



The New Genesis

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Description: Half vampire, half human. I'm the first of my kind.

Born from my human mother, I was given special gifts. Talents that are as yet secret from those who surround me. Better for them to be hidden than to be exploited.

The time is near though. We must unite.

We've asked them here, one vampire from each of the ruling clans to offer their service to me. And they will come...because they're curious. They'll play along to test me. They'll watch me for clues as to the power I hold.

But when the time draws near, they'll lie at my feet.

I am Izzy Ravana, future queen of vampires.

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Chapter One

I am Isabelle Ravana, future queen of vampires.

It didn't matter how many times I tried to sell myself on that line, it didn't quite work. First off, no one called me Isabelle. That was my grandmother's name. So, ever since I was little, I'd made them call me Izzy. It didn't sound as uptight as Isabelle. My life was one big formality as it was, so I would stick with Izzy until they made me change to something more sophisticated.

As soon as that crown was placed on my head, I'd have to become her though. This mythical person who thought, looked, and acted like my mom.

Ariana Ravana was widely known as the best queen our world had ever had. She'd fought in battles and saved our people more times than anyone liked to count. She united us from the beginning, changing the world as she went until it became as it is today. Could you believe that humans were once thought of as lesser? That they were basically kept only for our protection?

That seriously boggled my mind. Now, vampires were sent to the same training humans were. We were no longer put in glass houses and whisked away at the first sight of harm. We were out there fighting our own battles beside the humans who lived among us. We were all the same...

Except for me.

I was one-of-a-kind. There was no one like me. My mother was human when she had

me. The first known vamp-human hybrid, only allowed to live because my fathers were the Ravana Princes and my mother was changing the world as they knew it. If I'd been born into any other family, I would've been terminated before I even took my first breath. That was one thing our kind didn't like: the unknown. We were still like that, in a way. That's why my plan to unite the clans was being whispered about in vampires' sitting rooms all over the world.

I couldn't care less that everyone was talking behind my back. I knew it was the right thing to do. Since I was little, I had visions of the future. I didn't get them frequently, but when I did, I'd best listen to them or things didn't turn out right.

I've always wanted a "harem" of my own. That was the word thrown around when my mother was up and coming. Others treated it like a dirty thing, but I didn't think my mother ever minded. She had my fathers, and she'd given those four fathers to me. There was Papa Nic. He was surly on the outside, but the one you wanted in your corner when you were passionate about something. And Papa Stephan, he took care of me. Though it was practically impossible for me to get hurt, he kissed my "bruises" and made everything better. I'd taken on more of the vampire characteristics in that way. I healed fast and had thick, almost impenetrable skin. Papa Christian? He was the disciplinarian. The father that would catch me sneaking out of the house and punish me, but he was tender-hearted too. I only disappointed him once, which I'd be happy to forget about. Disappointing Papa Christian was like throwing your heart in a blender and watching it get torn up. And Papa Connor... Just thinking about him made me smile. When I thought about the fun times I had when I was young, Papa Connor was right there spreading his cheer around with a goofy smile and a personality bigger than life.

I loved them all, and they all loved me. When I'd had the premonition I'd be the one to unite the clans once again, it was a no-brainer to decide what to do. My mother had done it before in her own way. Now it was my turn, and I'd always done things my way.

The invitations had already been sent to the ruling clans. Some thought it a political move, and it was—to a degree. But I wanted what my mother had. I wanted the love and protection of not just one man, but multiple. I hadn't thought about how many I'd take out of my possible choices. I would lead with my heart. The only thing that kept me up at night was hoping I'd find my true mates among the invited vampires. I had nightmares of not liking any of them. Of this whole thing ending in a mess.

I'd already made my declaration though. There was no turning back. From these clans, I'd choose my princes.

They didn't know the real reason why I'd chose this route. They didn't even know me yet. I was still a mystery to the vampire world at large. For all they knew, I hadn't taken on any of the vampire characteristics. Some thought me more human than vampire because my mother was human. There were those who doubted my strength and abilities. A vamp-human hybrid had never been allowed to live let alone grow to nineteen years old. They would see soon enough though.

The event of the century wasn't just for the potential mates to show me what they could do. For the first time, I was coming out in the limelight to show the world what I could do. To show them their future queen could help them.

I was no longer their mysterious little princess. I would be queen, and I had more than enough skills to back it up.

They would need the reassurance once my visions started to come true. Fire and ruin. Bodies lying like heaps of forgotten men on the floor. The tormented cries of loved ones. I'd seen these images in my head before when my parents were forced to talk about the past.

There was war. There were fights to the death. Sharpened stakes. Weapons that maimed.

Now, the present would repeat the past. Only this time, it was me who was destined to do all I could to save us.

Chapter Two

Lightning streaked across the darkened sky.

I sat on the windowsill watching the ground beneath me light up in short bursts and then go dark again. Rain was heavy in the air though it hadn't fallen yet. Any minute now, the sun would break over the horizon. The brilliant light threatened like a ticking time bomb. It was now or never. I needed to be some place safe before then.

I turned back, looking at my nice, comfortable bed behind me.

Not today.

I looked right back outside. This wasn't the day to hide in my room and stay in bed. Today was the most important day of my life. Today I would meet my future mates for the first time.

At that thought, I jumped from the second story window and landed on my feet, knees bent in a perfect crouch before straightening and kicking into my vampire speed. I whisked across the front lawn and scaled the stone wall before again jumping to my feet on the other side of the estate boundary.

Stopping momentarily, I took a quick peek behind me and stared at my open window. Then I checked the other windows for any signs of life. The plan was to go and come back before Mom or any of my Dads came to wake me up. I had time. I could do this.

I stayed just off the streets. Though we lived in a predominantly vampire inhabited area, we also lived near humans too. They didn't need to see me running down the

road at full speed looking like Sonic the Hedgehog, so I kept just to the outside of the tree line. When I heard a car coming behind me, I side-stepped into the forest and darted under branches and leapt over rocks, successfully avoiding wooded obstructions like I was running the obstacle course at The Fort the day before graduation.

Today would be a whole new obstacle for me. Something far less physical, but one that would have a permanent affect. Today, I didn't want to leave anything up to chance.

When the car sped past, I dodged a tree and ran out onto the open grass again. The Fort's perimeter walls came into view and I pushed harder. The first rays of sun were appearing, lighting up the Rajyvik Training Facility from behind, making it as majestic as I always thought it to be. Maybe it was because Papa Nic had worked there all my life, so I remembered being there as a child whose head was filled with fairy tales. Maybe it was because I'd heard the stories of my mother saving the students there from one of the rogue clans. Whatever it was, The Fort always felt like history incarnate when I was beyond its walls...even when I was going to school here—especially when I was going to school here.

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The wall was coming up quick, so I launched myself at it and scrambled up the side. At the top, I stood and looked around. There were no guards in sight at the moment even though I knew they were around somewhere. They wouldn't care that I was here. I could've walked in through the front gate, but it would've gotten back to my parents in a hurry. If that happened, I was certain to get a lecture about acting like the future queen I was.

But, I wanted to see them before they saw me. I wanted to look at my potential mates not just from the pictures and files I was given with stats and facts and anecdotes. I wanted to really see them. Before they knew they were on display, I wanted to get a sense of their true character. You could tell a lot about someone when they didn't know they were being watched. How did they walk? How did they treat others? Were they revered or feared?

I tried my best to be "on" all the time. People were always watching me. Even now, I tilted my chin in the air before jumping from the top of the wall and landing smoothly on both feet. There were cameras all around The Fort. In case a guard had caught me on one of them, I didn't want to trip or stumble or have anything less than elegant strength.

I peered up at the surrounding rooftops. There were several buildings that made up the Rajyvik Training Facility campus. Dorms. Offices. Training rooms. I would take up sentry on top of one of the smaller buildings roofs, hoping to catch the sons of clan leaders as they drove into The Fort.

We could have used our house to host the choosing ceremony, or we could have used the Ravana Estate, but I felt The Fort was better. It had access to everything I wanted

to see. All the tools were at my disposal here that I wanted to learn from these potential vampire mates. We had training weapons, gyms, and ample room to spread out. I would need to see their warrior strength on top of everything else.

No one had publicly asked why I'd made this decree, and I wondered what that meant. We sent out invitations to all the ruling clans to send one vampire who would be willing to serve me, to honor me, and to unite our people, and no one had batted an eye. Yet. Time would only tell if that would hold true.

Streaking across the quad, I heaved myself at a smaller office building. I felt my claws extend and used them as hooks as I climbed my way up. My heart rate was slightly elevated when I reached the top, but nothing compared to if I'd been born with more human-like qualities. Instead of having to stop to catch my breath, I walked toward a small awning where I could hide in the shadows. This came in handy in two different ways. One, so I wouldn't be spotted by my potential mates. Two, so that I could stay away from the sun. I sat next, staring at the front gate to The Fort, waiting for the cars to come.

There would be six. Six clans. Six vampires. Six choices.

