badly wounded. If it came to a fight, we were screwed.

I held Spero, my sword. It was broken in battle but had been reborn from the magic of Midnight Star, half black, half steel.

Yami was invisible to all but me, curled around my neck shivering. I wanted to slap the silly dragon. If he'd just embrace his powers we'd stand a chance. A giant dragon with the magic Yami wields could fight all the princes of hell if necessary.

But Yami still didn't know how to control his power anymore than I did. One minute it was there, the next, just a shadow of a memory. And there is nothing more infuriating than knowing you have power but not knowing how to channel it. Especially when your fate is sealed, and your days are numbered.

The thump of boots against stone flooring reverberated through the hall, and Zeb, Niam and Dean turned a corner running. They froze, frowning at the scene before them. Levi faced his brothers, about to say something, but I had to speak first. I needed them to side with me. "Fen is dying!" I yelled. "I must get back to him."

Only Zeb and Dean twitched at the mention of Fen. The others didn't even seem to hear. Their cold gazes were fixed on me. On my ears.

"How is this possible?" whispered Zeb. The Prince of Gluttony normally maintained a polished look, with his dark hair perfectly coiffed and his clothes pristine. But he was bloodied with battle, disheveled, adrenaline running high, like us all.

"She is the last of the High Fae," Levi said. "That is why the Druids awakened shortly after she returned here."

Niam and Zeb raised their swords higher.

Ace moved closer to me. "She is no threat, brothers. She saved me, remember. She's trying to save Fen now."

This time, the princes softened at the mention of their brother. "Where is Fen?" asked Zeb. "Show me to him!"

Levi scoffed. "Fen can wait. Don't you see brothers? This is another scheme. Another tale woven to distract us from what truly matters. Her. She is the High Fae. If we kill her, the Druids will return to slumber. Peace will return to our lands. We must end her now. Before it's too late."

Niam nodded, moving forward with arm raised as if in battle. His dark skin was splashed with blood, his shaved head dusted with dirt and sweat, a savage

glint in his ebony eyes. "Step aside, Ace. I do not want to hurt you, but if what Levi says is true, the Princess is an enemy."

Ace gripped his staff, his knuckles turning white. "You will not kill her."

"No," said Niam.

The others glanced at him, their faces puzzled.

The Prince of Greed lowered his sword in a peaceful gesture. "We must do this properly. We must hold court. We must have a trial. This is neither the time nor place to dispense justice."

Levi sighed. He shared a look with each of his brothers. "We are the justice of this land. Is it not our duty to protect our people? To end this war? Is it not better to sacrifice one life to save thousands more?"

He was swaying them. I could see it in the way they raised their swords, in the way their eyes filled with rage.

"Please," I said. "Hold a trial if you must, but let me go to Fen. He needs medicine." I hold up what little I was able to find as evidence.

Zeb ran a hand through his short brown hair. He turned to the princes at his side. "You can deliberate all you wish. I go to find Fen."

"So do I," said Ace. He glared at Levi. "If you choose to fight us, if you choose to kill the future Queen, then you put yourself above the law, above all other princes, as if you are King already..."

Dean and Niam seemed to ponder the words. For the first time, I thought the princes might actually let me go.

Then Levi laughed. "Don't be fools. You dare leave this to trial? With Asher and Fen present? You know they care for her more than they do our kingdom. Oh, Asher plays the slave master, but he is soft at heart. And Fen... Fen does not see clearly anymore."

The princes said nothing. They knew his words to be true. Even I could not argue.

Whatever urge Zeb had to find his brother seemed to fade.

Levi turned to me, raising his sword. "You will not fool me again, Fae. I will take your life, and then I will find my brother."

He took a step forward, but Dean surprised us all by moving in front of him and laying a hand on his chest. "And what of the contract? We are all bound to it. She must choose the next king."

"Why do we need another king?" asked Levi. "We have ruled our own realms these past few months. Why put one of us above all? We shall be the Seven Lords. Seven Kings for Seven Realms. And with her gone, we will rule in peace."

This gave them all pause, even Ace, and the hall was silent for a moment, before Levi spoke again, his voice calmer, more collected... more persuasive.

"The Princess has deceived us. I will never have her as my Queen. Will you, brothers? Will you be ruled by the High Fae? A liar and a traitor? Will you surrender our world, our people, over to the Fae by making one of them our ruler?"

