



Tracking Fate

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: As if the first choice wasn't hard enough... A new day, a new potential mate. If it were just the choosing I had to deal with, it might be easier. It isn't just that though. It's everything else. The visions. The feelings. And now, the intruder.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

Chapter One

Papa Christian eyed me.

I blew out a breath. With the night I'd had, I really didn't want to fight with him about this. I'd just made one of the hardest decisions I'd ever had to—would ever have to—and now this.

I wrangled my emotions in, knowing full well that starting an argument with any of my fathers was a horrible idea. "Papa, I said in front of everyone that I would take part in this weekend too. I have to take part in every aspect. I gave my word. You of all people know how important that is."

His stare didn't waver. "Izzy, don't try to use my good judgment against me. I fully support you taking part in the training alongside all your potential mates, but this..."

Mother put a hand on his shoulder. "I used to stay in the dorms, and Isabelle stayed in the dorms when she was at The Fort too."

"Not with a dorm full of potential mates," Papa Christian snapped.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. "What do you think I'm going to do, Papa? I'm going to sleep, eat, and train. That's it. Just like when I attended The Fort before."

"I know what goes on at The Fort," Papa Christian said.

Papa Connor, who'd been sitting on the couch watching all this with a smirk, finally

stood. He gave his brother a sly look as he joined the conversation. “We all know what happens at The Fort. Especially you, Christian.”

Mom hid a smile.

I was pretty sure I knew what they were all getting at. My fathers had brought my mother to The Fort when she was seventeen. Younger than me even. Their relationship had grown and blossomed there. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out what Papa Connor was alluding to.

Papa Christian looked like he wanted to stake Papa Connor, so I tried to intervene. “Alexei will be there. He won’t let anything happen to me.”

He turned large eyes on me. “You think his presence makes it better?”

“It always did before.”

“But now we know Alexei’s been harboring feelings for you this whole time.” His lips thinned, and a twitch started in his jaw.

“Christian...” my mother started.

I waved her away and walked up to him myself. “You raised me to be strong, independent, and my own person. Why do you think that will change if I spend the night in the same building as my potential mates? I’ve only just met them all. You can’t think that I—”

He held up his hand. “I’d prefer not to talk aboutthat.”

That made two of us.

“You can send a guard to stand outside my room...like you would, anyway. You can give that guard explicit instructions to not let anyone in my room until I leave for training in the morning.”

Mother raised to her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. “You have to let her go,” she whispered.

His shoulders slumped. His gaze fell to the floor, but after a while, it worked its way back up to me. “Part of me doesn’t want you to grow up.”

There was little to do about that.

Papa Connor and my mother both gave him a face, and he rolled his eyes. “I know, I know. It’s just that she has so much on her plate already. With her visions lingering, I don’t want her to rush into anything just because she feels she needs to get this done.”

“I do need to, Papa. The clans need to be united, stronger together, that’s how we’re going to survive this.”

“But why you?”

“If not me, who else? You’ve already done your part. It’s my turn now. I already promised you I wouldn’t take this lightly and I’m not. Deciding tonight...” I blew out a breath. I knew in my heart I’d made the right decision, but that didn’t mean it didn’t take a lot out of me. I was happy with the direction I’d chosen, but Papa Christian was right about things. I did feel the weight of it on my shoulders. “The potential mates deserve to see that I’m in this with them every step of the way. Give me a guard, Papa, then let me go.”

“Connor?”

“On it.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

Papa Connor pulled out his cell phone and walked to the other side of the room. I looked away from him and up into Papa Christian's face. "I'll be safe. I promise."

"It's not you who I'm worried about. It's everyone else. The Chang's never came. The Dumont's haven't changed. I worry."

"He's always been good at that," Mother said, staring up at him as if she was as enamored with him now as she was when they first met. It warmed my heart to see them like that. Her look only reaffirmed my decision. I wanted that. That thing you couldn't put into words, but the picture conveyed it all. It was a feeling, an emotion. It was as if my mother's soul was stripped bare every time she looked at them.

After Papa Christian bent down to kiss her on the forehead, he turned to me. "You'll need your cell phone on at all times."