I wasn't sure how many I would take. I could have all six, or none.

To think that each clan was willing to play along with this was...surprising. I must have been more infamous than I thought. Though I was always on display, my abilities were largely kept secret to our people. There were whispers and rumors, but I'd yet to hear one that was exactly true. Most of them were well exaggerated, but those were always fun to hear too.

Whatever my abilities were, and we weren't sure we'd seen them all yet, I would be needed. When I thought I was crazy for doing this, I reminded myself I was here to unite the clans as my mother had done before me. There would be more war. There

would be more death. Together, we would win. Separate, we would die.

I saw it. I foresaw it. And that's why I was here right now on top of this roof, waiting for them to come.

The world grew lighter around me as it was just waking up. The trees rustled in the wind. The birds began to chirp. My gaze flicked from one end of The Fort to the other. I looked right past the guard shack and then came back around. There was activity there. I leaned outside my hiding place, my stomach fluttering. Just then, the tiniest of noises met my expert ears. There was a car approaching. It was still far away, but it just might be the first clan's arrival.

My skin pricked. To my right, a group of people exited the dormitory building. There were no students on campus right now, just staff. I recognized them as they walked to the middle of the quad and started erecting a large tent that had lain like a square parachute on the ground. Beyond them, the vehicle grew closer and closer. The staff talked and laughed. The guards in the shack straightened their shoulders. All of this was culminating into one thing. This was really happening. Everything I'd planned for months was falling into place.

The rest of the world fell away as the sleek black car came into view. It slowed, and my heart felt as if it was going to punch right through my rib cage. Though I tried telling myself to be calm, it was difficult. In that vehicle could be my mate. If I chose.

The car checked in with the guard station and was given instructions to pull around. Someone exited out a building to my left. I heard the groaning of the door and the telltale slam of it closing behind the person. I waited and waited. When the person approached the car, I slipped back into the shadows. Papa Christian. I should've guessed it would be him here to welcome everyone. As head of The Council, he would be the perfect choice.

I lay down on the roof, making myself as invisible as possible. The driver got out of the car and went around to open the back door. I held my breath. A crop of dark hair emerged. That only narrowed the mates down some. But judging on the vehicle they drove, I narrowed it down to only two in my mind.

The full body emerged. He looked up and around, taking in his surroundings and I slunk back even further. It would be humiliating to get caught sneaking around by any of my future mates.

Papa Christian shook the vampire's hand.

The man smiled and the tension in my stomach eased. He turned from Christian and reached back into the car and helped out a woman with long dark hair. She wore a flower in her hair and even though she didn't look a day over thirty-five—as we all didn't—she had the aura of age and wisdom. This was the Iona Clan from the Pacific. He—Kai Iona—had permanent tanned skin, deep and rich. He introduced his mother to Christian and stepped back, using his time to look around again. I flattened myself as low as I could, but I couldn't move back enough to take my eyes off him.

He was beautiful. His grin gleefully pricked at my skin. His demeanor calm, jovial, pleasant though we asked him to come far for this...for me. And he had no idea of what was at stake...

The strength inside me steeled. I had to do this. I knew I had to, but with options like him, it would make it easier.

Christian gestured toward the main building. I inched closer to watch them for far longer than I should. Christian's gaze rose, and I slipped back quickly, closing my eyes as if that would make me invisible from my father. I didn't know if he'd seen me or not, but he probably had. Papa Christian always had a way of knowing stuff.

My phone pinged, and my stomach fell. I pulled it out warily and looked down at the screen. If you wanted to be here to welcome them, you should've just asked. And appeared like normal. And dressed for the occasion.

He didn't understand and wouldn't understand if I tried to explain it to him. It wasn't about welcoming them, it was about seeing them without all the pretense, before we all put on airs and... This was just way too long of a text to send. Instead of answering, I just ignored it and put my phone back in my pocket.

Another vehicle approached. With no time to dwell on Papa Christian, I inched to the edge of the roof again, my heart once again in my throat. The SUV passed the guard station and pulled up just behind the other car. The door opened again and surprising me, it wasn't Papa Christian who emerged this time. It was Papa Connor. He was smiling, as usual, waiting at a respectable distance with his hands behind his back.

The door opened and a large man with muscles barely contained by his attire stepped out. My mouth dropped when he came around the side of the SUV. I noticed his beard first, down to his collarbone and fiery red. His kilt next, showing off calf's weightlifters would be jealous of. Clan MacDougall. The clan leader had driven himself.

Interesting.

The passenger side door swung open and a smaller, albeit still intimidating figure came into view. He closely resembled his father in looks though his copper hair was more subdued. Calen MacDougall. I bit my lip as the accents rose up to meet me. Papa Connor and MacDougall hugged and then Papa turned to my potential mate. They shared a healthy handshake, MacDougall laughing heartily in the background. I watched them walk away, my throat dry. Calen was more handsome than the picture in his file. They warned me about the cultural differences, and I admitted I smirked a little when I heard the word kilt, but if anything, it made his appearance that much

more rugged. The man wore what was essentially a skirt and didn't care. My face heated just thinking about it.

I flipped over on my back and stared at the sky. What if I wanted all of them? Surely that couldn't be a bad thing...but six?

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Six seemed like a large number. My mother only had four. I loved the way they doted on her and their arrangement was the reason I went with this plan, but...six was a lot. Six was insane, right? Or not. Six men all there to love me, to protect me. I wanted what my mother had, and I wouldn't settle for anything less. If I didn't think these guys were here for the right reasons, no matter how handsome they were, I wasn't going to invite them to mate with me. This was all about trust. Especially when my vision came true, I would need us all.

I needed the best of the best, but I wasn't going to sacrifice love for that. I couldn't sacrifice my heart. If there was anything I learned from my parents, it was that.

Voices echoed below, and I turned over. I'd been too caught up in thinking I hadn't realized another vehicle had drove up. This one was a sleek sports car. I knew who it was before he even emerged from the driver's seat and the face matched the picture in his file. Rafe Stuart. He had blond hair and blue eyes and was essentially Californian in all aspects. He was from the Stuart Clan of the West Coast. It was a newer clan but had gained a large following in recent years.

I waited for someone else to come out of the car, but no one else did. He'd come alone, and here was Papa Stephan coming out to greet him. I watched the meeting with a locked jaw. Papa Stephan was the most humble and caring person alive. Rafe greeted him with a nod and a short handshake. It bristled my spine when he walked ahead of him toward the door after such a short introduction.

Papa Stephan looked up, right at me. I couldn't move. This time I knew I'd been caught from the beginning. He lifted one shoulder and my heart clenched. I love you, I mouthed to him, and he mouthed it right back.

Papa Stephan turned as another large, tank-like vehicle approached right behind the sports car. The first SUV and the sleek black car were gone now, leaving just the two in front of the main building. Papa waited as the car pulled to a stop. A driver got out of the front seat of the enormous SUV and walked to the back. A man followed quickly by a woman stepped out of the vehicle. Stephan moved forward and greeted them. Then, they all stepped out of the way.

I saw his light brown hair and stiff shoulders first. He emerged from the backseat like a robot and awkwardly shook Papa Stephan's hand. When they turned toward the main door, I watched him walk behind his parents. He was Theo Nolan of the Nolan Clan from Canada. He kept his eyes straight ahead as if he were walking a death march. Nothing about his face or appearance said he wanted to be here. His parents were mostly the same too. Their lips were grim, and they didn't look around like the others had. For the first time, I felt as if I'd made them agree to something they didn't want to. I'd have to make a point to tell all of them they certainly did not have to be here. I didn't want them here if they didn't want to be. This was about helping the clans, but it was also very personal to me, too. If Theo wanted nothing to do with me, I wasn't going to make him. I wanted the kind of love my parents had. Not a poor substitution, or only doing so out of honor and respect.

Two men were still to arrive. I checked my phone to see what time it was. I hoped they hurried. If Mother didn't already know I was here, she would soon enough when she woke up and I wasn't in my room. It was possible Papa Christian wouldn't have told her already. He wouldn't want my mom all riled up today. He'd save it for when this was over to rat me out. But, if I spoke to him first, I could convince him not to...

Another black sedan approached the gate and turned my thoughts. The guards seemed stiffer than normal and my stomach twisted. It was difficult to forget things that happened in the past. I hadn't wanted to send an invitation to this clan, but my parents disagreed. Time had passed. Things could've changed because they had a new leader. But the Dumont Clan would always leave a sick taste in my mouth.

As I thought this, the face to match the picture I'd been given stepped out of the back of the car when it came to a stop. Felix Dumont. He had brown, curly hair. He looked up at the buildings in distaste, an almost sneer. He was handsome though. I'd give him that. Almost too handsome.

Papa Nic approached him and I bit back a gasp. Out of all my fathers, I wouldn't have guessed they would want to send Papa Nicolai out, but I didn't have to guess he insisted he'd be the one to welcome the Dumont Clan. They shook hands, and the tightness in my father's jaw said it all. Muscles rippled out from his forearm, and for a few moments, I didn't think either one of them was going to relent.