Ace spoke softly. "The Fae used her as a pawn in this game. She's not responsible for this war."

Zeb clutched his dagger, thinking. "That may be true, but without her, the Druids would still slumber. Without her, my people — the ones who died today — would yet live."

My heart broke a little at that. I thought the Prince of Gluttony was on our side. He'd always been kind to me, and liked by Fen. But could I blame him, really? He'd watched friends die today, all because I woke the Druids and brought war to them. If it were my friends, my family, the people I loved in danger, would I feel any differently?

I could see that all but Ace had turned against me. Niam wanted a trial. Zeb wished to avenge his people. Dean wanted to be his own ruler. And Levi... Levi wanted me dead.

I tried to think of something else I could say. Something else I could do to sway them. "Please, I am not your enemy. I fought the Fae to save Fen. I fought the Fire Druid."

No one moved. Even in this, they did not believe me.

Ace spoke one final argument. "Brothers, do you not remember who brought her here?" he asked. "It wasn't the Fae. It was our father who arranged for Arianna to enter this world. Who arranged for her to be Queen. He must have had a reason."

"Our father is dead," Levi said.

"And have you learned who killed him?" A new voice filled the stone halls. A familiar voice. A voice that nearly destroyed my composure.

We all turned to see Fen standing there, shirtless, his heavy boots almost shaking the castle, the white globe lights faltering in the power of his presence. Asher stood beside him, a worried frown on his face. Fen held his sword, a large blade of thick grey steel etched with runes.

And then I noticed the tree tattoo covering his body... and I saw his ears. Fae ears. How could this be? An illusion spell? Some kind of trick?

The hall remained silent, all eyes on Fen as he spoke. "Perhaps you thought the Fae conceived his death? Perhaps you thought Arianna orchestrated it? No. I killed him." His voice thundered through the halls, ripping the air apart and pulling it back together.

The other princes were stone cold, frozen in place by his words.

Fen stepped forward. "Your father told me of his plans for peace... he spoke of weakness. So I poisoned him."

I could feel the anger brewing around me. All but Asher were struck by his words. Even Ace dropped his sword a fraction, doubt clouding his face.

Why was Fen saying these things now? Here? Why was he pitting himself against his brothers? Saying 'your father' instead of 'our father?' Making himself the other.

But then I looked around and I saw. I saw what he was doing. And why. All eyes had shifted to him. The brothers edged forward, alert, focused.

He did this for me.

To give me a chance to run.

But I couldn't leave him there, with them. I couldn't let him destroy himself to save me. I moved to go to him, to stop him, to save him before he started a war with his brothers.

Before I could reach Fen, Ace's arm reached out to stop me. His grip was tight, unbreakable. Even in his weakness he was strong. My heart raced and bile rose in my throat. I turned to him, to challenge him, to explain that we had to help Fen, but Ace's face had grown cold and distant. Hard.

Tears filled my eyes, and I brushed them away with my free hand and tried to get Fen's attention, but he was deliberately not looking at me.

He was still speaking. Still confessing. Still riling them up, and Ace wasn't immune to his words. He had helped Fen and I search for their father's killer. The whole time, Fen lied to him. Even if there was good reason behind it, I could see Ace did not understand. His eyes flicked back to the Prince of War, now an outsider, a Fae, an other. The Prince of Sloth was on an edge. And the way he fell would be dictated by Fen's next words.

"And then, you chose me to find the murderer," Fen said. "Oh how I laughed at you all behind your backs. How I gloated to myself, brothers. But then again, we were never kin, were we?"

Dean drew his sword and roared. "You bastard! We should have never treated you as one of our own!"

Fen's eyes fell, a quizzical expression on his face, as if he had just learned something new. But he quickly returned to his cold, hard, disregarding performance. And that's what it was, a performance. "I understand now why I've always been better than you. Stronger than you." He stepped forward, toward his brothers. "I have the power of the Fae and vampire. I have the Earth Spirit at my side."

Eyes flashed to the white wolf baring his teeth to the right of Fen. Baron was the Earth Spirit? Tauren? But how?

By their faces, it was clear the brothers didn't know this part. Fen was saying he wasn't just Fae but a Druid as well. The Earth Druid.

But it couldn't be true, could it?

