## **VAMPIRE GIRL 4: MOONLIGHT PRINCE**

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# **PROLOGUE**

Kayla Windhelm

"The darkness takes shape. Small at first, then larger."
—Arianna Spero

**I dream of** fire and pain. I dream of Daison and Ari. And then, just as the flames threaten to consume me, he is there. Tavian Gray.

He holds me. And together we burn.

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I wake gasping for breath, my head covered in sweat. I must have had a fever. Again. Too common now. Sickness. Ever since that bastard... ever since he... No. I cannot think about him. I cannot think about what happened. If I do, I will break. So I push away memories of Levi, memories

of the dungeon, and I will myself to move. My limbs are weak, battered, cramped from days in a cell, but like a rusty door, eventually they give way. My bones pop and crack as I sit up. My breath weighs heavy. And then, looking down, I see it. I see him.

I suppose I knew this day would come. I dreaded it. But now, seeing him on my lap, I can't help but smile. "Hello... Riku."

The little phoenix chirps back at me. He is a deep purple with streaks of silver, his feathers metallic in appearance. Slowly, I bring up my hand, move it forward like I do to calm horses.

Riku doesn't back away. Instead, he leans forward, into my palm, and I caress his feathers. They are soft, smooth, despite their solid looks. He seems to like my touch. He keeps rubbing against my arm, so I keep petting him, and he chirps in what sounds like happiness.

I can't help but giggle. Giggle. Me. A Shade who's just been through the worst days of her life, giggling on her bed with a tiny phoenix on her lap.

And he is tiny. About the size of a potato, easily fitting into my hand. Much smaller than I imagined.

"The mighty Riku," I say in mock seriousness, lifting him up to my face.

"You are so cute."

He nods, beaming with his eyes. A mix of deep purple in the center and silver around the edges.

I had always thought Riku would be red, maybe orange. You know, fire colors. But my flame is inexplicably silver. So I suppose he matches me.

I force myself to sit up even more. Somehow, it hurts less now. Perhaps because of the cute baby phoenix in my hand. He hops onto my shoulder,

perching there, and I glance at both of us in a polished steel oval that acts as a makeshift mirror. We look quite the pair, my blue hair complementing his deep purples. My pale skin matching his silver.

My gown is a simple green, unlike my very non-simple room. Fen insisted I stay in one of the bed chambers reserved for the most renowned guests within Stonehill. It's huge. Complete with a burning fireplace and a thick fur rug, bookshelves with more books than I've ever read, and even a vanity! Who needs all this stuff? Maybe a princess, but I'm no princess. I miss my own home, my small house outside the castle. And how Daison used to—

I push thoughts of him away, turning to Riku. "So hey, buddy, you hungry? You need any food?" I can't remember if Spirits need to eat. I try recalling if Ari ever feeds Yami, but can't remember. Then I think of Baron. Baron definitely eats food.

Still crazy to think he's a Spirit. When Fen told me all the details, my brain almost exploded. He'd been half Fae for centuries, but never knew the truth. How do these things happen?

I try not to ponder too heavily as I scour my room for food. Someone left an assorted meal of bread, cheese and ham on my dresser. I offer the ham to Riku, but he waves his little beak at me in a very displeased fashion. So I offer him the bread.

Then he chirps and digs in.

He's quite immaculate, getting every little crumb. "Good baby phoenix," I say, petting him on the head. "Now how about some water and—"
Footsteps. Outside my door.

My heart stops, my breath hitching. Please be Tavian. I ache to be with him. He's visited my room since we were freed, but I've been half asleep most of the time, battling fever. Today, I feel better than I have in ages. I need to see him.

I need—

The door opens.

It's not Tavian.

It's Asher.

"Ah, I see our new Druid has awoken." He closes the door, adjusting the black sleeves of his pristine suit. His dark hair is tidy, but messier than usual Asher. I wonder if something's happened.

"Can you see him?" I ask, raising my hand with Riku.

Asher nods. "Of course."

"And you're not surprised?"

"Why would I be?"

Because I haven't told anyone I'm a Druid. Not even Fen. Only Tavian.
Only Tavian knows.

Asher seems to notice my pause. "I overheard your new friend talk about it. He seems quite nice."

So Tavian told him. Somehow, something feels wrong about the idea. I don't know Tavian well, but I know he's a private person. I don't imagine him spilling the secrets of others.

"I had my doubts," says Asher, waving his hands in the air. "But now that you have Riku, there's no denying it."

I drop my eyes, sighing. "No. I suppose there isn't."

"Come my dear," says Asher, putting a finger under my chin. "This is good news. We have three Druids on our side now. And the Midnight Star. Levi won't challenge us again."

I know he's trying to cheer me up, but at the mention of Levi I feel sick. I bend over, trying not to vomit, but preparing for it all the same.

Riku chirps soothingly in my ear, and it helps a bit.

"I know it can be... hard," continues Asher, "having responsibility thrust upon you. Even if you are raised to rule, the idea of ruling and the act of ruling are two very different things. As a Druid, you have a duty to your people. Maybe not as a supreme ruler, but as a guide. A mentor." He looks away, into the flames of the fireplace, his voice soft. "I feel much the same."

There is something about Asher today. A depth I have not seen before. Or perhaps, I am simply noticing a lack of wit. He seems more serious than usual.

"I don't believe the others know yet," says Asher. "That you're a Druid. If you wish, I could keep the secret a while longer."

"Yes," I say, suddenly feeling better and standing straighter. "That would be nice. Until I'm ready to tell them on my own."

"Very well. Now to important matters." He leans in, sniffing at my gown, then pulls back repulsed. "You must take a bath."

I only run into servants on my way to the bathhouse and none seem to notice Riku. He must be staying hidden, invisible. Dim light shines through the hallway windows. It must be very early. Explains the lack of people. When I enter the bath chamber, I am alone, in near darkness, the water a pale blue.

Well. I'm almost alone. There is Riku after all.

I slip off my gown and enter the water. It's warm, soothing to my aching joints. A slight steam hovers on its surface, the heat battling the cold air. I sigh and lean back against the bath walls, closing my eyes and letting my stress melt away.

"Hello, Princess."

I recognize his voice instantly. Deep and warm and gravelly.

Tavian Gray, tall, muscled and naked stands above me.

I think I... well... I think I forget how to think.

Then he smiles.

And my mind starts to wander. To things I could do to those muscles, those lips...

Then Tavian jumps in the pool, splashing me with water and breaking my wonderful dream.

I laugh and splash him back.

Before I can fully exact my revenge, he grabs my arms, pins them down, and presses his rock hard body against mine. His heart beats in time with my own. His breath tickles my skin. His scent is that of stone and wood and fire. I run a hand down his chest, studying every inch of his being,

memorizing him as best I can. So I may never let go of this moment. So I can hold onto it forever.

"I missed you," I whisper, our lips close. Oh, so close...

"That is good." He places his mouth against my neck, kissing my skin gently over and over. "Otherwise, I would have stayed for nothing."