I pushed up onto my knees and prepared to jump down. The movement caught Felix's attention. He stopped, his gaze rising to meet mine. I stood on top of the roof's edge and looked down on him. He let go of my father's hand and gave me a wink which did nothing but anger me further. How dare he disrespect my father like that?

I stood there fuming, imagining all the different ways I could jump from the building and tear him down. I could fight him. I could demand he leave. I could make him respect my father.

While I debated, they walked toward the entrance. Just before they disappeared, Felix lifted his hand to wave. I sneered, which only made him laugh, and laugh hard.

We would see about that. Part of how this weekend was going down was that I would get to train with all the possible mates and spar with them. We would see who was laughing in the end. This was about having a stronger, united clan, and Felix Dumont had no idea who he was up against with me. If he didn't respect, I would make him.

My phone pinged again. I brought it out from my pocket and saw another text from Papa Christian. Your mother just called asking where you were. You better get home.

But there was one more yet to arrive... I closed my eyes and listened to my surroundings. I couldn't hear the approach of another car, and the sun was starting to get hotter and brighter. Resigned, I jumped from the building and landed in a graceful crouch before standing again. The stone of the drive crunched beneath my feet.

The door to the main entrance opened. My body locked. I was trapped. Not enough time to climb back onto the roof and I wouldn't make it to the wall in time to stay hidden.

"Princess Isabelle."

The accent was what sent a shiver up my spine. Australian in nature, I knew who it was who'd spotted me before I even turned around. Felix Dumont.

I turned, inclining my chin.

"You've come out of hiding, I see."

I pushed my shoulders back. "Someone who stands on rooftops is not intent on hiding."

He shrugged. "I guess I must have missed you when I drove in then."

"Apparently," I said, though I knew I was wrong. What was illogical was trying to save face with this pompous ass, but there was something about him already that made me stoop to his level. "If you'll excuse me, I need to go now."

He chuckled. The sound of it raised my hackles, but I turned anyway and walked slowly across the quad. So much for not wanting to be seen, but I wasn't going to run away from Felix Dumont. I waited until I heard the door shut, then I took off, using my vampire speed to push my muscles to their limit once more. I launched myself

over the wall, just barely grazing the top of it with my toes to propel me that much further outward. I ran flat out, hugging the tree line once more until my own house came into view. The world blurred as I used the stone wall as a vault to launch me over it. From there, it was a quick shimmy up a nearby tree and then a leap into the open window to make it back into the safety of my room, and back out of the hateful stare of Felix Dumont.

Politics or not, he shouldn't even be here. It would take a lot to change my mind, and I wasn't sure he had the brain cells to accomplish such a thing.

Chapter Three

"Princess Izzy?" a mocking voice came from the other side of the door.

I straightened in front of the vanity and smirked. Well, if that wasn't perfect timing. I narrowed my gaze and schooled my features. "I swear to God Alexei Rajyvik, I'm going to stake you."

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He laughed and took that as leave to open my bedroom door and walk in. We'd grown up right down the road from one another. Our parents were good friends, working with one another on the Rajyvik Training Facility among other things. Alexei was my training partner and best friend, and never once let an opportunity to pick on me pass whether I was Princess Izzy or not.

He came in, gave me a wink, and then leaned against the wall just inside my bedroom door. He was dressed in all black as usual. His dark hair fell short of his ears, but his blue eyes were what drew me in time and time again. Whether we were sparring or just hanging out, his eyes would spark like literal fire, making his blue hue that much brighter.

"I really hate you sometimes," I said, catching his silhouette in the mirror in front of me.

My mother's old room was now mine, which my fathers never ceased to remind me of. I'd made it my own though. Papa Nicolai had bought me the vanity that sat in front of me at an estate sale when I was thirteen. It was gold and ornate. Fit for a Queen, Papa Nic had said.

"Aww, you don't mean that, Izzy." He moved forward and placed his hands on the back of my chair. He bent down so we could both be seen in the mirror. "Are you almost ready?" His gaze caught on my hair, then my makeup. He could always see right through me and knew I wore these things like a costume when I had to. Otherwise, I was just me.

My stomach tightened. "It's time?"

Alexei shrugged. “Your mother sent me up here to get you, so it must be. She seems off, by the way. Would you know anything about that?”

I peeked up at him and bit my lip.

He pushed away from the chair. “I’m guessing you had something to do with it?”

I shrugged. “If sneaking out and watching the clans come in bothered her, then yes, I suppose I did have something to do with her being off.”

He shook his head. “It’s a wonder you’ve lived this long.”

“Oh, come on. You’re not mad.”

“You could’ve told me, and I would’ve went with you.” His gaze seared into mine, saying something without saying it.

He didn’t need to. I’d heard it too many times before. With my premonition of what would happen, why did I do things to push the limits? “I can do things on my own.”

He rolled his eyes. “Obviously.”

I pressed my lips together. Alexei hated this plan. He knew everything. He knew about my premonition and the deaths and all that would happen, but he hated this particular idea, my grand scheme to join the clans forever. He would be the last person I would’ve invited to scope out my future mates. Why couldn’t he see that?

“I’ve heard Christian tell you they can stop this at any time. No one will think less of you.”

That was a lie, and we both knew it. I’d already made my decree. What kind of queen

would I be if I always went back on what I said? Especially with this. It was the right thing to do. I knew it in my heart, and I wanted it. That was the part he always seemed not to hear. I wanted what my parents had, and this was how I was going to get it.

I stood from the chair and untied my robe. Pulling it off, I dropped it on the back of the chair and faced Alexei. I wasn't going to get into this with him now. He'd get over it. We would always be best friends. "I'm ready."

He looked up, then blinked. His stare scanned the length of my dress before meeting my eyes again. He stood a little taller and bowed his head before holding out his hand. "I'll take you down then, Princess."

Nerves settled in my stomach. I hated when he acted like I was his superior. I placed my hand on his forearm anyway and we walked from the room. Alexei had moments like this from time-to-time. We could be training one second and then the next, he acted as if he was my subject. I never asked him about it even though it always struck me as odd. As far as I could tell, I hadn't done anything differently between one second and the next even though his actions said otherwise. Instead, I blamed my future title even though I never threw it in his face. I never asked him to call me Princess, and I'd never ask him to call me Queen. We were far too close for him to think he was beneath me in some ridiculous royalty hierarchy.

Conversations rose up from below us as we made our way down. I descended the stairs with my heart in my throat. My mother's voice floated upwards, along with at least Papa Nic's and Papa Christian's. I could also hear Natalie Rajyvik's voice, Alexei's mother. She and my mother had grown close. A long time ago, Natalie's brother had been my mother's instructor at The Fort, but those times were long past. Samuel had passed in the Dumont Clan uprising. He'd died to save us, and even though I wasn't doing anything as dramatic at the moment, I knew I would when called on.

The training facility still held the name Rajyvik, but it wasn't just Rajyvik's who ran it any longer. It was led by the best fighters—vampire and human. Alexei, for instance, had gotten a position there right after graduation last year. He was the best at hand-to-hand skills I'd ever seen. He would say he was the best but one, but as Princess, it wasn't in my destiny to help out at The Fort. It hadn't even been my mother's even though she loved it so much and helped when she could.

Papa Christian lifted his stare first, causing my step to waver. Then, the rest of them turned like an invisible wave had gone through the room, making them stop to look up at me. I put my princess face on, the barely there smile with the carefully controlled countenance.

Mother moved forward. She stood at the bottom of the stairs and waited for me to come down. Her face was one of pure joy. Her fingers slid over my cheek as she smiled at me, tears hovering in the corners of her eyes. She was beautiful as usual. Whether she was training or just hanging around the house, she held an aura that made me strive to do better. Ariana Ravana was revered as was my grandmother before her. I came from a strong line of women, of queens, and I would do the same.

In my own way.

Alexei stepped away and allowed the rest of the party to ooh and aww over me. A fierce heat swamped my cheeks, and Papa Nic tapped my cheek playfully.

Natalie grinned, too. She peeked at her son and then turned her attention to me. "I can't say I envy you this, Izzy. There's so much weight upon your shoulders."

I went to shrug, but my mother answered first. "She can handle it."

"Of course," Natalie said, not in the least bit offended. "I wasn't talking about uniting the clans, I was talking about the six suitors who await her at The Fort."

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The room erupted into laughter though Papa Nic's face shadowed over.

"Seven," a voice said.

The room went silent. A deep knot formed in my stomach. I turned toward where the voice came from. Even knowing who said it, I couldn't keep the confusion from my face. There wasn't seven. We all knew that. There were only six ruling clans.

Alexei bowed his head and moved forward in front of my mother and fathers. He swallowed. "I know I am not from a ruling clan, but I beg you to let me offer myself up to our future queen."

My heart stammered as the world stilled around me. "Alexei?" I asked, not sure what prompted me to speak first. The fact that he called me his future queen and I hated hearing that from him, or the fact that I was so stunned at what he was doing, what he was saying.