"Of course."

"You'll take part, but always keep in mind that you are the Princess."

"Yes, Papa," I said, trying hard to keep the embarrassment out of my voice. When he didn't say anything else, I asked, "Is that all? The car is waiting to take me back. I just had to grab my things."

He pulled me to him. His strong hands holding me. I relaxed into him, giving him an embrace in exchange. "I'll be fine," I promised again.

"I know."

We broke apart and Mother grabbed my hand as she led me toward the vestibule. I passed Papa Connor and gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Papa Nic was still at The Fort preparing for the next day, and Papa Stephan had gone to the clinic to do a few things since he'd been preoccupied in this all day.

She laced her fingers with mine and pulled me to a stop where my bag lay just inside the house. Her eyes latched onto mine. "I was proud of you today. You did the right thing. As long as you're following your heart, you're doing the right thing."

I nodded.

She lowered her voice. "Don't get too upset with Papa Christian. He doesn't want you to hold yourself above others. He truly doesn't. He just wants to make sure you're treated as you should be. Not for the title you hold, but for the person you are." She stopped for a moment before continuing. "There were times when he couldn't do the same for me, so I think he takes extra special care in reminding you of who you are. Whether you're a real princess or not, Papa Christian would call you his princess and expect everyone to treat you that way. No real thrones needed."

She rolled her eyes, and I laughed with her. "I love you, Mom."

She smiled, her lips tight. I recognized the face. The face that said she was trying to hold back emotion. She moved forward and kissed me on the cheek. "You better get going before Christian thinks of something else to keep you back."

I turned and grabbed my bag, heaving it over my shoulders as I opened the front door. "I'll see you all tomorrow."

I stepped outside and the wind bit at my cheeks. The driver stood straighter as I approached the car. He smiled down at me and waved me inside.

“Sorry that took so long.”

“No problem, Princess. I’ll have you over to the training facility in no time.”

I slid into the backseat and placed my bag on the leather seat next to me. There was so much room in the back of the limo without the rest of my family in here. The darkness crept over me like a shadow, so I turned on the interior lights.

That made it worse.

I could see every inch of the empty seats. Hear every silence.

I turned the lights back off and sat back. I’d be at The Fort in no time. It would’ve been shorter if I’d just ran there, but Papa Christian wasn’t taking any chances. After I’d had my visions, he and Papa Nicolai had amped up all our security.

The one thing about my vision was, I knew what could happen, not how it started or when. Until then, we’d have to be careful.

The car pulled away, and I braced myself for what would come next.

Chapter Two

The halls of the Rajyvik Training Facility dorm smelled the same. It was as if I never left. I’d gone back into the main buildings since graduation, but never the dorms again. There just wasn’t a reason.

Suddenly transported back two years, I couldn’t help but smile as I made my way past the common area. How many evenings had I spent there hanging out with Alexei? Of any number of vampires and humans? My mother told me once I’d been lucky to be surrounded by all those guards-in-training who only wanted one thing: to

protect us and not have the sting of political barriers rising up everywhere. I heard her in my ear now and a swell of pride welled up inside me. The fact that I was even here, breathing, was a testament to my mother and my fathers. I'd never forget that.

I turned the corner and stopped short. "You've got to be kidding me."

Papa Nic turned his head. He was sitting outside my old room, his feet pulled up so his forearms could rest on his knees. He smiled back a toothy grin. "Did you expect anything less?"

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

“I asked Papa Christian to get me a guard.”

“Am I not a guard?”

I dropped my head back and made an exasperated noise.

“Oh, come on,” he said. “It could be worse. You could’ve gotten stuck with Christian.”

At least Papa Christian would be diplomatic about it. “I think you underestimate how threatening you are.”

“Threatening?” He shook his head as if he couldn’t believe the very words that had just come from my mouth though his eyes shone at what he considered praise. “I’m just going to sit here while you sleep, that’s all.”

And probably give everyone the evil eye who decided to walk by. “Isn’t this a great misuse of your time?”

“Now that you mention it, it is. But someone decided she wanted to participate in everything, including spending the night in a simple dorm room instead of sleeping in her nice cushy bed at home.”