He recovered faster than me, somehow. I remember him by my bedside as I struggled to live. He seemed fine then. He seems fine now.

"What are you, Tavian Gray?" I ask, running my hand through his thick brown hair.

"You know who I am—"

I yank on his hair. Just hard enough.

He inhales deeply, grinning. "I am many things. Right now, foremost, I am your friend."

"Just a friend?" I ask, biting my lip.

"Well, maybe I am a special friend."

I touch his face with my hands, tracing his sharp cheek bones, his sturdy chin.

Then he takes my face into his palms and pulls me closer. Closer. Closer.

Until our lips touch.

Until I feel his taste on my tongue.

It seems forever, until we part.

"Mmm," I say, still remembering him on my lips.

He chuckles. "Mmm is right." Then he puts a hand on my chin, his fingers rough and strong. He tilts my face until our eyes meet. "I will remember this, my princess. I will remember this for all time."

There is something to his words. A sadness.

And I realize what they mean.

"You're leaving, aren't you?"

He doesn't look away then. I think a lesser man would. But he does not. "Yes. This is not my world. Not my place. I am a traveler. And soon, I must travel again."

I grab his hand, holding it tightly, so tightly I fear I hurt him, but I don't care. "I can go with you."

"You are a Druid," he says glancing over my shoulder. And I realize he can see Riku standing there. "Where you go, Fae will follow. They will seek your guidance, your leadership." He pauses, finally looking away, looking into the deep blue water. "I am no leader. I am no person to follow."

I shake my head, tears welling in my eyes. "Why? Why do you insist on being alone?"

"I..." He pauses. "Do you really wish to know?"

I nod, steeling myself for what is to come. "I do."

"Then stay with me tonight," he says, frowning. "The memories, they are worse than usual today. Stay with me, and you will see. Then you will understand."

I grip his hand even tighter. "I will stay with you. Show me."

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We spend the day together, but it is not a happy affair. Not truly. Tavian seems lost, buried in his memories. While I eat ravenously, he barely

touches his food. While I walk with a jump to my step, he lags behind. When I ask him what's wrong, "You will see," is all he says.

I try to find Fen, but Keeper Kal'Hallen informs me he and Dean are out searching for Ari. They should be back tomorrow.

I wish I could be out there, looking for my friend. But I am still too weak. Soon, though. I promise. Soon.

"She is very dear to you," Tavian remarks as we walk the gardens in fur cloaks.

"Yes," I say, thinking of Arianna. "She is like a sister. A sister I love." He nods, not saying any more.

When night falls, he escorts me to a shack at the outskirts of the city—a place I thought abandoned. He seems to have made a home here. Thick rugs cover the floor and the fireplace is stocked with wood. He sets it burning, and we cuddle by the flames, warming each other.

I do not know how long we stay like this. Together. Holding each other.

But at some point, Tavian pulls away. "It is time I slept." He walks over to the corner, a cold, damp place. He grabs something there and tosses it at my feet. A sword.

"What is this?" I ask, not touching the blade.

"You may need it," he says.

"Why?"

He says nothing, laying down his fur robe and making a bed for himself.

"I've seen you sleep before," I say. "When we traveled."

"Not all nights are equal." He sounds tired, beaten. He lies down on the furs and closes his eyes. "Goodnight, Princess."

"Goodnight..."

He says no more.

Hours pass. Nothing. Nothing but a man sleeping peacefully. I fetch more wood for the fire. Keep it burning to stay warm.

It is sometime deep in the night, sometime when the moons are high, that Tavian begins to tremble. It starts with a murmur, a whisper I do not understand. He mumbles, louder, then louder, in a language I do not know. His hands start to shake at his words. His head jerks back and forth. He seems to be calling. Calling to someone. Yelling. Yelling a warning.

It is then the wind begins to stir. It howls around me though all windows are shut. It chills me despite the burning fire. The lights begin to dim. A shadow falls over the room.

I have seen this before. When Tavian threatened Metsi. When Tavian fought the raiders.

But now it happens as he sleeps.

He shakes and spasms, crying out. Screaming.

Thunder crashes.

But I see no lightning. No storm outside.

Thunder again. The tempest is here. In this room. The storm swirls around him.

A flash of light.

Another.

They blind me.

But in between the flashes, I catch glimpses.

Tavian.

Different.

His skin darker.

Darker.

Black.

White stripes upon his body.

His mouth twists unnaturally, opening, and he roars, tearing the air with his voice.

His teeth are far too long, far too sharp.

He is more beast than man now.

What is happening?

Riku screeches in terror, quivering on my shoulder.

Tavian roars again, and it is a sound of agony, such terrible agony.

I rush forward, wanting to shake him, to wake him, to make it stop.

But something stops me. A feeling. A feeling that this must pass on its own.

I hold back. Though every part of me wishes to help. I hold back.

Another flash.

And the fire goes out. Darkness envelops the room. Darkness and silence. A silence so strong it chills.

And then I hear it. Feel it.

His breath against my skin. The heavy breath of a beast.

He is in front of me.

I cannot see him. But I know he is there.

A predator before his prey.

I look for the sword, but can see nothing in the darkness. I search with my hands, but find nothing.

The breath is still upon me. Hot. Loud.

Something growls in the darkness.

My fingers find purchase. The sword. I hold it up.

Don't make me do this. Don't make me do this.

Something lunges. Lunges for my throat.

I drive the sword forward.

And as quickly as the darkness came, it withdraws.

The flames return, flickering.

And before me, I see Tavian covered in sweat, shaking on the floor, bleeding from his shoulder.

"No," I fall to my knees, pulling him to me, holding me tight. "I'm sorry.

I'm so sorry."

He lets his head fall back, fall back so we are eye to eye. And I see it is him again, the real him. "I told you, Princess," he says, his voice a raspy whisper. "I told you I must go."

My hands shake. My eyes fill with tears. I tear away a piece of my gown and wrap it around his bleeding shoulder. The wound is not deep, thank the Spirits. "What happened?" I ask as I work, my voice trembling.

"You remember what I told you? How I summoned the Darkness? How I watched it kill my family? There is something else." He clenches his jaw, every word a clear effort. "The Darkness spared those who performed the ritual from death. But it did not spare us entirely. A curse it placed upon us. A curse..."

He reaches for something. The table. Water. He must want water. I rush, grabbing a cup and putting it to his lips. He drinks.

I caress his hair softly, waiting. When he is done, I take back the cup. "What is your curse?" I ask.

"I cannot forget," he says. "I cannot forget anything. The Darkness consuming my wife. The screams of my children as they died. I remember all of it. Every single detail. Every single detail I have ever felt."

"What do you mean?" I ask, frowning, feeling his pain.

He clears his throat, raising his voice. "Do you remember the last time you touched hot iron? The last time you burned your hand? Do you remember how it truly felt? The pain?"

"No," I say, realizing what he means. I can recall a part of the pain, but only a part.

"I remember everything," he says. "Every cut. Every burn."

"That is... That is..."