He didn't look at me. He stood there, his gaze never leaving the floor as he waited for his answer. I looked at my mother, then at my fathers, who stared at one another. Natalie excused herself from the inner circle and stood in the background, a small smile on her lips.

"Alexei," I said again after I looked back at him. He still wouldn't look up at me though. My fingers started to tremble, and my stomach tightened.

Stephan moved toward me and put his hands on my shoulders. "Let's go in here." I let him steer me away. As surprised as I was, I couldn't think straight.

Papa Stephan took me into the kitchen and sat me at the table before leaving again. I was too stunned to try to even listen to the conversation that was going on in the other room. Alexei. He wanted to be one of the choices. Why? How?

The kitchen door swung open and Natalie stepped through. I looked up, and she tilted her head at me. “Is it that much of a surprise, Izzy?”

My mouth gaped open, but I couldn’t find a suitable response. My first reaction was to say yes, but everything about her told me that was the exact opposite answer I should’ve had.

“Alexei has loved you since you were both young. I know you fought about choosing mates from the clans. It wasn’t ever because he didn’t like the idea, it was because he would never have his chance.”

Life drained from my face. He wanted a chance. With me? He loved me...

I stood and moved to push past her, but she held back on my arm. “They’re sorting through it now. Just wait.”

“But...”

She pulled me close. “You’ve always been so special to us. Forget about what’s going on in there. Prepare yourself for meeting the others. You need to have a clear head. There’s nothing you can do about what’s going on in there right now.”

I closed my eyes. She was right. I couldn’t make the decision about accepting Alexei or not. That had to come from the kings and queen.

She muttered something about wrong timing, but I was too busy trying to pull myself together. If Alexei was out there for the ceremony, I’d deal with it. If he wasn’t, I’d

deal with that too. I had to.

Chapter Four

My mother, my fathers, and myself left through the main door. Natalie and Alexei were already gone. I didn't dare ask questions and no one thought to include me in what was going on. Instead, I focused on what was ahead of me. This was for the good of our future. Yes, selfishly, I wanted to be able to like the people I chose, but I had to weigh the good with the bad too.

"Are you ready for this?" Papa Nicolai asked.

I looked at him and nodded.

It only prompted him to smile. "You've always been stubborn like your mother."

The limo pulled away from our house and inched down the driveway. We normally didn't like such pretense as driving around in fancy cars, but when we all went somewhere together, there was little alternative.

"And grandmother," Papa Christian added.

Papa Nic's eyes widened as he nodded in agreement. "There's something about the females in this clan," he continued, turning loving eyes toward my mother. Most kids were disgusted when their parents showed so much love for one another, but for me, it was the exact opposite. I was brought up in a cocoon of love. It didn't make me nauseated, it made me feel even more included in the strongest emotion there was possible.

Papa Stephan reached out to touch my knee. "Remember that this is your life, Izzy. We won't be around forever, so you have to do what's right for you, and your heart."

Mom smiled at him and looked at me again the same way she did at the house when I'd come down in my dress. "You're ready for this, Isabelle. I don't know that it will be as much of a choice for you as you might think. Your heart wants what it wants. Just remember to listen to it. Forget about the prophecy and the future. If you're surrounded by those you love, you can never go wrong. When I saw these four, I just knew. It will be the same for you."

"You think so?"

She nodded, and I felt a little lighter. My heart wouldn't steer me wrong, and even if one of my choices wasn't the most skilled fighter, I believed she was right. Love could conquer anything, and no matter who I chose, politics aside, it would be the right choice for me. In the end, the clans would all be united, anyway.

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The vehicle took a left and I knew we were pulling up at The Fort already.

“Remember,” Mother said. “There will be a ceremony where you’ll be introduced to them all. They’ve been asked to show you a skill in front of your clan members and then the party begins.”

Papa Connor leaned down, a teasing smile on his lips. “You can tell a lot about someone by the way they dance. For instance, Papa Nicolai is terrible at it. How he won your mother over, I have no idea.”

I laughed, and Papa Connor followed suit. Papa Nic turned around to glare at us just before he opened the door and stepped out. We’d stopped in front of The Fort already. I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing. It was showtime now. The whole clan would be watching.

My fathers scooted down to the open door and left one after the other until it was just Mother and me. She leaned forward and gave me a peck on the cheek. “I don’t know if I told you how proud I am of you lately.” She swallowed. “Your gifts take a lot from you, but I think in time you’ll find this one a blessing. Hopefully, you’ll find the ones who fill your heart among these. If you do not, don’t settle.”

I nodded. I wouldn’t settle. I couldn’t if I wanted what I grew up in.

Four hands reached down into the car for my mother. She smiled at them and then peeked back at me. “You’ll never be want of a hand, that’s for sure.”

I smiled as she took two hands, one in each of hers. If she’d had four hands, she

would've taken all four, but unfortunately, we were limited to only two in this life.

I scooted to the end of the seat and took a deep breath. A hand waited for me too. It would be Papa Christian's. As head of The Council, it would seem fit that he walk me into the party. No matter how many times they told me what it would all look like when we got here, I wasn't prepared. He pulled me out, and I blinked once before remembering to smile.

A carpet of blue awaited us, taking us up to the main entrance. We only did things like this during ceremonies and it always made me feel like a bit of a celebrity. When I was younger, I used to enjoy it a lot more. Now, it just seemed like so much pressure to not trip or make a fool out of myself or my family.

A cheer rang out around us. People from our clan among many others would always come out to these things just to get a glimpse of my mother. She'd done so much good for our whole world throughout the years that just getting a glimpse of her was well worth it to most people.

For the first time though, I felt as if they were cheering for me as well. I hadn't heard the crowd until I stepped out and maybe that was because I was blocking things out to concentrate on not tripping, but it was also possible that this time, everyone had come out to see me. I was Ariana Ravana's daughter, their future queen.

My parents always said the vampire world would be curious of me being the half breed that I was. This was the first thing I'd done to step into the light. The first thing I'd done to carry on my mother's mission of uniting the clans. People were as yet unaware what might befall us, but that was for me to know and to prevent, so they would never have to find out.

Papa Christian squeezed my hand. He smiled down at me with perfectly straight teeth and his gray-blue eyes, helping to ease the sudden surge of nerves that kicked up

when I heard the crowd. “Steady now,” he said. “They’re just curious about you.”

He looked forward and smiled as we walked toward the main entrance and I followed his lead. I waved to the crowd a few times as I saw my mother doing ahead of me. She held onto Papa Connor’s hand with a fierce grip, much more steadily than I held onto my own escort. When the doors closed behind us, I let out a breath.

Some of the tension eased out of my mother’s shoulders as well. She was much more comfortable in action. She didn’t do the speeches and the crowd-greeting with ease, but put a weapon in her hand and she was something else. That was why people loved her so much. Her main goal was the safety of the clan, not just to sit around and talk about progression and think up ideas. She actually went out there and did them. It may seem like such an easy notion now, but not back then. I’d heard all the stories more than a few times.

We walked through the stone arches to the large hall. When school was in session, this was used as an assembly area, but tonight, it was decked out in the Ravana Clan colors. Strips of burgundy fabric hung from the ceiling. On the stone pillars throughout the room, our great family crest was displayed. The fierce firebird spewed fire of orange and yellow everywhere I looked. On the far wall was a row of gothic windows. Just underneath them sat a long, ornate carved table. My mother would sit in the middle on a rather large, equally ornate chair. I would sit to her right with Papa Stephan and Papa Connor to my left. On the other side of Mother would sit Papa Christian and Papa Nicolai.

Chattering noises rose as we got closer until one of the guards called out our arrival in a smooth baritone. “Clan Ravana.”

The talking ceased. Not just died off but stopped at once. Bodies turned from their tables and rose as we walked in. I noticed many familiar faces of our clan members as we moved toward the center of the room. However, it wasn’t until we reached the last

set of guest tables that I saw my first possible mate up close.

My heart beat once in my chest. When Kai Iona stared at me, his lips pulling back into a smooth grin, I could barely keep from looking back at him. He moved forward and before I knew it, he'd dropped to a knee in front of Papa Christian and me. "Princess Isabelle, I am honored to meet you."

My stomach squeezed. His mother behind him smiled, and even though a second blipped by while I figured out how to react, I said the first thing that came to my mind. "You may call me Izzy."

"PrincessIzzy," Papa Christian said.

Kai Iona stood. "Of course," he answered, inclining his head toward my father. "I wouldn't think of calling her anything else."

Papa Christian moved us away, and I looked at him with raised eyebrows. "What?" he asked.

"Did you have to be so formal with him? He might be one of my future mates."

"Until then, we'll use our proper titles." I still stared at him with disbelief, and his face softened. "Remember, Izzy, that we were calling your mother a princess well before she even took the title as our wife. Remind yourself of that when you are making your decisions. Anyone who doesn't think you're worthy of the title of princess, and then queen, does not deserve you."