I’d finally made my way up to him and stood there with my hands on my hips. “I already explained this to Papa Christian.”

“I know. I heard second-hand.” He held out his palm and handed me the key.

I took it and frowned down. “You don’t have to do this.”

Papa Nic huffed and then stood to his full height. His dark hair framed his face. “If you think I’m going to trust someone other than one of us here, you’re out of your mind.” He bent down to give me a kiss on the forehead. “Now, get to sleep. You have a hard day of training ahead of you and you’re going to need your rest, and your strength.”

I gave him a quick hug and slipped the key into the lock. As soon as I opened the door, a rush of memories flooded me. Early morning wake-up calls. Hours staying up all night talking to Alexei about the future. Sore muscles.

This was all before I had my vision.

“Good night,” Papa Nic said.

“Good night.”

I closed the door and dropped my bag on the floor. Looking around, I tried to get acquainted with everything again. Bed right in front of me on the left wall. The desk just under the window on the wall straight ahead. To the right was a dresser, then the door to the bathroom and the closet after that.

Taking a breath, I moved in again. My hand trailed along the simple bedding, but then stopped. There were two things on the middle of the bed. I picked up the first, narrowing my gaze at the woven bracelet. It was sturdy, long chutes weaved in and out reminding me of homemade baskets.

This must have been from Kai. I smiled as I slipped it over my hand and held it to my wrist. What a beautiful gift. My fingertips glided over the woven green and pale brown pieces. It reminded me of a similar bracelet I’d seen on him earlier today.

I sat and stared up at the ceiling, conjuring a picture of Kai Iona in my mind. His tanned, brown skin and even deeper, darker hair. He was always smiling.

And his weapon.

I'd almost forgotten about that. I needed to play around with that blade the soonest chance I got.

I stared at the door, wishing I could thank Kai for the gift right now, but knowing full well Papa Nic wasn't going to let me get out of this room tonight.

Moving my back against the wall, I picked up the second item. It was made of metal, an ornate bowl set on both sides with a handle that came outward with Gaelic markings.

It was beautiful, but I just didn't understand it. Taking out my cell phone, I Googled what it was. The gift had obviously come from Calen, but I was embarrassed not to know what the gift meant. It wasn't often I received a bowl—ornate or not—as a present.

After clicking on a few sites, I found a similar bowl. It was called a quaich, pronounced quake according to the website. It was an ancient Scottish artifact given from one to another as a symbol of kinship. The two handles signified trust for both the giver and the receiver.

I smiled down at it, happy he understood how important trust was to me and that he valued it as well.

I placed the quaich on the desk and turned to open the window. It was stuffy in here, the air stagnant, almost stale. I pulled up, but the window stopped abruptly, only allowing me to open it an inch or two. I tried again, lowering it and then bringing it

up harder this time. It stopped just as abruptly, making a loud thwack. I bent to peer down at it more closely when a voice drifted in from the outside. “I wouldn’t try that again, Princess. It won’t open.”

I clamped my jaw shut, noticing a nail had been driven into the window track, not allowing for it to move any higher. “I wasn’t trying to go out the window, Papa Nic, I just wanted to get some fresh air in the room.”

“There’s a fan in the closet,” he stated simply.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

My fathers had never behaved like this. They were protective, sure, but guarding the door and barricading the window? This was new. The proximity of these mates was really making them crazy.

Even as I thought it, I knew that wasn't all it. I was sure that attributed to it, but it was the unknown too. When would the attack happen? It wasn't clear.

I undressed quickly and pulled on my pajamas before sliding into bed. If I slept, maybe I'd have another vision. Something to tell me more about the beginning of the war and the deaths.

They'd warned me the visions would drive me crazy with their vagueness. They were right.

I needed answers.

If you chose Calen to be a part of your harem, please continue reading.

If you refused him, please skip to Chapter Four or Location 358.