"Horrible?" He smiles for a moment. "Imagine if women could remember childbirth. If they could remember every detail. Had to live with it every day."

"It would drive one mad," I say, sipping some of the water myself.

"It would, wouldn't it?" He pauses. "Most times, I can distract myself with the present. But the past is always there, always by my side, haunting me. Mocking me with every mistake. Every tragedy. For a time, I can ignore its call. But some days it is harder not to listen. And then... then I live in agony."

"I'm so sorry," I say, tears running down my cheek. "I'm so sorry."

He raises an eyebrow, seemingly puzzled. "It is not your fault, Princess. It is my own burden. A burden well deserved."

"No one deserves such a fate."

He shakes his head. "If you could know how my family suffered, if you could know as I know, you would not agree." He tries to push me away.

I don't let him. I hold him tighter. "But you didn't intend to harm them."

"No. No, I didn't. But I must still pay for what I did. For the fool I was."

He pushes me away then, stronger than I expected. I fall back, wiping my tears, Riku chirping into my ear as Tavian grabs his belongings. He wraps his cloak around his shoulders and heads to open the door.

He pauses, holding the handle. "I will leave tomorrow. It is best. Best for me to travel alone. And... I will not tell anyone about Riku. About what you truly are. That is your burden to bear."

With that he opens the door and leaves.

A sharp cold wind hits me, and I wrap myself in the fur rug. Tavian's rug. It smells of him. And I hold it close. Weeping. Weeping for what could have been.

It is hours later, near day, when I remember what Tavian said. What he truly said. I will not tell anyone about Riku. About what you truly are. That is your burden to bear.

Your burden. Your burden...

If Tavian kept my secret, then how did Asher know? How did he know?

I grab my fur cloak and run out into the cold winter air. I run back to the castle. There, in an empty hallway, I find Asher. Despite the hour, he is awake, and he walks with a purpose.

I stay in the shadow, trailing him through winding pathways and doors.

Once, I close a door too loudly, and Asher glances back. I freeze, slipping away into a corner. Asher looks around, then shrugs and continues on.

I follow more carefully. Riku, fortunately, doesn't make a sound.

He knows something is wrong here. Something we must uncover.

Asher stops in the middle of a hall, peeks around over his shoulder, then pushes something on the wall. A stone.

A groan echoes through floor, and a piece of the wall slides away. A secret door?

I thought I knew the passages. Fen showed me all of them.

But this. This is not one I know of.

Asher enters the new door, disappearing from sight.

What is he doing? Meeting someone?

Oh, Asher, please don't be a traitor. Please.

I clench my jaw and follow, hoping for the best, dreading the worst. I follow through the secret door, down steps leading deep into the earth.

Leading to a chamber shrouded in darkness, lit only a by a few torches casting sinister shadows. Behind a corner, I watch as Asher grabs something from the floor. A tray of food.

He carries it forward. To something in the center of the room.

No. Not something. Someone. A man, bloody and bruised. On his knees. His hand outstretched, bound in chains.

I whisper an incantation, enhancing my night vision. And then I see the prisoner's face.

This... this doesn't make any sense.

The prisoner... the prisoner is Asher?

The man, the prisoner, looks up, and he grins. "No one figure you out yet? Bloody marvelous. Means I still get to be the one who kills you."

It sure sounds like Asher. The voice. The inflections. Even the cocky wit.

The other Asher, the one standing, laughs. It is not his voice. No. It's deeper now. Darker. Familiar.

My gut twists. My hands tremble. It can't be...

The other Asher waves his hand, and his form shimmers, changes. And there he stands.

My father.

Lucian.

Despite myself, memories flash through my mind. Memories of my mother escorting me to High Castle. My first trip there. Waiting for hours in the hall. Hours to see the king. Getting our chance. Walking up to the great king in front of hundreds of people. Oh, how mighty he looked. How grand. Dark hair with only streaks of gray. Black armor covering his body like dragon scales. A mighty sword by his throne, surely too big for any normal man. My mother pushed me forward to stand before him. "This is your daughter," she said.

The king looked at me then. Once. Only once he looked.

"My only daughter is dead," he said.

But, what did he mean? I could not understand. I was his daughter, and I was surely not dead. He was my father. Father's take care of their children. They embrace them. Tell them words of wisdom.

But the king did not move to touch me. He did not speak to share with me a story. Instead, he waved his hand in a gesture, and my mother pushed me to move out of the way. I did not wish to move. I wished to stay. To talk with father. But my mother pushed me more. "Please," she whispered. "Before the guards notice."

I let her move me then, move me back into the crowd. I had seen the guards. Big men in scary helmets that looked like beasts. I did not want those men to notice me. So I went back to the crowd, and then I went home. I did not see my father again. Not for a long time.

But I see him now.

He stands before me.

Laughing.

Laughing at the real Asher.

He's been impersonating him. Using illusion for... who knows how long.

I once thought Lucian dead. Gone. But he lives. He keeps my half-brother prisoner. I don't know what game he plays, but I know it is not good. Lucian was... is... never good.

"What's so funny?" asks Asher. The real Asher.

Lucian stops chuckling, adjusting his red cape. "Your audacity, my son. You always were so full of yourself, so proud."

"Ha, ha, ha," Asher says in mock laughter. "The Prince of Pride is prideful. Oh father, you truly are hilarious. Please tell me, what was your curse again? Bad jokes?"

Something changes then.

Lucian grows still. Cold. This is the man I know. The man I saw that day in court.

"I wish we could chat more, my son," says the king, his voice plain, bereft of emotion, "but we are being rude. You see, we have a guest."

A guest?

I freeze.

He means me.

Lucian turns, facing me. And he smiles. "Oh, Kayla, Kayla, right on time." What does he mean?

"Come now," says Lucian. "Come out of the shadows."

I do as he says, not because he says it. But because this way I can raise my sword. Raise my sword and point it straight at his heart. "Let him go."

"Not yet. The time is not right. But soon. I promise."

"No!" I yell, stepping forward. I don't know my plan. I don't have one. I can't fight Lucian. But maybe, with Riku at my side, maybe I stand a chance...

"You won't need that thing," says the king, gesturing at my blade.

"Don't you see, you are here for a reason. No one. No one has uncovered the truth. No one knows I have been impersonating a prince. No one but you. A filthy half-breed wench. Why is that?"

"Because you let me," I say, realizing the truth. "You lied about Tavian on purpose. You led me here."

"Hmm," says Lucian, nodding. "Perhaps you are smarter than I thought. Smarter than your whore mother, anyway."

"Don't talk about her," I hiss. "Don't you dare!"

He shrugs. That's all? A shrug?

"How did you know I was a Druid?" I ask, studying the room. Looking for other exits. Looking for a way to free Asher.

"It is a skill I have learned," says Lucian, "to sense power in others. Your Spirit is strong. Ever since we rescued you from the dungeon, I knew what you were. Your potential."

"Do you? Really?" I raise my free hand, and it lights with silver flame.

"Then you know what I can do to you. Let Asher go. Now. Or I burn you until there is nothing but ash."