I squeezed his hand. "Thank you, Papa."

His jaw locked as he looked ahead. He then allowed me to go in front of him up the small set of stairs. The rest of my fathers and my mother were all waiting at their

places at the table already. Papa Christian led me to my seat and then stood behind his. It wasn't until then that we all sat. In front of us, the others in the room followed our lead, sitting once more.

I caught Kai's gaze again as I stared out at the crowd. His stare made my stomach twist...in a good way. He reminded me of Papa Connor. He might be the one who could always make me laugh even when we were dealing with the kinds of things that would test our strength down the road. Mother always used Papa Connor as her rock. Even when I was little, I saw how he comforted her when she needed it most. It would be a welcome addition to have someone like that.

My gaze then traveled to neighboring tables, trying to pick out another familiar face. Instead of falling on a welcome one, I stared into the dark eyes of Felix Dumont. He smirked at me, and not in an adorable way, but in a way that made my fingers tighten to fists. I was like my mother in a lot of ways. I preferred action to talking, and right now, I wanted to kick that smirk right off Felix Dumont's face. Why even come if he was going to look like that? Why even want to be considered?

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A guard stepped forward, announcing us all. His booming voice reverberated around the ancient stone walls. It was then he turned toward the suitors. He went right down the line, introducing first their clan and then the men themselves. All the prominent Ravana Clan members who'd been invited craned their necks to see them. In my head, I knew this would be a spectacle. It was a new idea, so there would always be questions, but since this was basically an arrangement of marriages, people were particularly interested.

When one man's name was called, the crowd gasped. I quickly scanned the tables and stopped, my heart pounding against my chest. I had zoned out while they were introducing the clans, but this one was different. The Rajyviks.

Whispers rose up. It was easy to guess what they were all saying. They weren't a ruling clan. Over the years, they'd practically joined with the Ravanans because we were so close. Their ranks had gotten smaller and could therefore no longer support their own ruling body.

I locked eyes with Alexei. He took the slight in stride, never wavering, only standing when his clan was called along with his mother Natalie. Alexander was there, too, with Christopher, Alexei's older brother.

A figure stood, drawing everyone's attention. He spoke loud enough over the crowd until they quieted down. He was stark and formidable, and from what I'd seen of his clan already, very much rule followers. "May I ask the kings and queen of the Ravana Clan why a clan with no leadership whatsoever has been allowed to offer up a future mate for the future queen?"

Down the line, Papa Christian prepared to answer, but I drove to my feet instead. “Nolan Clan, thank you for your inquiry.”

Theo Nolan’s father’s eyes rounded as I addressed him personally.

“It was my decision to include the Rajyvik Clan. Since it is my personal future we are all here for, I’m sure you will understand that it is my wish.”

I prepared to sit, but Nolan spoke up again. “With all due respect, Princess. It is not just your future at stake here. We have come on good faith that you will choose to align yourselves with a number of the ruling clans all over the world for the sake of our people. The Rajyviks are not a ruling clan.”

I could feel Papa Stephan’s eyes on me, though I didn’t look down at him. I knew they all wanted to help, but this was something I had to take care of on my own. Instead of sitting, I continued to stand. “With all due respect, Sir, you will have to trust that I make my decisions for the good of the clans in all possible manners, including this one. The decision is final, but I thank you for your question. Please move on,” I said, nodding to the guard who’d been running the ceremony.

I sat without looking at the Nolan Clan table again, my stomach in knots. I felt the wave of pride coming from my family, but we dared not look at one another for the sake of keeping face, and not embarrassing the Nolan Clan any further. All this was a tricky business, but I was going to be queen someday, and I could not have anyone questioning my decisions right from the beginning.

I, however, did let my gaze wander to Alexei. He was staring at me, his blue eyes intense as he regarded me. He dropped his chin when he saw me looking at him, and I wondered again why he took up such formality with me sometimes.

When all this was over, he was going to pay for this. Not telling me he wanted to be

involved. Making me stick up for him in front of everyone. Even now, I restrained the urge to give him a dirty look he so deserved. Or worse. Though, I don't think I wanted people remembering I flipped a possible future mate off during the welcome ceremony.

Beyond all that though, my mind was already working on what I was going to do with him. Alexei, my best friend, or so I'd thought. Could I add him to be one of my future mates? Did I feel for him in that way now? Or could I ever?

I guessed that was the larger question here. I couldn't fall in love with these men over the weekend. I could only choose them based on what I felt my propensity to love them was. Whether I could open my whole heart to them in the future. There would be those I could trust, and those I couldn't. Those I felt would be safe with my heart—and the good of the clan—and those who wouldn't. I would have to go with that feeling first and foremost.

Chapter Five

It wasn't until the potential mates were called upon to show me one skill that it dawned on me we were missing a family. The Rajyviks had their own table, but that table had not initially been assigned to them. I leaned to my mother as the guard introduced Alexei to come forth in front of everyone to display his chosen fighting skill. "Where are the Chang's?"

Without looking at me, she said, "We're unsure. There's been no word from them at all. We assumed they would send one of theirs, but it's possible they chose not to."

My fingers dug into the armrest of the wooden chair. Most would have sent word, and I felt the slight, intentional or not. I did not want anyone to be here who did not wish to, but to not send word at all was downright disrespectful.

I clenched my teeth but dwelling on it would have to wait. Alexei approached our long table. He bowed after he came to a stop in front of us. I moved to the edge of my seat. I knew Alexei's fighting style. He was the absolute best at hand-to-hand, but how could he show that here without an opponent. My stomach churned for him in the brief few seconds as he stood before us. My heart reached out. I was closer to Alexei than anyone beside my immediate family. The last thing I wanted was for him to be embarrassed and unprepared.

A yell came from out of nowhere though. My heart raced as a figure ran from the back of the room toward Alexei. Three others appeared, and a battle ensued in front of us. I tried to rise to my feet, but Mother put her hand on my knee. "He is showing us his skill, Izzy. Calm yourself," she reminded gently.

It was instinct. Instinct to want to jump from the chair and help my friend. At the same time though, a heavy rush of embarrassment poured over me. Alexei would be mortified if anyone had seen I'd been willing to jump over the table to help him, especially during this.

I took a deep breath and leaned back in the chair as casually as possible. He dismissed the first attack easily, but then two converged on him at the same time. He locked the first one up, and then moved him in front of his body as a shield while he dealt with the second, incapacitating him by throwing his shield's head at his opponent's. Their heads cracked off of one another and the crowd hissed. It was brutal. I wondered who he had gotten to volunteer to do this for him. Students? Other teachers? They were all wearing masks, so it was impossible to tell. What was readily apparent though, was Alexei's skill. I'd always known he was the best. This wasn't about showing me or my family, this was about proving it to the rest of the ruling clans. The Rajyviks were a clan to be reckoned with. They might not hold a title or ruling power, but they were as honorable and skilled as any other prominent clan.

Pride seeped through my pores and I could not help but smile at Alexei as he sank a

sidekick into his last opponent's midsection, sending him flying in the air. The masked attacker crumpled to the floor and a round of applause rose from the crowd.

A long time ago, vampires weren't encouraged to fight, as ridiculous as that sounded. They had superior strength and abilities that were needed for the fighting arts. It wasn't until my mother came and encouraged the vampires to look out for their own safety that vampires training became more essential. They stopped letting the humans do their dirty work for them and started doing it themselves. Samuel Rajyvik, Alexei's uncle whom he'd never met, had been one of the first casualties after they decided to start standing up for themselves using their own skills. Though he hadn't succeeded, Samuel's name would always go down in history for changing it forever.

Alexei's family history was just as important as the rest of ours, and he just showed that.

He stood in front of us once more and bowed his head. Afterward, he helped the surrounding guards right his opponents and then checked on them individually. I felt Papa Stephan's anxiety as to their well-being. He peered over the table, assessing them for permanent injuries. When all of them walked away without assistance to their own round of applause, he calmed down.

When Alexei took his seat, Felix Dumont stood, that same smirk on his face. The guard announced, "The Dumont Clan would like to go next."

Felix shook his head, a sneer replacing the smirk. "Since you don't mind inquiries, Princess, may I ask to why this is needed? I mean, I admit, Rajyvik's skill was tremendous indeed, but to what end? Are we supposed to show our proclivity for defending you? What of your skills I've heard so much rumor of? There is so much mystery."

Gasps sounded from around the room and the smile on Dumont's face widened. So,

this was his reason for being here. To question, to cause unnecessary drama.

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My mother's patience was being tested. She had been wary herself of allowing the Dumont Clan to come. She had dealt with the worst one when she'd first come into this world, but with the intention of inclusion, she did not want to leave the clan out. Over the years, they had gained power again, reaching their boundaries out to include all of Australia where they were exiled after their uprising and attempt to overthrow my grandfather.

I smiled at the man looking up at me. "You do not have to show us a skill if you do not wish to. In fact, you do not even have to be here if you do not wish to."

"Then how am I supposed to earn your favor, Princess?"