Ace spoke first, his voice soft in the echoing stone hall. "Our mother... our mother said she found a Fae babe on the battlefield that she turned to save its life. She said nothing of Spirits."

His words sent a chill down my spine. Fen wasn't lying. But then... Did he just find out? Or had he kept his true heritage secret from me?

Me. After all we shared.

"It's true," Asher said, speaking for the first time. "I was there, remember? I saw the wolf enter the infant. It took physical form many years later."

Niam turned his eyes to Asher, his jaw hard. "All this time, Asher... you knew? You knew he was the Earth Druid and you said nothing?"

"Our mother knew," Asher said. "She swore me to secrecy. Swore me just as she did you, to never speak of Fen's heritage. Would you have broken your oath to her?"

At that the princes said nothing. The rage and passion that passed between them was fading into resignation. Old relationships were breaking, making way for something new.

And his words gave me a brief comfort. Asher lied to his brother, but Fen never lied to me. Not about this. He didn't know.

But...

Oh god. I did this to him. I made him the enemy.

Fen and I needed to get out of here. Now. Before this shifted into something deadlier.

After all, I was the reason Druids had any power at all. And now that included the Prince of War.

Fen caught my eyes and held them. I could tell he wanted me to leave him. To save myself. But how could he think I would do that? How could I leave him here to face the wrath of his brothers alone? Stupid, foolish man. I shook my head, but he ignored me, continuing.

"Will none of you avenge your father?" he roared. "Is your fear of me too great? Do you piss your pants at the sight of me? Come!" He beat his chest with his fists. "Come at me, *brothers*." His last word dripped with mockery.

That was all it took for Levi to charge him. Fen jumped into the air and their swords clashed.

I pulled at Ace's hold on me again, but his grip tightened. He looked angry. His jaw clenched as he watched his brothers fight.

"What are you doing?" I hissed at him. "Fen needs our help. Let me go."

Ace turned his hard glare toward me. "I think you've done enough to help, Princess." His words bit, and I recoiled in shock. This wasn't the Ace I'd come to know.

Fen fought hard, but Dean, Levi, Niam and even Zeb surrounded him, and it quickly became apparent that Fen hadn't yet recovered fully from his near death, despite his posturing. Even with Baron fighting at his side, he was weak. And he was losing.

Asher stood to the side, and I could see in his eyes he wished to help. Yet he did nothing.

I nudged Yami, pleading him to do something. "Use your powers. I know you can!"

Yami recoiled, shaking with fear.

"Please," I cried.

And then he threw himself into the fight, spitting blue fire into the fray. His flames crackled with lightning, setting a wall tapestry ablaze. I felt myself fill with rage as Yami grew bigger in size. But Levi thrashed a sword through the air, slicing into my dragon's shoulder before he could take his full form.

The blade cut deep. Yami screamed and dissolved into dust as I bent over in pain, feeling the blow in my own body as my dragon left. I fell to my knees, and Ace lost his grip on me. I groaned in pain, spit flying from my mouth.

Fen turned at the sound. His face filled with sorrow. Then rage. He ran to me, and that was the only mistake Levi needed.

He grabbed Fen from behind and swung his blade at his throat. "For our father—"

I jumped up, moving faster than I ever have, and blocked Levi's blade with my own. "Leave him be!" I screamed.

Levi turned his ire against me, and we exchanged blows, our swords ringing in the stone halls. Baron growled and tried to leap to my side, but Dean and Niam kept him restrained, looking none-too-pleased at having to keep an angry wolf stilled against his will.

I struck at Levi.

He parried.

He lunged.

And a third blade entered the fray, knocking both of us back.

"Stop!" Dean yelled, standing between us. He was the last person I expected to intervene. Perhaps the others felt the same, because the hall fell silent, all eyes turned to the Prince of Lust. "I love fighting and killing as much as the next demon, but this is not our way. Not against our own. We are more civilized than this. Fenris deserves a trial."

Levi scowled. "You heard him. He admitted his crimes."

Dean shook his head. "Be that as it may, we do not know the whole of it yet. A trial is the way. Our father's way. Our way."

The other brothers nodded in agreement. The anger was leaving them. They didn't want Fen dead. Not just yet. Not like this.

"And what of the princess?" Zeb asked, his voice laced with some compassion.

"She shall be tried as well," Dean said, looking over to me with an unreadable expression in his eyes.

