

# Silver Flame (Vampire Girl book 3)

By Karpov Kinrade  
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## Chapter 2

Levi sticks a stone into my hand and commands Marco to take me back to my cell. "You have my mark, Princess. Use it before it's too late."

I look down at the stone and see his demon mark painted onto it in black. Marco places a hand on my back and draws his sword, keeping the crowds at a distance as he guides me to the castle. When we've walked far enough to avoid detection from Levi and the crowds, Marco takes off his red cloak and drapes it around my shoulders. "I'm sorry, Princess. You didn't deserve that."

His voice is cracked and full of emotion. I can only imagine what he's going through right now. How torn he must feel. I thank him for the cloak and pull it more tightly around me, covering my nakedness and bruises and cuts as he leads me back to my cell.

My eyes adjust to the darkness again, and I stand leaning against the bars of my cage staring at the stone in my hand. If I accept Levi's offer: I will live. Fen will live. He won't be free, but he'll live. And my mother... my mother will live. I'd have fulfilled my contract, and her soul would be free, her body healed.

How can I refuse?

But...

But...

Levi would make a horrible ruler. He's a misogynistic racist blowhard who thinks he knows what he's doing, but he doesn't. He would destroy the Fae, ruin this world, corrupt everything and everyone. He's a poison that would seep into the very soul of this place.

If I refuse his offer, I am damning Fen to death, and my mother to imprisonment for eternity. If I accept, I am damning everyone else to slavery and a tyrannical ruler for who knows how long. Can I really condemn thousands to save the lives of a few? Would my mother even want me to sacrifice the safety of my people for her? Would Fen want to stay alive only to see me wed Levi while he remains imprisoned?

And what of me? Can I face my own death? I am the last of the High Fae. If my blood dies, it takes the last of this world's magic with it.

I glance at the window, the light almost faded. I must choose. And I am running out of time.

I sink onto my straw mat in exhausted defeat, my body so sore from the abuse I took on the streets that I can't point to a single spot that doesn't hurt.

Through the pain, I barely feel the pouch poking into my back. The pouch of expensive fabric tucked into the straw.

I open it and find an old steel skeleton key inside. It's rusted and ancient. With it is a small bit of parchment. I unroll it to find a note. *This key unlocks all doors within Stonehill. Free Fen. Meet me at the docks on the north-west river. There will be a boat. Come quickly.*

It is not signed, and I don't recognize the writing. Is this a trap? Some twisted game Levi is playing? Or is someone really trying to help me?

Marco still guards my door, but he is alone. I can't leave if he doesn't let me.

I stare at the key in one hand, the stone in the other. If I try to escape and rescue Fen, I could fail, ensuring our deaths. If I call for Levi, we could live. *Dum spiro spero.* While I breathe, I hope. There is no hope left if I'm dead. Agreeing to Levi's terms would buy us time to find a better solution. But what if I don't find one?

I weigh the choices in my hands. There are grave risks in both.

I drop the contents of one hand to the dirt-packed floor, and stare at my other hand.

I have made my choice. Now, I just hope I can live with the consequences.

It doesn't take long to put my plan into place, but my hand still shakes as I cut my wrist with the sharp edge of the stone and draw Levi's mark into the ground with my blood.

Only the last line is left unfinished. I look up at Marco, who frowns. "Are you sure?" he asks.

I nod. "It's the only way. You've seen what he's capable of."

Marco drops his eyes in resignation. "I'm sorry I was a part of it. Fen would never forgive me."

"If this works, Fen will know you helped me today. He will know you did your best. I will make sure of it."

Marco nods, still frowning. "Just be careful. I have a bad feeling about this."

"Are you sure he's with Fen?" I ask.

"Yes. It's not pretty. You shouldn't have to see that."

My stomach clenches. "Fen shouldn't have to endure that," I say through a thick throat. "How long will it take Levi to get here once he feels his mark?"

"He has to cross the castle. You're in different wings of the dungeon. But still, not long."

I nod. "And you're sure about this?" I know what he's risking.

He nods. "I'm sure. I should have done this long ago."

I hold up a tin cup to him and clear my throat. "Is there any way you could get me more water? I'm parched."