His demeanor said it all. He came to laugh at this. "Why do you wish to earn it, when all you have done is mock it?"

He tapped his chin, loving that all this was playing out in front of everyone. "I did not come here to laugh, I came here for answers. The invitation, though lovely, was a little less than forthcoming. Why ask us here so you can take several mates?"

My fingers curled into the armrest again. "It is my wish," I replied, barely keeping the anger out of my voice.

"I do not wish to insult the Princess."

"Of course not," I said, smiling at him.

"But," he said, letting the pause draw out. "I still stand by my questions."

“Interesting that you didn’t think to ask these questions before you arrived. Was there not plenty of time to reach out to my clan?”

“It is interesting, isn’t it? Why several mates?” he asked again.

“Because that is what I wish.”

“Why choose from us?”

“To bring the clans closer together.”

“Why ask us to show our skill?”

“Enough,” Alexei said, standing now. “What’s the reason for this? If you do not wish to be here, leave.”

“I didn’t say—.”

Calen MacDougall stood too. His muscles looked far larger than they did earlier from the rooftop. He was an imposing force just to look at—and hear. His booming voice swallowed the room as he spoke. “I agree. Some of us are here for a chance to serve the Princess without knowing all the answers. We trust her position, as well as her clan. Has her family not done enough for us? Must we endure this...” he sneered, his accent deepening. “...vampire’s outrageous remarks.”

The crowd’s voices of anger rose up at this. Felix looked all too happy to have been the cause of such an outburst. He reached out his hands and pressed them down repeatedly as if he could will the crowd to lower their voices. They did so. “I am sorry for any misunderstanding,” he said. “I meant no disrespect. Truly. Only that I am expected to want to mate with you when I know nothing of you. You cannot deny that your very existence is mysterious, and that though you have grown up in front of

us, you have been kept largely a secret from us all.”

No one could deny that. They all looked at me expectantly. Forget that I, too, was choosing from among these group of men that I did not know much of. That had been my choice to do so. I wouldn't let Felix Dumont win this one though. He had raised questions that couldn't be ignored. I went to stand. Mother placed her hand on my knee, but I gave her a quick shake of my head. This had been all my idea, so I would have to answer to the questions at hand.

“If you will sit, Felix, I will answer your questions to the best of my ability.”

They could not know about my vision yet. That was for me to know and to prevent. But they could know of my true thoughts behind this.

“If my intentions were not clear, I apologize. No one should have felt a duty to come here as I would not want to take a mate upon duty. My parents have ruled for some time now. Their relationship is no secret. I want that for myself. I could've let fate bring my mates to me, but I am not one for that.” I stepped away from the table and walked around, down the steps, to stand in front of the guest tables. “I saw this as an opportunity to do what my mother has done for us, bring the clans closer together. As I choose from you all, you will also need to choose me in return. I do not wish to give my heart to someone who does not want it.” I looked at the men from the different clans in turn. “You may leave at any time. Duty does not keep you, nor does my, or my clan's, wishes. No repercussions will follow if you choose to leave. In turn, I will also participate in the events this weekend, so that you may make the best possible choice for yourselves as well. If neither my character nor my skill affects you in any way, you have my heartfelt appreciation for coming, and you may leave as you want to.”

I turned to Felix whose face burned red. He had not thought me capable of “lowering” myself to join them. He was sorely mistaken.

“I wish to have partnerships with all my mates, individually and as a whole. Perhaps you do not see it as I do since you did not grow up with my parents. While you’re here, take the time to watch them, to see their interactions, their love. That is what I wish for, and if you do not want the same, I give you leave to return home. But please, watch and listen. Sometimes it is wise just to be an observer before opening your mouth.”

I turned and headed for the stairs. Papa Nicolai was on his feet. Papa Christian’s hands were around his wrist as if he had to stop Nicolai’s initial reaction. That was forever happening. Papa Christian, always the voice of reason no matter if we wanted to hear it or not.

“Well said,” my mother spoke, rising to her feet. “I will reiterate her wishes. If you came here based on your loyalty to us and for no other reason, you have my permission to leave.”

She sat down again, and I waited for the telltale signs of seats scraping against the floor. I got to my seat again and sat. No one had moved.

Mother nodded at the guard again and he called the next clan up to show their skill as if none of that had happened.

I kept my face steady, but inside, I was twisting and turning. I knew I was strong enough to handle all this, but this was when it became apparent that it was nice to have the reassurances of those close to you. I sought out Alexei. He smiled at me and then mouthed, “That was good.”

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I smiled back instantly, buoyed by his words. I could do this.

Rafe volunteered to show off his skill next. He brought daggers. First, he went through a series of moves that showed his adeptness with them. Then, one of the targets was brought up from the training area and he sank his daggers into the middle of the target one after the other. When he was finished, he bowed at me. “It was my pleasure to show you my skills, Princess.” He smirked at this and winked. His blond hair sat stark against his sun-bronzed skin. He would lose all that glorious tan here in Pennsylvania if I chose him.

Calen MacDougall was next. He displayed his superior strength by picking up heavy objects and throwing them. He then asked for volunteers from the crowd to sit on chairs. He lifted a chair with one body each into the air. He was a giant. A respectful, friendly giant. He was impressive, both in his skill and his looks. To see a man standing there with two grown men sitting in chairs perched on his palms while he smiled at me wearing a kilt, I couldn’t get over it. There was the accent too, Scottish. It coated me in warmth whenever he spoke, the words dripping off me as if I were melting from mere sentences.

Kai went next. His weapon of choice originated from his island. I didn’t recognize it though it looked fierce. Both my mother and I sat up straighter as he wielded it with perfection. I could tell her interest as well as mine. I was sure she would also be asking him about his blade as well as I would.

Theo volunteered to go next. He used stakes. The Canadian clan caught me as one of formality. Though he wielded the stakes with strength and vigor, it made me wonder if he was skilled at any other weapons. Only time could tell that.

Overall, I was impressed with them so far.

Felix was last. He hesitated in his seat, and I wondered if he'd even come prepared at all. He seemed to be making up his mind about something as we waited for him to rise and approach our table.

A wicked glint struck his eyes. He rose and came forward, bowing his head a little at me though it was so small it could barely be called anything out of respect. "Would the Princess delight me in a sparring match?"

Papa Nic stood. "Are you calling out my daughter?"

My lips pulled back into a smile. Papa Nic could be as mad as he wanted to be, but this was perfect. "Excellent choice," I said. I stood and frowned down at the dress. It was about to get ruined. Too bad because it had been so beautiful. I walked around to the front amid another round of gasps and whispers. Felix sure did like to rile the crowd up. "What a fine way to have us show off both our talents?"

Felix stepped back a few strides as I approached him. His eyes were wide and semi-panicked. "Princess..."

"What?" I asked. "Did you not think I would agree? We're all fighters here. I'm sure you're as adept as I am at sparring." I gave him a wink.

Kai Iona stood from his chair, his lips pulled back into a snarl. Alexei rushed forward to stop him from interrupting. "Trust me," he said to Kai. "All will be well."

Kai grunted at him, but I had a feeling they might be good friends. Eventually.

"Do you not wish to get changed?" Felix asked.

“No need,” I assured him. “One of the ways we train here is to be ready for anything. If I cannot protect myself or my clan while wearing a dress, I wouldn’t be a very good queen someday, now would I?”

Felix leveled a stare at me that only made me jump for joy inside. It was evident this was the last thing he expected to happen when he came up with the idea. His skill was talking. That much was clear. The talent could be useful in certain political situations. That I couldn’t help but think about.

He moved forward. “I do not wish to hurt you,” he said under his breath.

“Only to try to embarrass me in front of my clan?”

“I have questions.”

“Then you can ask them at some other time, Felix. For right now, we must spar.”

I pulled the skirt of my dress up and kicked out, hitting Felix with a solid kick to the midsection. He stumbled back a few feet before righting himself. The crowd stood. Felix looked around, his face morphing from one of concern to a bit of a bruised ego. He brought his fists up in front of him and dropped into a fighting stance.

“Isabelle,” my mother called out. I looked at her and she gave me a quick shake of the head.

I nodded at her. Don’t maim him, got it.

Felix and I circled one another. The skirt of the dress was cumbersome, but I dealt with it. It was too bad I rather enjoyed large skirts. If I ever had to defend myself in one of these things, it would make me slower. Internally, I wondered if I should go with a less fancy dress next time. Something with a smaller skirt, perhaps a shorter

one too. Something easier to move in.

Felix kicked out, and I blocked it. I then threw his leg back at him. He hopped on his feet a few times before settling back down into his fighting stance. He lowered his hand. When I saw the opening, I went for it. I faked, then came up with a hook that glanced off his jaw. It would've been a full hit, but he moved just in time.

He moved away and touched his chin. A red mark was beginning to show. "Princess..." he said again.

"Now you want to give me respect?" I shook my head. "Too late."