Asher's eyes go wide. "Kayla. Kayla you can't—"

Lucian slaps him across the face. "Quiet. Let the half-breed play her games. It will be all the better when she loses."

Asher drops his head. He seems barely conscious.

I'm tired of this talk. Of Lucian's insults. I've carried a lifetime of hate for this man. And now I unleash it.

I charge forward, and Riku launches into the air. His wings burn bright with flame. Like an arrow, he flies for Lucian.

But the king is too quick. He steps to the side, avoiding the flames, and he dashes forward. At me.

Our blades clash.

And in an instant, it is over.

My sword falls to the floor.

He disarmed me. I do not even know how. He moves so fast. It's impossible.

He-

Lucian kicks me in the gut, and I fall, clutching my stomach. I spit and blood flies from my mouth, staining the cold stones.

Riku screeches in fury and strikes, claws reaching for Lucian's face.

The king grabs the phoenix midair. Holds him by the neck.

"No," I try to yell, but it comes out a weak whimper.

Riku chirps in terror, thrashing, but Lucian does not let go. He seems unaffected by the burning feathers. Maybe his armor protects him. Maybe he truly feels no pain.

"Silver flame," he says, his eyes wide with awe. "There hasn't been a silver flame for ages. Not according to the ancient Fae texts. You truly are special." He looks at Riku with pleasure. With greed.

"Let him go!" With the last of my strength, I jump up, grab my sword and strike at his arm.

Lucian blocks with one hand. It's all he needs. He smacks the blunt of his blade against my fingers, crushing them, and I drop my blade again. Any energy I had leaves me, and I fall to my knees, crying, pleading. "Please let him go. Let him go."

I cannot stand the pain Riku is in. The terror. It is my pain. My terror.

Lucian pulls something from his red cloak. A grey stone. He holds it up and whispers something under his breath. Words I do not understand. Words like Tavian mumbled in his sleep.

Riku screeches again. Louder. A sound of true horror.

Something. Something is happening.

Riku becomes more flame than bird. His screams fade. They die out.

And then nothing is left. Nothing but silver smoke.

It flows into the grey stone, changes it. Turns it a deep purple with streaks of silver.

"What have you done to him?" I scream, my body shaking with terror and rage.

"Shhh," says Lucian, caressing the stone. "Do not worry, my dear. Riku is safe. Safe and well."

He's in the stone. The bastard put Riku in the stone. "What do you want with him?"

"I need his help. And then he will be free. I swear." He smiles at me. I spit at his face.

The phlegm doesn't reach him. But I don't care.

Lucian just shakes his head. A strange disappointment in his eyes.

"What now?" I ask. "Chain me up just like you did your son?"

He raises an eyebrow, then sits down to my level. "Oh no, there's no reason for that. No, I have a far simpler solution." He pulls something from his cloak. A vial. A potion.

No. Not again. I'm not taking something again.

"Don't be afraid, my dear. This will simply make you sleep. A deep, beautiful sleep. Your friends will think the fever broke you, that Levi's tortures and poisons put you into a coma in the end. They will try to help you, but nothing will work."

I lean back. "No. Please."

He doesn't look into my eyes. He doesn't seem to hear. "But you will wake. One day. When the time is right. When I have need of you."

"No. Please—"

He grabs my jaw. I try to keep it closed, but he pries it open. Stuffs the vial down my throat. The liquid pours down, coating my tongue with bitterness. I try not to swallow, but it's gagging me. Gagging me until my muscles react against my will. My mind begins to fade. My vision blurs. His is the last face I see. The face of my father.

"Good," he whispers. "Good."

### Chapter 1

### **BLEED FOR ME**

"Sometimes wolves come in sheep's clothing."

#### —Fenris Vane

They won't kill me. At least not yet. As far as words of consolation go, these are pretty pathetic, but they're all I have. They're the words I whisper to myself when Metsi comes in each morning to administer my dose of prenatal herbs by having her lackey force my jaw open as she pours the bitter liquid down my throat. They're the words I use to quiet my mind at night when I am left alone save for the sound of the wind and wild animals outside my barred window. They're the words I think to myself each morning when I lurch out of bed to vomit up my morning sickness into a pail they left for me. I don't know if this is caused by my pregnancy, or by the herbs Metsi gives me—but each day I feel worse.

It only took a week for these words to replace *dum spiro spero* in my mind. I still have hope, deep down, buried where my magic now lays dormant. I have tried to cast spells, but my magic is a dead thing inside me, there but useless. They've placed wards on my room to ensure I cannot use magic, and it works.

It's not a fancy room, but it's not a dungeon. So there's that. I have a small mattress on the floor that's clean and warm. A room in which to

bathe and relieve myself. And three changes of clothes so that I don't stink. And there's one window, always left open, but barred with lead to keep me from escaping. My door is always locked. There are no decorations. Nothing to occupy my mind save the occasional book Metsi brings in to let me read—mostly very dry books about the history of the Fae.

Each day I get a walk to keep the baby healthy. The walk involves following Metsi and her guard down to the dungeons, where I endure an hour of watching them torture Levi.

As I sit and watch right now, my stomach clenches and bile rises in my throat. It is suffocatingly hot down here, with no ventilation and fires burning that smell of flesh. The air is acrid and stale and reeks of blood, sweat and excrement. I cannot control my vomiting when I'm down here, so Metsi hands me a bucket, but refuses to allow me to go back to my room.

"I would think you would enjoy watching this monster suffer," Metsi says, holding up a knife, the tip red hot from the fire she held it in. "After all, did you not suffer at his hands? Did you not see the effects of what he did to your friend Kayla? To the people you claim to love? He is getting nothing less than what he deserves."

Her next words are drowned out by the screaming. Levi no longer looks like a man, but rather like a charred, skinned wild thing that just wants to be put out of its misery.

And Metsi's not entirely wrong. There was a time I would have paid to see Levi get his comeuppance. A time I would have volunteered to exact justice from his flesh. A pound for a pound. But I didn't know what I know

now. I didn't know that seeing someone tortured, seeing someone suffer beyond measure, takes its toll on your soul, no matter what that person did to deserve it. I didn't know how vile it would feel to watch what I am now forced to watch.

Today, after Metsi is done with Levi, she turns to me with a cruel smile.

"I have something to take care of, but since you are under contract to spend time with each of the princes, I'll leave you two alone to bond.

Consider it quality time with this month's monster."

We are not left alone of course. Two armed guards are stationed on the other side of the door. But we are alone enough. More alone than we've been in a long time.

One of his eyes is swollen shut by an ugly bruise. His other eye is bloodshot. There are pieces of skin missing from his body, and burns that are festering. On the table next to him sits a variety of torture devices, as well as a cup of human blood, to help him heal in small increments, just enough to wound him again.

I don't think they've let him sleep since we've arrived, though he has likely passed out for short periods.