He looks at the cup for a longer beat than necessary, and then takes it from my hands, through the bars. "Yes, Princess."

Once he is gone, I leave the rock with my blood dripping from it on the ground next to the unfinished demon mark, and I grip the key still in my hand. It's time to save Fen.

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I've lived in this castle long enough, explored the secret passages and tunnels enough to know how to get around without being seen. That knowledge comes in handy now, as I escape the dungeons and duck behind a tapestry on the wall and into one of the many hidden passages within the walls. Fen was amused when he discovered how much I'd learned about his castle. Now my snooping just might save both our lives, if I get lucky.

I use a small light globe I stole from the dungeon to travel through the passages, feeling my way through dust and cobwebs. My feet are still wrecked and I need clothing, but those concerns will have to wait. I'm on a tight timeline.

The sound of leather slapping against flesh and bone is all I need to know I'm in the right place. I swallow back the vomit forming in my throat and steel myself for what I know I will see.

But there's no way to prepare yourself for seeing the love of your life tortured while you can do nothing to stop it.

And that's exactly what I have to do.

Fen hangs upright, looking as if he'd collapse if he could, if chains didn't shackle his wrists to stone columns. His lips are stained dark red. Crimson streaks cover his back.

Snap.

A leather whip darts through the air, tearing another line of flesh open across Fen's back. He doesn't cry out. He says nothing.

Levi steps into view, whispering something to his brother.

I watch through a crack in the wall, too far away to hear what Levi whispers to Fen, but close enough to see what he does next.

It makes me sick, and angry. Someday I will kill that bastard. But I am naked, unarmed and injured. Exposing myself now will only get me caught. I must wait and hope Marco does what he promised.

After what happened in the streets of Stonehill, Marco's anger at me transformed into guilt. He explained he'd spent the last few weeks spiraling out of control in his grief over his family. That Levi promised him vengeance against those who caused the battle. Against me and Fen.

But seeing the kind of king Levi would be, the kind of ruler he is, Marco couldn't support him. He knew I wasn't the enemy, that I had no control over what I was born as. So when I found the key to my cell, I took a risk. I asked Marco to help me.

He wouldn't help me escape, per se. That would be too risky, even for him. But he could get me water. And tell me where Levi was. And he could finish Levi's mark in the dirt with my blood, after I left. To give me more time to free Fen and escape.

So now I must wait for Levi to feel the pull of the mark. To come to my cell.

It takes so long I fear the plan failed, that Marco chickened out, or I hadn't left enough blood. But then Levi stops talking and looks down at his wrist.

He says something that makes Fen scream louder than any of the torture had, and then leaves the dungeon laughing.

I grit my teeth and wait until I can no longer hear his footsteps, then I push out the loose stones I know are there and climb out.

When Fen sees me, his mouth falls open.

"You know, you really have to stop getting yourself captured and beaten," I say, trying to lighten the mood.

I rush over to him and shove the key into the lock, hoping it works. It truly is a master key, because his chains fall off, and I support his body as he steps away from the beams. "How did you get here?" he asks, his voice hoarse and low. Even in this broken state, it soothes me to hear it.

"Remember, I know this castle's secrets," I say. Then something whines behind me, and I turn to see Baron chained in the corner. "Oh my god, what has that monster done to you?"

I quickly free the white wolf and check him for injuries. There are none, and Baron rubs his head against both me and Fen. I still can't believe this wolf is the Earth Spirit, but I will have to think on that later.

Fen pulls me closer to him, and I take comfort in the warmth of his body, in the hardness of his muscles and the feel of him so close. And beneath the layers of stench we both have brought with us, I can smell him. The wildness that clings to him always. The pine and woodsy scent. I breathe him in and dig my nails into his arms to hold him tighter.

I sob into his chest, all the fear and tension of the last few weeks flowing out of me, releasing in one great swell, like a wave I can no longer control or hold back. The beat of his heart is steady and strong and I sigh into his embrace, so happy to be with him again. I haven't seen him since the trial, and I feared I would never see him again. After a moment I pull away just enough to look up at him. He's still Fen, with his ruggedly gorgeous features, his piercing blue eyes and sandy brown hair with copper flecks always a little disheveled. But he's also

more. I reach up to touch the points of his ears, now so much like mine. "This is my fault," I say softly.