I beckoned him forward with my hands. His face hardened, and he came at me again. He was skilled, but I was too. We traded blows back and forth. There were times when both of us could've gotten the better of the other, but we stopped just in time. A true sparring match.

He came in at me, driving past my barriers until his foot knocked against my ankle. He smirked, showing me that he would've tripped me. I smiled back and gestured down to where I had a small blade pointed right at his testicles.

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His eyes rounded, and an appreciation made him actually bow this time.

He helped me to my feet, and I pressed the blade back into the cuff at my wrists. We both bowed to one another, and the crowd clapped.

Looking away, I caught Calen MacDougall's large eyes. "That took tremendous restraint, my lady."

He was in awe of me. I smiled back and returned to my position at the table. Once there, Mother whispered to take my hair down. Strands were now coming down around my chin when it had been in an updo before the match. I complied, letting the dark waves fall over my shoulders.

"Well done," Papa Connor said. "Hopefully Felix will think twice the next time he opens his mouth."

I chanced a look at the vampire in question. He was now sitting at his table, all by himself. Though his shoulders were back, and his chin was slightly in the air, he still looked like a man that had been defeated. I'd been able to counter him easily. Not that it wasn't a good match because it was, but I doubted he went into it thinking I would accept his challenge let alone be up to the task.

"Let the rumors grow now," Mother said.

"It couldn't hurt," Papa Christian answered. "Perhaps Felix Dumont was right about one thing. We have made Izzy into this mystery of sorts."

“It was for her own safety,” Mother countered.

“Of course,” Papa Christian said. “But now it might be a detriment. We’ve known for some time now that she can defend herself. Maybe it’s time to let out some of her skills.”

Mom smiled down at me. “I think she just did.”

Chapter Six

Now the hard part began...the party. I’d much rather be sparring with Felix Dumont than standing up in a dress being asked to dance time and time again. First, I danced with all four of my father’s one after the other. That part wasn’t so bad. It reminded me of when I was younger and wanted to be a true “princess”. Even the vampire world had Disney.

As soon as the dance with Papa Stephan ended, I turned to face Alexei. His blue eyes burned into mine. He bowed and asked for my hand. I accepted. He led me a few steps away. All around us, stares felt as if they were piercing away at the armor I put up when I went out in public. I knew this would be the most difficult part of the night, yet the most essential. What I wasn’t banking on was having dancing with my best friend be strained as well.

“You’re upset with me.”

I swallowed. It wasn’t that. Confused was more like it. “Why didn’t you just tell me before?”

He stared into my eyes. Now that it was out, it was evident he wasn’t going to hide it anymore. “Think about it from my point of view. You’re my best friend. Always have been and always will be...despite what happens,” he quickly tacked on. “It

wasn't an easy thing to say to you, especially with you being you."

"I'm just Izzy to you."

His hold on me tightened. "You think that, don't you? But you're wrong. You're not just anybody. Whether you're a princess or our future queen, I would never think you were just anybody. You're special, Izzy Ravana. For a long time, I was the only one outside your family to know you. Now, you've invited these others to get to know you and they're going to see how special you are too."

"That's why you didn't want me to go through with this?"

"Jealousy, I know. It's abhorrent."

I peered straight ahead at his shoulder. My fingers gripped him there and I tried to put us in another place, another time. Alexei had always been just my friend, but could I look at him differently? "I wish you would've said something before."

"Would you have still held this?" he asked, gesturing to the party going on around us.

"Yes, it's what I want."

"And I can't say that I blame you. It has always been your wish. I knew that. I just want a chance, Izzy."

"But what were you thinking all that time we spent together? How long have you known you thought of me as more than a friend?" I wasn't sure why, but our relationship started to sound like a lie. If one person withheld something major from the other, wasn't it based on a lie? And that was wrong. Very wrong.

His lips thinned. "I've always been your friend. That won't change. I'm able to keep

my other thoughts to myself and differentiate between the two.”

“It’s not fair that you didn’t allow me to do the same.”

His jaw locked down tight as he regarded me. “I wasn’t stopping you.”

“I didn’t know these feelings were a possibility.”

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“Why? Because I never said anything?” He shook his head. “You were always one to make your own decisions and you’ll do it in this case too. Take me or not, Izzy. But please don’t pretend you knew what it was like for me to have feelings for you when I knew you never thought of me that way. No matter when I said something, it would’ve come to this.” The muscles feathered in his strong jaw. “It wouldn’t have mattered.”

We’d stopped dancing. Around us, couples circled and laughed, but we were in our own bubble.

His hands fell away from me. He stepped back once, twice, then bowed his head before turning on his heel and walking away.

“Alexei,” I called out after him.

He didn’t turn.

That was so like him. To get mad just because I was mad. If we weren’t in the middle of this all-important evening, I would’ve chased him down and tackled him. Pinned him to the ground and made him listen to me just as he would do to me if the situation was reversed. He knew I couldn’t do that now. He knew there was no way I could act out like that in the middle of all this.

My temper flared.

“Careful,” an accented voice said. “I believe your gaze of fury may start a fire.”

I turned and stared into Calen MacDougall's eyes. They sparked in the low light, and I couldn't help but feel the nerves of tonight as I looked up at him. He was taller than myself, much taller. His muscles were about as big as my head which made me think dancing with him would be cumbersome, but that's what he wanted.

He bowed, and I bowed right back. "May I?"

I smiled in agreement and he took me in his arms. Even though I felt towered over and engulfed, I also felt safe. Calen talked easily, making me forget the tension with Alexei.

"I was impressed with your match with Dumont," he said, his accent dripping over me like warm butterscotch. "I admit that I have not seen many young women fight as you do."

"Really?" I asked.

"You're surprised. In my clan, we still have old ways of thinking. The women are shown the basics, but it is the men who are called upon by duty and honor to keep the clan safe if need be."

I bit my lip. I'd wondered at Calen's strength, and obviously not going to lie, his kilt, but I didn't like this new information. I wasn't going to be the type of mate that stayed home and baked cookies while the men went out to train and even fight one day. I would need to be there right beside them that much was evident from my sight.

"You're giving me the same look you just gave your friend. I don't have much experience with women, Princess, but I feel as if that's not a good thing. If I angered you, I apologize."

I stared up at him. His features were less refined than the others, a little more callous

though it just added to his rugged good looks. His red-tinted brown hair fell in waves about his face. He looked as if he could've just stepped out of the pages of history. It was not his fault that his clan believed that way. I could do what my mother did before me, change the ways of the people. And not just of those around us, but as far reaching as Scotland and other European countries. "Will you tell me more about your clan, Calen?"

His eyes blazed, sending a heat flowing through me. His stare retreated inside himself before looking down at me again. "We are a simple people. We live amongst the fields, moors, and lakes. We haven't a lot to do with the city and we keep to ourselves."

"It sounds beautiful. Peaceful."

"Perhaps I can show it to you one day, Princess."

I smiled at that, imagining myself in a plain frock, running through the thick fields and turning in circles. The great blue sky above me. "Do you have horses?"

He cocked his head. "Horses?"

Heat swamped my cheeks. "Yes. Where you live, do you have horses? I've always wanted to ride a horse."

He smiled. "Then you're in luck. Our horses have been born and bred with us. As you can imagine, they sense our predatory nature, but our horses have been with us for so long that they are tame. I ride most days at home. It's the easiest way to get around with our landscape."

Not only a kilt, but a kilt on a horse. Could this really be a thing? "You'd have to teach me, and not laugh if I do something wrong."

He laughed heartily at this. “I cannot promise to keep my amusement to myself, but I would try for you, Princess.”

We swayed together in silence for a little while. It was nice to dream like this. Maybe we could have a little time before the premonition proved true. A time to get to know one another, to be carefree. “What else can you tell me?”

He looked away. His eyes taking on a dreaminess like he was caught in a waking daydream. “We are a clan steeped in our culture. Our ancestors were once Highlanders and we hold that tradition still.”

I ran my hands up his arms and placed them on his shoulders. “What kind of house do you live in?”

A teasing smile pulled at his lips. “Are you wanting to know if I live in a castle?”

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“Perhaps...” I said with a grin of my own.

“It’s as good as. It’s a large manor house that has been a part of the MacDougall family for many years. When you step onto the property, it’s as if you are stepping back in time. This place,” he said, looking around, “...though I know in my heart is fairly old as well, still looks modern to me.”

“So, what would you make of a modern princess, Highlander?”

“If we are talking of you, then I am enamored. You move with grace yet with the ferocity of a soldier. You are fluid like the rivers but have the stopping power of giant boulders. I haven’t seen anything like you in my existence.”

“And just how long has your existence been?” I asked, swallowing. His words made my heart lift, and my insides quiver.

“I am a fair bit older than you, Princess.”

“Age means nothing in our world.”

“There is a lot of truth to that. I like to think I’m aged like a fine whiskey, it only gets better.”

I chuckled at that, and he returned the gesture.

“I will only ask ye one thing, lass.”

“Yes?”

“If you’ll accept me as mate, I prefer to trust those around me to the fullest extent.”