Ace stayed quiet, his sword limp at his side, as if he didn't know what he felt anymore.

Levi didn't look happy, but everyone else agreed this was the way of it. Niam took my sword, while Dean and Zeb kept Fen under control. He struggled, but weakly, drained by the fighting. Together, we marched deeper into the castle. Levi fell to my side and squeezed my arm until it bruised, his face close to mine. "Enjoy your time in the dungeons, Princess. It's the last view of this world you'll get before you're hanged."

His words proved prophetic. For here I sit, awaiting a hanging at sunrise. Even as I think these thoughts, it feels surreal, like I am living someone else's life. This is just a movie, or book—a story made up to scare naughty children. 'Don't make deals with devils or you'll end up dead!' sounds like an excellent morality tale.

Too bad I didn't listen.

I made the deal with the devil. I thought I could outthink them. I thought I could come out of this unscathed, saving my mom and me and all of the Fae and living a happily ever after with the man I love. I was such a fool. I still am a fool, if I'm being honest, because even now I don't entirely believe this is the end.

I can't allow myself to believe that, at sunrise, Fen and I will both be killed. Not because of something we did. But because of what we are.

The trial, if it can even be called that, was such a farce. If I thought there was corruption in my world's justice system, it's downright perfection compared to what they do here. There was no 'jury of my peers', no evidence, no real testimony, just Levi expounding his own hateful rhetoric and convincing the princes they didn't have to worry about the contract, because with me dead, there was no contract. They'd be free to rule their own realms. As long as none of them made a claim for High Castle, no one would suffer.

No one but me and Fen, of course. We were kept separated the whole time, and Fen was given no voice as part of the council. They treated me more as animal than human. I cannot even imagine how they treated Fen.

Then they voted behind closed doors. I never found out who voted which way, but I can only assume Asher was on our side. I pray Ace was as well, but perhaps the lies he endured sealed our fate. In the end, both Fen and I were sentenced to death.

Asher brought me the news.

"I'm sorry," he said, standing outside my cell. "I brought this upon you."

I clasped the bars, still possessing some energy. "Asher, no. You fought for me in the trial—"

"No. Before that. I am the reason your Fae blood was revealed." He paused. "I dropped the contract."

The contract. That one that prevented me from revealing my true heritage. The one only Asher and his father could cancel. When my Fae powers emerged during the battle, I thought perhaps my magic had broken the oath. In truth, I was fighting for my life, I was fighting for Fen, and I barely gave it much thought.

"When the fighting started," Asher continued, "I wanted you to be able to defend yourself. So I dropped the contract, hoping your magic would aid you. I... I couldn't forgive myself if you had died because of some oath I made you swear."

"It was my choice to sign."

"But I arranged it. It is my foolish mistakes that brought you here." He started to turn away, but I grabbed his hand through the bars and pulled him back.

"My magic saved me," I said. "If you hadn't stopped the oath, I'd be dead. At least now there's a chance."

He smiled. "Brash as ever princess." His smile dropped as he held my gaze. "But this time, I am not so sure you're right."

I let go of his hand and clutched the bars tight. "There must be something more we can do. Can't you break us out? You have soldiers you could send. They can—"

"Shh," he whispered, raising a finger to his lips. He glanced at the two guards behind him, then kept his voice low. "I am doing all in my power, princess, but my brothers are watching me closely. They know I am on your side. It took calling in favors just to allow this meeting."

My shoulders slumped. "There must be something."

"Perhaps another contract," he said. I could see him thinking, thoughts and emotions spiraling over his face. "Maybe if you and Fen swore to obey the other princes."

"Then we would have to fight the Fae," I said.

“Perhaps.” He smirked. “But all contracts have loopholes. You taught me that, princess.”

I stepped back, sighing. “I can’t fight the Fae. And you wouldn’t want me to.”

His eyes fell. “No. I wouldn’t.”

We were silent for a moment, searching for ideas and finding none. “Did Fen know?” I asked.

Asher looked to the distance, to the light from the window. “No. He never knew he was Fae. No one ever told him.”

For a moment, the cell became less cold, less dark. Knowing Fen had been honest with me made all the difference. “But... he would never have known the land you came from. The land before here. Didn’t he ever wonder why he couldn’t remember?”