He reaches for my hand and pulls it against his chest. "No. You didn't even know what you were until we brought you here. This isn't your fault. Never blame yourself."

I nod, wiping the tears from my eyes. "We don't have long. We must leave. Levi will know we've escaped as soon as he gets to my cell."

That's when Fen looks down at me and notices I'm wearing only a cloak. "What happened to you? What did he do to you?" A growl forms deep in his throat, and the new tattoo on his stomach glows a slight pale blue, radiating his magic.

"I'll explain later. Right now we have to go."

Fen presses his lips together but nods, reaching for my hand as we climb back into the secret passage. He returns the bricks to their proper place and we make haste through the dark, hidden halls as quickly and quietly as we can. I know he has many questions, as do I. They will have to wait.

As we pass one door, Fen stops and holds up a hand. "We need our gear. Our weapons. Normally they'd be in the armory, but ours are a special case, so they should be kept here." He looks down at my feet. "And you won't get far without some clothes and shoes."

I can't argue with that. I'm limping along as it is.

He pushes through the door and peeks out, then ushers me in. It's Fen's quarters, though it's clear Fen's not the one who's been sleeping here. "Levi has taken my place," Fen says with venom in his voice.

I look at the disheveled bed and unfamiliar clothing that litters the floor and I seethe with rage. "That bastard."

Fen opens a few trunks until he finds what he's looking for. He hands me Spero—my sword—and the dagger Daison made for me before he died. Then he hands me clothes. "They will be too big, but they're better than nothing."

I shrug them on over tender skin as he also undresses out of his rags and into his leather armor. Light but still offering some protection. I try to look away when he's naked, but don't quite succeed. He catches me staring and smiles for the first time since the dungeon. "There will be plenty of time for that later, Princess."

I'm flustered but don't turn my eyes away. "I hope so."

And I mean it. I'm tired of waiting. Tired of second guessing. We aren't guaranteed any kind of future. I want to live my life now. Which means being with Fen. Loving him. Regardless of what the future holds. I spent so much time worrying about who would make the best king, I failed to consider that fate might conspire to take the choice from me altogether. I almost lost him once in

the battle, and again at the hands of Levi. I won't lose him to my own foolishness now.

He raises an eyebrow at me as he pulls on his clothes. He says nothing with his mouth, but so much with his eyes. For a moment it's almost easy to forget everything that's happened. Everything we are running from. We are in his room. We are safe. We are together. But we can't let our guard down. He takes three long steps and is standing in front of me. He raises his finger to my cheek and runs it down my jaw. "This face, these eyes, this mouth, filled my thoughts every moment I was imprisoned. I feared I would never see you again."

I reach for his hand and hold it against my face. "I'm not so easy to get rid of."

He leans in and his lips find mine. It is a moment I have dreamt of every night. The feel of him. The taste of him. I don't want it to end. I want to lose myself in his embrace. But we are nearly out of time. We could still be caught. We could still be killed.

We pull away from each other with great reluctance and grab our swords. It's time.

It doesn't take us long to make our way out of the castle. Fen knows even more secret passages than I; this has been his home for longer than I can even imagine.

I show him the note, and he nods and leads us to the barge. I can see the questions in his eyes, but we both know this isn't the time. First, we must escape and get somewhere safe.

I have no idea where that somewhere is, but I know it's not here.

The moons are high in the sky by the time we make it to our meeting place. The docks, which I have only visited a handful times. Usually, they are bustling with people unloading delivered goods or freshly caught fish. There is laughter and the smell of wine and of the river. Now, it is quiet, dark, but for a few torches in the distance. Black waters shimmer under the pale light, and a small boat sways on the waves. From a distance I see a man cloaked in black, standing on shore with his back to us. It isn't until we get closer that I realize who it is.

Fen grabs my hand and stops me. We both hold our ground, drawing our blades. Baron leaps in front of us growling, as the man turns to face us.

He grins and holds out his hand. "Brother, you don't look nearly happy enough to see me."

Fen growls. "What are you doing here, Dean?"