I have no idea what to say to him. I hate him. Loathe him. When I think of the things he's done to me, to my friends, to my people, I feel a ball of rage twisting in my gut, fighting for space with the inexplicable life that now grows inside of me. But seeing him suffer makes me want to help. To heal. To fix. Of course, I can't do that either. There's nothing I can do to ease his suffering, even if I wished to. So I sit. And wait.

"You're next," he says through a mouthful of blood.

"What?"

"You're next. What they're doing to me, they'll do to you."

I shake my head. "They need me too much," I remind him. "They don't need you."

His lips curl up in a grotesque smile that's filled with cruelty even still. "They need what's in your womb, not you. "

"Pregnancies take time," I say. "I'll find a way out of this by then."

The first thing I did when I had a moment alone, right after my capture, was summon Fen with my blood and his demon mark. But if the magic worked—which is doubtful given the wards—he has not come. Or maybe can't come. I have no idea what became of him and the others once I was captured. I can only hope and pray they are safe. And Es and Pete, my god, I brought them into this messed up world and left them stranded here. And there's nothing I can do about any of it until I find a way to escape.

I place a hand on my stomach, something I've been doing a lot of lately. It's hard to think about this baby. To think that it belongs to me and Fen. In my world, I wouldn't even know I'm pregnant yet, but magic has perks, and one of them is apparently early pregnancy detection.

"You think I deserve this, don't you?" says Levi, his head hanging low, but eyes fixed on me. "You think this is justice?"

I don't say anything. I won't give him my pity.

"There was a time, you know," continues Levi, "a time when I was no danger to anyone. I was but a boy, bright and eager to learn. But the world took that boy and forged him into a harsh man. It didn't have to be that

way, but it was." He pauses, glaring into the fireplace burning within the stones.

"I still remember, back in the Silver Gardens, back when mother and father still lived. I remember being lost. Younger than Niam and Zeb, but older than Dean, Ace and Asher. Somehow, my older brothers were praised for being wise and mature, my younger ones for being spirited and youthful, and yet I was not praised at all. I didn't let it deter me though, no, not at first. I took hard to my studies, exceling in my classes and impressing my tutors. I grew found of smithing especially, and toiled long hours to perfect the craft. When testing came, I worked for weeks on a blade, pouring my ambitions and dreams into the steel. Gold it was, with a sapphire in the guard. Lightbringer, I called it. And when it was finally done, I took it to my father, eager to impress him for once. He glanced at the blade and laughed. 'Oh Levi, you couldn't possibly make such a blade,' he said. 'Tell me, who'd you steal it from?' I argued with him. Told him it truly was my work. But he just laughed once more and left for more important matters. I took the blade back to the forge then and bashed it until it shattered. I didn't forge again."

He turns his face back to me. "When the next testing came, I did as my father expected. I stole the project, a handmade cloak, from Ace and passed it off as my own. My father congratulated me more than he did before." He chuckles, then his eyes grow darker. "Ace and I fought after that, but not for long. He forgave me, though he had no reason. He just... did."

He pauses much longer this time.

I cross my arms. "So what? I'm supposed to forgive you? Is that the point of this story? Poor Levi had one bad thing happen to him, and instead of working harder to prove others wrong, he just did what they expected and turned bad? Well, boo hoo. We all have crap to deal with. At least you have brothers who care for you—"

"You think they care for me?" He flips back his head and laughs.

"Really? You think Niam sides with me because he cares about poor old

Levi? No, Princess. He sides with me because of the opportunities he sees

for his own gain. The schemes he plots to undercut me. And who else do

you think cares for me? Zeb, perhaps? Oh, no, Zeb does as he pleases, dear

Princess. Sometimes he helps, and other times he stabs in the back. For

centuries, he's darted back and forth between me and Asher, and he will

flip sides once again. In fact... I'm not sure who he supports even now. Do

you know, Princess? Are you sure?"

I stay silent, because he's not wrong. I don't know who Zeb supports. I don't even know if he voted for Fen and me to die, or if he tried to save us.

Levi grins at my silence, then continues. "And I hope you have no illusions about Asher and Fen. They despise me, I can assure you."

"Only because you've made it so," I say. "Only because you betray and hurt them every chance possible."

"Like when?" He looks up, as if he's trying to remember something.

"Like when I witnessed the Presenting? The one Dean and Asher joined in as well? I understand it was hard for you, Princess, but you must understand such things are not rare in Inferna. Slaves are presented all the time, even free men sometimes, if they are looking for particular work. You

may find the custom disgusting, but my brothers do not, I assure you. Well, perhaps save Fen. He is an odd one.

"Now, let me see, what else? Oh, perhaps I betrayed them when we went to battle with the Fae? No, wait. I don't believe that's right. I believe I fought at their side, while you hid the fact that you were the Midnight Star, the fact that you had returned the Druids from their slumber.

"Or perhaps you refer to the time when I threatened you. When I saw what you truly were, and I tried to end your life. When I tried to stop the war and save the lives of all in Inferna. Even the lives of innocent Fae.

"Or perhaps you refer to the time when I—along with five other Princes of Hell—sentenced you and Fen to death, the Midnight Star who brought ruin upon my people and the Earth Druid who had slain our father."

He pulls on his chains in rage. "I may have threatened you, Princess, hurt you even. But I have never betrayed my brothers."

I... I don't know what to say. He has hurt me, nearly killed me, and I always assumed he had done worse to others... but I have never seen him do harm to his brothers. Never even seen him act alone. I forget that Dean and Asher were part of the Presenting, even peripherally. I forget they were part of the Council who voted for my death.

This is a cruel world. I have let myself forget, but no longer. Before I came here, I had never killed anyone, never been taken captive or seen others tortured. Now I have endured all these things. And I know I will endure more.

Levi has done terrible things, but what of me?

I have killed.

I have lied.

I have ruined.

My very existence causes chaos and disorder. My very presence brings death and pain.

"There is a way to escape, you know," Levi whispers. "Quite simple, really."

"What? What do you mean?"

He adjusts his neck, twisting it to the side until the bones pop. "You let me feed on your blood. I will regain my strength. Then I can break these shackles with ease."

"And kill me," I say, backing away.

He smiles. "Kill you? True. I would. But you are not just you now, are you? I've heard of the babe you carry. My niece or nephew. The heir. What kind of uncle would I be if I killed the child? What kind of monster would I be?"

I shake my head, placing a protective hand on my belly. "You really expect me to believe that? That you care about my and Fen's baby?"

"Believe what you will." He shrugs. "The way I see it, I am your only option. Let me feed, and together we can escape. Don't, and you will remain a prisoner forever. That is, until your baby is born. And then what do you think will happen, Princess? Let me tell you. Metsi will cut your throat and take the babe as her own. She will teach the child to call *her* mother. And your precious babe will grow up just like her mommy Druid, demented, mad, a Fae who will not stop until every vampire and Shade is

massacred. Is that want you want for your child? Is that the future you imagine?"

"Screw you," I say through gritted teeth. I'm not stupid. Of course I've considered that. But I will figure something out before that happens. I must.

He chuckles.