“He thought he was forgetting, just as I have been forgetting. The pieces he could recall, yes, they were fictions told by our mother, but told so often they had become memory.”

“So what changed?” I asked.

“You,” he said. “You awoke his powers. But I suspect his injuries are what finally forced his body to use his natural abilities.”

I nodded. It made a sort of sense, though I would have to discuss it later with Fen. How did he feel about this? Did he despise me for revealing him as Fae? For changing his life forever?

“So, what next?” asked Asher.

The only thing left.

“We hope,” I said. “We hope.”

He did not look hopeful however, when, with a resigned look, he walked away. It was the last time I saw him. Two weeks ago.

Now, I slouch against a cold wall, wrapping my arms around my knees for warmth. There are no clocks down here. No natural lighting sources. I have no way of tracking time other than the once a day slop a guard brings in for me to eat, if I can stomach it. I wonder if I’ll be granted a last meal, like I would on my world. But it seems unlikely. I’ll die with the taste of this rot in my mouth.

My greatest fear, my deepest sadness, is that others have to suffer with me. My mother, whose soul still lays trapped in a hell dungeon waiting for me to fulfill my contract. The man I love who will die by my side, his only crime that of loving me back. Es and Pete who will never know what happened to their friend.

The Fae. They will continue to be enslaved, and those who resist will be killed until there are no free Fae remaining.

And the magic on this world will die.

Do the vampires even know what they are doing? What they are condemning themselves and everyone around them to? I tried to explain, but they accused me of lying to save my own skin.

It's not my skin I'm trying to save.

But it doesn't matter now.

All I can do is wait.

Wait for death. Wait for the end.

Maybe this world is better off without the magic of the Fae. Maybe it is better off without me.

Minutes pass. Hours. Days. Time loses meaning in this dank, damp pit of despair. I have no idea how long I have to live. It is an odd thing, to know the exact moment of one's death, and to be powerless to choose how you will spend your last moments. There are so many things I have left undone in my life. So many words left unsaid to those I love. And now it is forever too late.

A commotion outside my cell alerts me to the guards changing shifts. They always have one or two watching over me. It started with two, but lately they've reduced the watch to one. Maybe they figure I have nothing left to fight for. Maybe the war rages on with the Fae and they need more soldiers than guards. I tried asking once, but no one would speak to me. So I just watch and think. But today, I am surprised to see a familiar face.

"Marco?"

His dark eyes flick to me, and he frowns, but doesn't answer. He stands in the spot of the guard, just out of reach of my cell, but close enough to see me, his broad shoulders filling the space and blocking out the little light from the orb.

I scramble to the bars, clutching them in my hands. "Marco! Did Fen or Asher send you? Are you here to help me?" There's a desperate pleading in my voice that makes me cringe, but I don't care. This is the first hope I've had since my fate was decided. But then Marco turns away, and my hope plummets.

"Marco? Why won't you talk to me? Please let me out. We must save Fen. We must get out of here. You were my personal guard. You swore to protect me!" I'm nearly frantic now, tears clogging my throat as I speak too loudly in the cavernous space.

He turns to me finally, his eyes cold. "The Fae killed my family when they attacked Stonehill in this last battle," he says quietly. "My parents, who were farmers. My little brother, who loved horseback riding and wanted to be a soldier when he grew up. My little sister, who wanted to be a guard when she grew older. Just like me." He shakes his head, a lock of brown hair falling into his eye and making him look boyish in his sadness. "I can't let you out, Princess. I'm sorry."

I don't know what to say. How can I defend myself? How can I defend what I've done by releasing this magic into his life? Into the lives of the innocent people who live here. Why can't the right choice be easier to see? Why must it all be shrouded in gray?

Marco and I share no more words, and my thoughts turn to the afterlife. Does dying in this world change what happens in the next? Or would I experience the same fate regardless of the world my life ended on?

After a time, my existential crisis is put on hold by more pressing concerns of the flesh. Namely, my growing need to relieve myself. I've been loathe to use the pot they provided, with guards watching my every move, but eventually the urgency of my need trumps my modesty. So I pull the pan as far away from Marco as I can and do my best not to make a mess of myself. It's not a pleasant experience, made worse so by the clearing of a throat.

I'm just finishing up when I hear something tap the bars, and I nearly kick the pot over. A man stands at my cell door.