His eyes fell upon Felix Dumont with a blaze of anger. I understood his sentiments. “I agree wholeheartedly. You can trust that whoever I choose will have the truest hearts whether you or another. But more than that, I intend to choose for my heart as well. I don’t intend to build an army around me for protection, but I intend to build a group of linked souls that will fight for one another as much as they would fight for the sake of all our people, regardless of clan name and boundaries.”

“I would not stay if I felt otherwise about you, my lady.”

He stopped dancing. His stare burned down at me. I gulped as I realized he was making his intentions known now, right at this moment. “Are you offering yourself to me, Calen MacDougall?”

“I am.”

“You do not wish to wait until the end of the weekend?” I asked, eyebrows raised.

“I prefer to do it now. I know enough about you to know your heart. We can get to know one another in time, but I’ve seen your strength, I know your beauty. The rest of your mystery, I would like to peel away a little at a time. It is the way with my clan.” He dropped to his knees in front of me. “I offer my service, and my heart to you, Princess Isabelle Ravana, and I ask that you choose me in return.”

The world around me stopped. I looked up to find that all eyes were on us. It had begun.

My gaze flickered past my parents as they waited for my response in earnest. Felix

looked shocked and a little disgusted. Rafe, Theo, and Kai watched on with their eyebrows raised. They were probably waiting for their own chance to dance with me, not realizing they would have to see me add or turn away someone from my harem already.

But it was the last set of eyes that gave me pause. Alexei.

His face was a blank. His throat worked, but he stared on as if he was just a passerby in the audience of my life.

“My lady?” Calen urged.

Are you ready? This is your first decision! Would you like to add Calen MacDougall, the sexy kilt-wearer, to your harem? Keep in mind that your decision affects everything going forward. It may even impact your ability to choose one of the other possible mates...

If you would like to add Calen MacDougall to your harem, please continue to the next page.

If you would like to refuse Calen MacDougall’s offer, please [click here](#) or go to location 972.

Chapter Seven

I knew my heart. I lowered to one knee as he had done and grabbed his hand. “Calen MacDougall, I accept your offer, and am honored to have you.”

For the first time, I saw nerves overcome the big, burly man in front of me. The crowd cheered. He drew up to his full height and brought me with him. His hands gripped me around the waist and he swung me around in a circle, my dress billowing

out all around me. “Thank you, lass.”

My heart squeezed. I’d never been called lass before, but I loved it, especially in his rich accent. He bordered on the old and the new. I was excited about this match. Not only was Calen strong, he was also sexy and honorable. He treated me with respect and that was the foundation of all relationships. We would work together to move forward, peeling away our layers, as he called it. I kind of liked that he was a mystery as he said. That we could spend time with another, to figure one another out in our time.

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He gripped my hand and held it up and the crowd roared again. His father stood like a giant from his seat and came forward. He clapped his son on the back, a thunder echoing through the room at the contact, but Calen didn't even flinch. His father then moved to me. "You give our clan great honor, Princess. I know my boy will treat you well."

"Thank you," I said, looking up at Calen. His buttoned shirt tight around his biceps, and his large shoulders standing proudly.

Mother made her way forward next. She embraced Calen's father and then turned to me. She didn't need to ask if I was sure. We'd already discussed that I would not, could not agree to a mate unless I was positive.

My fathers followed my mother, giving me a hug and then shaking Calen's hand once again. Before we could talk, the music rose up, this time a tune I was unfamiliar with. Calen's eyes gleamed. "Now that's a fine tune." He took my hand and showed me how to dance to it. The reels in the music pitched high, a Gaelic flare. We kicked our feet and turned. I stumbled, and he laughed, but he soon showed me the majority of it and I was able to dance without too much trouble. Papa Connor grabbed my mother's hands and they danced next to us. Calen's father grabbed a woman to his right. He lorded over her and she was bright with embarrassment. They filled in right next to us with other couples beginning to surround us and learn the new steps as well. We jumped and kicked and soon my heart was so far high in my throat I could barely breathe. My cheeks hurt from smiling and laughing.

"I hope I do not crush you, my lady," Calen called out as he turned me in a circle. "I am much bigger than you."

He stood there with one hand on the waist of his kilt, the other holding mine as he turned me around and around. I was dizzy and loving every second of it. “I’m stronger than I look.”

“I already know that to be true.”

Too soon, the jaunting music stopped on a glaring high note. Calen and his father raised their fists in the air and yelled out a “huzzah”. The crowd laughed, and Calen sauntered forward. My heart sped up, kicking off my chest in an unsteady rhythm. Maybe it was the way he looked at me, or maybe it was what I was thinking about as he got closer that made my nerves kick in. Either way, by the time he got close enough to touch, I was shaking. He leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Thank you for the dance, Princess.”

Throat dry, I wet my lips and swallowed. “My pleasure.”

“Do you wish to spend time with me, or should I make way for you to dance with a possible mate?”

Just then, I wanted nothing more than to be around strong Calen.

“I believe it’s time to end the party,” my mother said, speaking up as she watched us. “We have a big day tomorrow and I would want the other potential mates to get adequate rest.”

I smiled up at her. Thank you, I mouthed.

“Have fun,” she said before turning to address the crowd.

I pulled on Calen’s hand and we walked through the room and out the side door behind the main table. When we got into the hallway, I picked up my dress and ran.

Though he was large, his step was as silent as mine. He was fast as well, but not as fast as me. I beat him to the door and we burst out into the chill evening air. “Come, I have something to show you,” I said.

We ran for what felt like forever when it was only a couple miles. A couple of miles to us was nothing. When we stopped beside the shimmering pond, we were barely even breathing heavy. He looked out over the moonlit water. “What is this place?”

“It’s Lowline Pond. When you spoke of the lakes in Scotland, I thought of this.” I sat down on the bank and stared out at the mirror-like water. “I know it’s probably not the same, but—”

He sat down next to me, his hand coming around my shoulders on. I cuddled in next to him as he squeezed me closer. “It is a sight,” he whispered. “Not as large as the lakes I’m accustomed to, but beautiful all the same. Maybe it’s because you’re here with me.”

At his words, I looked up. His hand reached out to take my other in his and we sat staring at one another for a while. “Is this real?” he asked.

“I hope so,” I answered, feeling the pounding of my heart.

His face lowered, and our lips whispered against one another’s. It wasn’t enough for me. I leaned in, pressing my lips more firmly against his. His resolve broke. His tongue urged my lips open and swept inside, bringing with it all the feelings of first kisses do. Hope and heat. A wish for the future. We didn’t pull away for a long time as we explored each other. We ended laying in the grass, staring up at the dark night with the twinkling of stars shining down on us.

I’d made the right decision. The more we touched, the more confident I was that I’d been able to follow my heart and do what was best for my people. “There’s

something you don't know, Calen."

He turned to me. Propped up on one elbow, he stared into my eyes. "You can share anything with me, my lady."

I stayed where I was, staring up at the infinite sky. It made everything that had happened to me easier to understand. If I could believe that there were billions of stars and planets, and even more galaxies beyond that, I could believe that my gifts were truly real. That I could see the future, but not only that, try to prevent it.

"We're not safe."

He shot upward, his hulking muscles bunched as he looked into the night. To a normal person, our surroundings would've been pitch black, but to us, we could still see with our generous night vision.

"Not now," I said, tugging on his hand and pulling him back down. "I'm sorry. I should've explained it better."

He threaded his fingers through my hair. "What is it then, Princess?"

"There will be another war. Bigger than the first against a greater enemy that will not stop."

His throat worked. "How do you know this?"

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“I have the gift of sight,” I said, smiling at him.

“Like your grandmother...”

I nodded. “Hers was more refined than mine. I can’t quite control it yet, but I’ve foreseen this, a great battle with many lives lost. We’ll have to be prepared.”

Rubbing my cheek with his thumb, he shifted so that his kilt inched higher. “I am here, Princess. There’s no need to be afraid.”

“But there is,” I assured him. I closed my eyes and saw the fire again. The rubble. The death. “There’s much to be afraid of.”

He was silent as he took in my words. Then, his demeanor changed. The lines in his face deepened and he stared out across the pond. “There’s an old lore in my country. Lore that tells of the greatest warrior who had the strength of a thousand men. He fought his battles and defeated his enemies, but there was one thing he did not have. Love. The tale tells of a man always searching, always pressing forward, but never feeling complete. We all have our own battles and our own fears, but love is not one of them. Love is the savior of all things. It does not matter what we will face, my princess. We will stand by one another. I said I will serve you and I will, in whatever way you ask of me.”

The dark cloud in my head cleared, and a weight lifted from my person. There was something to be said for this after all. Someone to share the burden with. Someone to share everything with. I inched closer and captured his lips in a kiss again. His hand swept up behind my neck and pulled me close. For a moment, my fears fell away.

Inside, I felt the seedling of the feelings my parents had for one another. It would take time for it to nurture and grow, but it was there.

If it felt this way with Calen, what would it feel like when I added more?