A part of his offer tempts me, but I would be a fool to take it. Even if he's not lying about protecting the baby, he has no reason to take me with him. He could flee on his own.

"There is one other way," says Levi. "You could..." He glances at the guards at the door and lowers his voice further. So quiet.

"What? How?" I lean closer to listen.

And then he grabs me.

His hand clutches my hair and yanks my head to his mouth. Before I can react, his lips brush my neck. His teeth sink into my skin.

I gasp as blood rushes out of me. I try to fight. Kick and scream. But already, he has grown stronger. He keeps a hold of me. Drinking. Drinking.

Yelling.

The guards.

They charge at Levi.

For a moment, he lets me go.

With bare hands, he tears the guards apart, their entrails exploding onto the walls. I fall to the ground. Weak. So weak. I try to stand. To crawl. I cannot.

And then Levi returns. To finish.

He grabs me by the neck. Bites down again.

I can't even scream this time.

He is draining me. Draining me completely.

I am fading. I am dying.

He never cared for the baby. He was lying all along. Of course, he would just kill me. With me gone, the Druids would have to return to slumber. Metsi's powers would fade. The war would be over. And Levi could escape with ease.

He is close now. Close to ending it all.

My vision blurs. My mind dims.

I place my hands on my belly. On my baby. And I think of Fen.

I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry to you both. You deserved a life together.

Someone rushes into the room. Water crashes into Levi, pushing him back.

But it is too late.

I am too far gone.

I close my eyes.

And I die.

Chapter 2

SILENCE

Fenris Vane

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

—Asher

I feel it. The bond breaking. Something is wrong.

Arianna!

I rush forward through snow and brush, searching, hoping, praying. Branches snap beneath my feet and dust flies in my wake. Baron keeps pace beside me, running faster then he ever has, never slowing, even when his breath draws ragged and fatigue settles into his bones. For a straight day, we run. We run. We run. Until we can run no more. As the sun begins to set, I fall to my knees on a hill overlooking the forest. My breath is heavy. My body is drenched with sweat beneath layers of brown fur cloaks and vests. Baron moans into the snow, his body as spent as mine, his howls weak and plaintive. We have searched for days. Weeks. But still we find nothing. And now... now something has changed.

Ever since I fed on Arianna that day in the cave, I have felt bonded to her, felt her life a part of my own. But now I feel it no longer. Instead, I am empty. Hollow. Alone.

It is time for a new plan. Time to reassess. Time to do something I do not wish to do, but I must. For Arianna. Because I know of no other path now. I draw my dagger and slice the palm of my hand. With red blood, I draw *his* mark.

Then I set to building a fire behind a group of large stones. They remind me of a claw, viscous and cruel, reaching for the heavens. You are the Prince of War, they seem to whisper. You are the Prince of Death. What ending did you dream of? Did you dream of happiness?

My body coils with rage at my own dark thoughts. It burns with a fury I have not felt in my long life, even at my darkest. And then I fling my head back and roar to the stars. I smash my fist into the ground and feel it shake beneath me. Again. Again. I strike the ground until my knuckles bleed, and then I strike again.

And when I have no strength left, I fall back, back against those cold cruel stones, and I lose myself in memories. Memories of Arianna in my arms, her soft skin upon my own, her lips against mine. Her breath a cool breeze upon my ear, her scent like fresh flowers and a summer day. Oh, how I long to have her back in my arms. To know I can keep her safe, to whisper words of comfort. Why did I ever let her go? Why did I not see her rush for Levi? Why, when I did, could I not fight through the guards fast enough? Why? Why? The word haunts me.

But I will not fall into despair. Not yet.

I will save Arianna. I will do anything to do so.

I would even summon him.

Baron stands at attention, sniffing at the air.

He comes from the shadows, a silent snake coming upon its prey. I look up. Glare into his dark eyes.

"Lucian."

My father smiles, but there is no warmth to his eyes. He is cold and harsh like the storm. Black and red armor clads his body. His great sword hangs on his back. "You wish to speak," he says, still half in the shadows, half hidden in darkness. As if the light from my fire would burn him.

I have not seen my father since the day I drugged him. The day I thought him dead and my entire world changed. I stand, equaling him in height, my body as massive as his own. I never look away. Never show a sign of weakness. "Where is she?"

He does not feign ignorance. Feigning ignorance is feigning dullness. "The Druid Metsi has her. In a place you will never find. A place she will never escape."

It is as I feared. I saw the broken ice. The raging water. The Water Druid has her. I clench my jaw. "Without Arianna, the contract cannot be honored. A new King of Hell cannot be chosen. You must help bring her back."

He chuckles. "I must? After you betrayed me, your own father, your own kin?"

"I was never yours," I roar.

"Of course you were mine. I raised you. My wife's blood brought you to life, flows through your veins even now." His words pulse with rage. He is more upset than I imagined. Upset at the thought I am not his own. Or perhaps just upset I am not within his power.

"If the contract is not honored," I continue, "the realms will suffer.

There will be no ruler, and your children will continue to squabble as they have, setting ruin upon each other. Have you seen the destruction within my castle? Have you seen the strung-up Fae and the dismembered heads adorning pikes?" I step forward, pleading. "Did you not seek to bring balance between the Fae and vampire? Did you not seek to bring peace?

Help me. Help me save Arianna and bring balance."

He looks down for the first time. "Even if I could... even if I did... what would it matter? You have no desire to be king. You will make no difference."

His words punch me in the gut. They ring true, and yet, they fill me with anger. How dare he deign to know my mind? To know what I can or cannot do?

"I will bring peace," I vow. "I will bring balance."

Lucian smirks, pointing at me. "You have always had a flair for the grand gestures, a flair for the dramatic. And often, you have kept to your word, succeeded where others thought you'd fail. But this time, you will not succeed my son. You cannot. Because this time, you are against me." He looks to the fire. "You and your brothers play your game, fighting over my scraps like a pack of dogs, but in the end, there is only one King of Hell. And he stands before you." He turns to leave.

But I will not let him. My voice thunders through the air. Asking what I have dreaded to ask. "Am I a true Prince of Hell? Can Arianna choose me to rule?"

He turns back, his face half in shadow, half in light. "Yes. She may choose you. But will you let her?"

His words fill me with emotion. I am a true heir. Arianna and I can still be together. But before I can collect all my thoughts, Lucian continues.

"You know, I despised you at first," he says. "Despised everything you represented. A Fae living in my own home, feeding upon my food, my hospitality, my knowledge. But in time, you showed me something I never thought true. You showed me it is not our birth that makes us who we are, it is our choices. It is our own true self." His eyes fill with sorrow; an emotion I do not recall ever seeing on him. "I once thought myself condemned to this realm, condemned to live a life lesser than that of my brother's. But you showed me I could do anything. Anything. I remember when you left to slay the beast upon Grey Mountain. It was your test, your test to see if you were worthy of a realm of your own. Half your brothers laughed and placed bets on your demise, the other half worried and trembled for your safety. But I... I did not doubt you then. Too often had you proven me wrong. Too often had you made dreams reality. So when you returned from Grey Mountain, your rags soaked in blood, the head of the beast strapped to your belt, I did not even blink an eye. That is Fenris, I said. That is who he is. The Prince of War."