Only the light of flickering orbs illuminates this corner of hell soaked in darkness, but even without seeing his face I know who stands there. Will he really be the last person I see before I die? Lovely. "Hello, Levi."

The Prince of Envy smirks. "Princess Arianna, how low the mighty fall. Fancied yourself queen of everything, did you? But here you are, no better than sewer vermin, and smelling much the same." He wrinkles his nose.

I glare at him. "I seem to have misplaced my perfumes."

He chuckles. "I must admit I respect your spirit. You have a way about you that attracts admirers from all walks of life. You might have even made a great queen, had fates turned out differently."

"What do you want, Levi? I'm busy."

He scowls. "Of course, I mustn't take up too much of the lady's precious time. After all, you have only a few hours remaining of your life. How does it feel, knowing you're about to die? Your tiny mortal life snuffed out in just a few short years? And no mum here to trade her soul for yours."

I'd forgotten that this all started when I died once before. How odd that I'm about to face for a second time something most only ever face once.

When I don't respond to Levi, he frowns, then leans against the bars and plasters a smile across his face that doesn't reach his eyes. "Come to the door and place your hands together. You are needed elsewhere."

"Needed? For what?" My heart is racing. Is he going to have me killed early? Will he steal the last few hours I have left just out of spite? Does he really hate me that much?

I consider refusing. Fighting. But honestly, any chance to get out of this cell is welcome, even if it is for my execution. I walk to the cell door and put my hands together, slipping them through the slit in the steel.

Marco clasps chains around them and I pull my hands back in as he unlocks my cell. Levi steps away, letting the guard do his job of securing me.

"Where are we going?" I ask, when Levi refuses to speak more about what's going on.

"You'll see soon enough. Let's just say you never had the proper Presenting, and now everyone is dying to see the true face of their admired princess."

I shiver as I think about the Presenting Levi arranged for me when I first got here. I look down at my dirt-caked body. My hair is a tangle of straw, mud and who knows what else. I smell like an animal carcass left to bake in the sun. Is this really how I will be presented to the world?

And then I remember my ears. My signs of Faeness. I used illusion magic to make myself look human the first few days of my capture, then I stopped after the guards beat me. It wasn't worth the pain. Now I'm too weak to cast the spell even if I tried.

I can guess at Levi's plan. He wants the world to hate me before I'm killed. He wants to turn all those who loved or respected me against me, so that they are more loyal to him.

And it just might work, if Marco's disdain for me is any indication. Everyone is turning against me. Ace. Zeb. People I thought cared for me, for Fen. There is no loyalty here. I was a fool to believe otherwise.

I'm dragged through the tunnels and up stairs. When we reach the main castle, my heart clenches. This is Stonehill. This is what home feels like. Or used to. Everything has changed now. It was a twist of cruel irony that Levi had both Fen and I locked away in Fen's own home. In his own realm. With his own people guarding us. A twist of the blade into his gut. And mine too.

We reach a door and suddenly I am thrust into sunlight. My eyes go blind from the brightness, so long have I been stuck in darkness. I'm reminded of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. When we live our lives in darkness, the shadows seem like the only reality, and the truth is too blinding to accept. I wonder if this is what the princes' lives are like. They are cursed in their sins, stuck in their lack of growth. Perhaps their evil is not their fault, but the fault of the curse and the darkness in which their souls are fated to live. The light hurts them, and thus makes the shadows their only source of truth.

But that does not make their deeds any less evil to those they are perpetrated on.

It takes time for my eyes to stop hurting, for my vision to return. I stumble through the training yard, the sound of swords clashing cuing me to my

surroundings. But the closer I come to any group, the quieter it becomes. A natural hush falls around us, as people gawk and stare. Then the whispering begins as they join with the throngs of people following us. I am surrounded by guards now, not just the two stationed at my cell, and Levi leads the way as if he has already been crowned King of all the lands. He relishes this power, and covets it as he does all things not his by right.

We approach a wooden stage and my legs stumble on the steps, still weak from my time in the cell. My muscles have atrophied. Marco grabs my arms to keep me from falling on my face, and he is gentle as he helps me stand. A small kindness in the face of what's to come — one I appreciate.

"Here she is!" Levi yells to the growing crowd. I've never seen so many people in Stonehill. It's clear from the diversity of dress and style that Levi planned this ahead of time. All the realms are represented here, not just Fen's.