Why does he tell me all this? "You care nothing for me," I hiss.

"Oh, I care, my son. I care for you all. It is why I do what I do. One day, you will understand. It is why I tell you this now. So you remember.

Remember I am always on your side."

His words sound of lies, but I will use them as I can. "If you are on my side, then help me. Tell me where Arianna is. If you do not, I swear I will never forgive you. I will hunt you. I will do as others think I've done, and you will fall upon my blade."

Inexplicably, he smiles. "Perhaps one day, my son. Perhaps one day."

And as fast as he came, he slips away into the shadows.

I run forward, grasping for him. But he is already gone. Vanished by the magic he shares with no one.

And I am once again alone.

I fall back against those stones, and I draw another mark.

It is morning by the time Dean finds me. He wears no shirt despite the cold, only black pants, a sword on his hip, a bow strung across his shoulder. His golden hair shimmers in the sun. He grimaces when he sees me. "No luck?"

"Some." I say, putting out the fire. "She is with the Druid Metsi, but where I do not know."

"And you came upon this knowledge how, exactly?"

"Our father."

Dean's eyes almost leave his skull. "He came to you?"

"Yes. He answered my summons." I throw my supplies back over my shoulder and head for the next mountain.

Dean follows, his legs sinking up to his knees in the snow. He has searched these lands as I have these past few days. He has scouted day and night but found nothing. "So what next? We continue to scour the Outlands?"

"No," I say, sighing, wishing I did not have to share this knowledge. But Dean is the only prince to lend me his aid. Even Asher refuses to search. The Prince of Pride hasn't been himself lately, but I have neither the time nor attention to find out what ails my brother. "There is another place," I tell Dean. "Another place where the Fae dwell." And then I tell him about Avakiri.

"I heard whispers. Rumors of rumors." Dean shakes his head in wonder.

"But I thought them false tales conjured to give the Fae hope. If this place does indeed exist, can you imagine the history we will find there? The culture?"

I shrug. "I only hope we find Arianna."

Dean grins like a child promised candy. "So do you know how we get to this... Avakiri?"

"Varis and I spoke of it briefly. Before he left to search the skies for Arianna." The Druid has not sent word for weeks. I hope he is safe. He likely returned to Avakiri, hoping to find the Midnight Star, and if what he said was true, his people would not have welcomed him with open arms.

"There is a door nearby," I continue. "A Waystone, they call it. A passage into Avakiri. I do not know if I will be able to open it, but I will try. My Druid blood may be enough. Should be enough."

Dean nods, and then we do not speak for a while as I guide him over freezing mountains and through dense forests. Baron stays close to my heel as we walk, and I occasionally lay a hand on his head as my thoughts turn to the days after Arianna disappeared.

Dean, Asher, and I met to discuss plans. Small parties had been sent out to search for Arianna already, but they returned with no news, and we could scarce afford the extra manpower when every body was needed here. Es and Pete, her best friends, had volunteered to search as well, but they did not know the land nor how to defend themselves in the wild. So Dean escorted them back to earth, after a long talk that involved alcohol and promises to keep them informed the moment we found Arianna. So we had to reassess, and I needed advice.

The Prince of Pride adjusted his collar, cursing under his breath, then turned to the map before us. "How will you find her?" he asked. "Where will you start?"

I pointed at the different Outland villages and forts scattered across the map. "Dean and I will travel north, leaving no stone unturned, sweeping across the entire border. We will—"

"You won't find her," said Asher. "You didn't find her before. And you won't find her now."

Dean tilts his head to the side. "It was you who brought her back the first time the Fae took her, wasn't it, Asher? Perhaps you can offer some advice instead of whining."

"Very well," said Asher, sitting down and adjusting his black suit. "Send the Druid after her. He knows the Fae better than us all. If they have her, and they likely do, he will know where to look."

Dean nodded, twirling a finger through his blond curls. "Sounds pretty good, actually. But what if she's not with the Fae? What if Levi has her?"

I shook my head. "There have been no reports of him. Likely, he is dead or taken as well."

Dean frowned, searching the map. "Or perhaps he took Arianna somewhere secret. Perhaps he is trying to... guarantee his ascension."

If he were to get her pregnant and turn her into a vampire, then the contract would be fulfilled. Her time with the other princes would be forfeited, and Levi would become king of all. The thought disgusted me. The thought of Levi and Arianna somewhere alone. The thought of him...

I could not even imagine it.

"If that were true," I said, "and Levi did indeed have her in his clutches, I think he would have returned triumphant by now. Instead, it has been days."

"It has," agreed Asher. "So why not do as I propose and send the Druid? He will fair far better than the two of you."

I clenched my jaw. It was true that Dean and I had already begun to search and found nothing. But we had not strayed too far from the castle yet. My castle. "We must look farther north," I said. "We will leave today."

"And who will run Stonehill?" asked Asher. "Who will watch the Moonlight Garden?"

"I suppose it has to be you," I said. "Don't worry. It won't be all that difficult. The Keepers will tell you what needs attention."

Asher mock-laughed. "Not that difficult? Running three realms? You must be out of your mind."

Dean shrugged, pouring himself a glass of wine. "I find it pretty easy."

"That is because your realm is built on alcohol and sex," said Asher.

"But other realms are not so simple."

Dean snickered. "Yeah, some are built on nail polish and flowers. *So* difficult."

Asher jumped from his chair and pinned Dean against the wall. He gripped him by the collar and pushed him up to the air. "You will not insult me again. Do you understand?"

There was a panic in Dean's eyes. And then it turned to laughter.

"Smooth Asher losing his temper. Times are changing, indeed. What next,
brother? Shall we jump into an arena and spar? I so look forward to kicking
your ass."

Asher's eye twitched, and he seemed about ready to fight, but instead he sighed and let his brother go. "I have more important things to do than fight you, Dean." And then Asher left the room, avoiding both our gazes.

I kept my eyes on him as he disappeared down the hall. "He is acting strange," I said.

Dean nodded. "So you've noticed it, too."

"So have I." A third voice. A new voice. The Druid. Varis stepped in from the balcony, his white clock drifting in a wind I could not feel. His bald head gleaming in the torch light as his silver white owl perched on his shoulder. He must have flown there silently. How long had he been listening?

"Asher and I have spoken briefly," continued the Druid. "He was... nicer than usual."

I raised an eyebrow. "Nicer? And this is an odd thing between you? Considering you two were—"

"Yes. It is odd," said Varis, cutting me off. "After what we have been through, our talks are full of sorrow and regrets. At least, they used to be. Now he is too polite. Too formal."

Dean rubbed his chin. "Polite? You're right. Something is wrong with Asher."

"We should keep an eye on him," I say. A thought tickles at my mind.

What if... no. It couldn't be illusion. He is too identical to the brother I

know. It would take great knowledge and great power to cast such a spell.

No one would be capable of it. No one I have ever heard of.

I turned to the Druid. "Varis, tonight we leave to search for Arianna."

He bowed his head. "Then I shall leave as well. Zyra and I will search the skies."

Dean looked hesitant. "So we leave Asher alone to rule our realms?"

"Only for a while," I said. "Besides, what harm can he do? The realms are ancient. They are hard to change from their ways. And if he does something disagreeable, then we will undo it upon our return." I pause.

"Though these circumstances are not ideal, Arianna must come first. She must."

They both nodded, and then we parted ways. I packed my things for travel, and then I made my way to the healing tents. I had been there often of late. To see Kayla.

She wasn't in her room, so I searched for her in the healing tents. Perhaps she'd gone there for more medicine. I did not expect to find my half-sister in a white bed, her skin paler than usual, her limbs weak from atrophy. The healer, Seri, stood over her, applying damp cloths to my sister's head.

"What is this?" I asked. "She was on the mend last I saw her. I was only gone a few days."

Seri gritted her teeth. "We found her like this in her bed. We cannot wake her."

I clenched my fist. "Why has she relapsed so suddenly? What did you give her, Fae? What?"

Fear appeared in her eyes. But then it passed, replaced with concern. "Nothing new. This must be a result of the concoctions the Prince of Envy gave her. They have assaulted her mind, driven her to hallucinations and madness. A relapse isn't out of the realm of possibility in a case like this."

"But she was doing better," I said, my voice loosing its thunder in grief and worry.

"She was running off a last burst of energy, my lord," said Seri. "But when it expired, her body shut down. She collapsed."

I looked at my sister, my dear sister who endured torture unspeakable.

Torture that would have broken many I know. "When will she wake?"

"I do not know, my lord. She is fighting a difficult battle. A battle to regain her mind. It could take days. Weeks. Perhaps even longer."

My fist fell apart into a trembling hand. "But, she will wake, yes?" Seri looked away, her eyes nervous. "It is possible, my lord. But it

remains to be seen whether it is the Kayla you know who will wake, or another."

"No." I punched the wooden pillar to my side, breaking it in half and almost sending the tent falling upon us. But it held, supported by other beams. I looked at Kayla and thought of the story Varis told me, of his sister who was never the same. If only I had done differently. If only I had grown in my powers. Perhaps I could have ridden to Stonehill sooner. Perhaps I could have saved her.

Seri took my hand, rubbing it gently. "It is not your fault, my lord. You retook this city. You stopped the torture of Fae and Shade. And you saved Kayla from a fate worse than death. Because of you, she still stands a chance."

"Because of me..." I whispered. "It is because of me that this happened at all."

Then I pulled back my hand and left. It was on my way back to my quarters, when I passed the inn at the base of the castle, that I saw him.

Tavian Gray.

He sat at a table outside a tavern, drinking under the bright sun.

Drinking. While my sister lay asleep unable to wake.

I stepped forward and knocked the cup from his hands. "How is it that you drink and find pleasure while Kayla suffers? How have you recovered so quickly from the tortures inflicted on you both?"

The Fae sighed, flicking back his thick dark hair. He was a massive man, coiled in muscle, larger than any Fae I'd ever seen, at least as large as me. "Your brother spent more time on her than he did on me," said Tavian. "I wish it were not so. I wish I had stopped him."

At his words, I calmed. It seemed we wished the same. "I heard you were leaving."

"I was," he said, picking his cup back up from the mud and refilling it from the flagon of ale on the table. "But then I heard she'd relapsed, and I couldn't leave her this way."

"Who is she to you?" I asked.

"A friend." He said no more.

"And who are you to her?"

"I do not know. Perhaps I will never know." He raised his cup in a toast.

"To Kayla."

I nodded. "To Kayla."

Then I left the man to his drink and sorrows. I did not know him, and that worried me. But he was an enemy to Levi and a friend to Kayla. That would have to be enough.

As I walked back to the castle, I surveyed the repairs on the main hall. Winter had arrived, and that made the gathering of stone and wood harder than ever. Supplies were short and work slow. It would be a long time before Stonehill could be as it once was. Perhaps that was fitting. The place felt wrong without Arianna. Maybe it would only be put right when she returned.

"There." Dean's words pull me back to the present. Back to the cold and snow and search. "Look there." He points down the hill at something.

I follow his gaze down to piles of gray wood one could barely call houses. "A Fae village. So?"

"It's empty," says Dean. "Utterly empty."

I look again, and see that he is right. There is no sign of life, not outside the huts or within. There is not even a hint of prints in the snow. Strange. Like most things these days. But perhaps it is a clue.

We descend the snowy slope and scour the village for people. I find a wooden horse and a doll made of cloth, but I find no children. I find needle and string and a hammer for building, but I find none to use them. All I find is the smell. Like embers and ash. The smell of burning though there is no fire. The feel of smoke in my chest though the air is clear. Something unnatural happened here. Something dark.

When I come upon the village center, I notice something grey sticking out from the snow. A bone. I dig through ice and sheets of white until I find more. They make a circle. A circle of bones. And in the center, a carcass. A dead goat cut open. Baron howls into the cold wind, disturbed by the power that remains.

"A ritual took place here," I say, further examining the scene.

Dean hears me and jogs to my side. "You think the Fae cast a spell?" "Perhaps," I say, finding strings and beads.

"They must have done something wrong. Conjured something that turned on them."

I shake my head. "This was a dark ritual. A blood sacrifice. Whatever these people conjured, they intended to do so."

Dean looks around, his eyes spooked. "So you mean, these Fae... these Fae are gone... because they sacrificed themselves?"

"I believe they knew the cost, yes." I stand, brushing my hands clean of snow.

"But why do it then? Why give your own life?"

I shrug. "Perhaps Metsi told them to. Perhaps she convinced them the sacrifice would win the war."

Dean scans the nearby houses. "So you think Metsi started this ritual. Why? For power?"

"Or knowledge." I walk around, searching for anything else unusual. "I have seen such rituals before, at the base of the Grey Mountain. Shamans would call for wisdom of the future. Sometimes, for the strength to defeat rival tribes. The Outlanders would always make a sacrifice to summon the power. The power they called the Darkness."

"And yet," says Dean, "in all my centuries of ruling, I have never seen this dark power."

"Your realm isn't on the outskirts," I say.

And then I see it.

Footprints.

Someone survived.

They ran.

I follow the tracks, Dean and Baron at my heels, until I reach a shack at the back of the village. I try the door and find it barred from within. So I smash it open. Inside, there is nothing but darkness. Nothing but shadow.

"Hello?"

A whimper. Weak. Fading.

"Hello?" I run in, looking, looking for the sound. "We mean you no harm. We only want to—"

Baron sniffs the air and runs forward. I follow, and I find her. I find the little girl crying in the corner, clutching a doll to her chest. I reach out to her. "We only want to help."

The girl doesn't move. She only looks up. Into my eyes. And she screams.