The crowds quiet enough to hear what Levi will say next.

The Prince grabs my arm and shoves me to the edge of the stage. The same platform used for the slave auction. The same platform used to torture the Fae they captured in battle. I wasn't here for that, but I heard the stories of what happened while I was in Avakiri. I can see the stains of blood worn into the wood under my bare feet.

The blood of my people.

We are all monsters. The Fae. The Vampires. All of us, for the war we have wrought. If I somehow survive this, I will make sure this platform is destroyed. It is soaked in evil.

"Take a good look at her," Levi says, when I pull myself out of my mind enough to listen. He pulls back my hair and the crowds gasp, seeing my ears for the first time. "She is one of them. She always was. She is Fae. And not just Fae. No!"

He then tugs at my dress... if you can call it that. It's a shapeless canvas thing that used to be white but is now so stained you can hardly tell. It has long sleeves and falls to my ankles, covering most of my body. Covering the tattoos that formed when I became the Midnight Star.

I know what's about to happen, and I close my eyes, the tears stuck in my throat. I take a breath and steel myself for what he's about to do as hate and anger grow in me.

I feel the prick of a knife against the skin of my back as he cuts into the cloth. I hear someone — Marco, I think — suck in his breath in shock, but no one does anything to stop Levi.

And then I am naked, the dress a crumble of rags at my feet. Levi shoves me forward again, parading me before the crowd as he shows them the tattoos that definitively prove I am of Royal Fae blood.

"She is the reason we are at war," Levi shouts to the crowd. "Look at her. She is the reason your loved ones are dead or injured. She is the reason the Druids are back. She betrayed you. Us. Our world. She used your love for her to destroy you. She is no Queen. She is no friend to our people. And at sunrise, she will pay for her sins with her life."

His hands are still on me, taking liberty to touch me anywhere he wants, to move me around like a puppet master. I have to open my eyes because he forces me to walk through the crowds as the people reach out to hit and scratch and grope my naked body. I want to hide, to cover my face, but instead I force myself to look into the eyes of as many of them as possible. Each person who touches me. Each person who cheers at my abuse. I stare at them. I challenge them the only way I can. They spit on me and throw rotten fruit at me, and still I look. Still I hold their gaze and make them see me.

Many turn their eyes at that. Many still have some conscious left. Some do not. Some laugh and gloat and my challenge goads them on further. They are lost to their hate.

There are hundreds, maybe thousands of people, and Levi seems determined that every single one of them will have a chance to defile my body. My bare feet are bruised and bleeding from the rocks I'm forced to walk over. My body hasn't fared much better.

When one man tries to put his hands where they don't belong, I knee him in the crotch. Levi backhands me, and I fall to the ground. "See how she does not submit to her punishment? How she thinks she is better than you?"

He leans down and grips my arm, then speaks to me quietly, so that only I can hear. "This can go on as long as I want. This can get worse too. I could let the men do what they clearly want to do. Throw you into a room with the worst of them until they are done."

I shudder, and he laughs.

"Or... there is another way. I can end it all. I can save your life, and the life of Fen—even the life of your pathetic human mother. I can make you Queen and give you back all your luxuries and dignity. Which is it, Princess?"

I look up at him, wondering what game he's playing at, and he smiles.

"Marry me. Choose me as the next King, and I will drop all the charges against you. I will make this whole thing go away. Like it never happened. You'll get to be my obedient queen, and Fen will live to see another day."

So this has been his plan all along. I can't say I'm surprised. But he played his cards well, putting me in this hell and then making me choose. "What if I pick a different prince? Maybe one of the others would like this same deal."

His face hardens. "I control the people now. I control your fate. I am the only one with enough power to offer you freedom."

I need to buy time, but I can't outright say no. I believe his threats. The crowds have changed in the hours we've been out here. As the sun dies down, the women and children have begun to disperse. Now it is the hardest of men who have stayed. They want what Levi is promising. I can't let that happen. I'm not sure I'd live through it.

"Give me time to think. I can't think out here like this."

He pauses, considering my words. "Very well, Princess. I'll give you time. But if you haven't made up your mind by midnight, these men will enjoy a few hours with you before sunrise." He licks his lips and stares at me with a lascivious look in his eyes. "And I'll be taking the first turn."