Chapter Three

The sun streamed in through the window. My eyes opened lazily as the brightness became too much. I blinked, working the sleep away as I prepared for another day. I reached for the covers to pull them off when my hand clasped a piece of paper. Pulling it up, I noticed it was a phone number written neatly on a small strip. The arrangement of numbers wasn't something I recognized. It wasn't the usual three,

three, four combination from a U. S. Number, which made me wonder...

I grabbed my cell phone from the desk and eagerly typed the number in, deciding to send a text instead of calling in case it wasn't who I thought it was.

He wrote back right away. Good morning, my lady.

His words filled me with lip-biting pleasure. I eyed the door, worried Papa Nic was still out there and that he'd stayed awake all night on my account. He really didn't have to. I believed these potential mates, and one mate, to be respectful.

Even though I'd already pledged myself to him, a trickle of nerves emptied in my stomach when I thought of what to write back. We'd spent about an hour at the pond last night before I returned home. It wasn't near enough time to get to know him much more than when he first arrived. Now I had direct access to him whenever I wanted though. Did you sleep well?

Yes, apart from dreams of you that kept my mind busy all night.

I couldn't help myself. I giggled.

Thinking about the sleep I had last night, I confirmed I had not one dream, nightmare, or vision. In fact, when I woke, it felt as if I'd just laid my head down. I was exhausted.

We were a few hours from any training happening, but I didn't want to wait that long before seeing Calen again. I texted him that I was going for a run and asked him if he wanted to come.

His response took longer than the others he'd sent. I will, my lady. But I'm not the best runner. I'm afraid I would hold you back.

I don't care about that. Meet me at the front entrance in fifteen minutes.

I sent the text and hurried to the bathroom to get ready for the day. I threw my dark hair up in a pony tail and pulled on some athletic clothes before making my way to the dorm room door. Pulling it open inch-by-inch, I waited for Papa Nic to say something. Finally, I pulled it all the way open and stepped out into the hallway. He was in the same position, only moving when I walked out. He looked up, then down, taking in my athletic attire.

He shook his head, a pleased smile framing his face. "You're just like your mom."

I beamed and dropped low to kiss him on the top of the head. "Thank you." After I stood, I said, "Well, you're off duty now. My virtue is intact, safe in a stuffy room."

Papa Nic narrowed his gaze at me. "That's not the whole reason I stayed outside your door."

I cocked my head, but only smiled. "I know, Papa. I was only joking."

He stood, stretching out his body as he went. "Are you running alone?"

"Actually—"

"Excuse me, King Nicolai," the strong, Scottish accent rose up from behind us.

Papa Nic spun, his hands coming up and out to a fighting position. When he registered it was Calen MacDougall, he relaxed, blowing out a breath in the process.

Papa Nic took in Calen's appearance. His legs covered in jogging pants while he wore a t-shirt that just barely covered his muscles. No kilt.

“I’ll be running with her, King Nicolai. As long as you approve.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

Papa Nic liked that. He used it to his advantage. He took on a casual stance, bringing his fingers to his lips as if he had to think it over. I caught his eye and gave him a death look. That still didn't faze him. After a few more seconds, he nodded. "That's fine." I started to move away, but Papa Nic said Calen's name. "She's your responsibility now too. I don't know how much she has mentioned to you, but her safety is of the utmost priority."

Calen nodded, dropping his head in acquiescence. "Of course, King Nicolai. I will keep her safe or die trying."

"Good," Papa Nic responded, a smug smirk on his face as he looked at me.

I gaped at the two of them. First Papa Christian with his Princess talk and now this? "My life doesn't mean more than others," I said firmly.

"It does to me," Papa Nic said, his voice dark, sending a shiver through me. His usually shadowed face rescinded even more into the darkness as I looked at him.

"Mine as well, my lady."

In an instant, Papa Nicolai smiled. He looked at Calen with approval then gestured to us that we should leave.

I stalked on ahead, leaving them both behind. Calen was bigger than me, but I had longer legs than him where he had a lengthier torso. No wonder why he said he was not a great runner. With his vampire strength, he would be able to run fast, but not for any distance.

I pushed open the front door, sending it wide open, the hinges screaming in protest.

Calen hurried up behind me. “You are mad, Princess?”

I whirled on him, heat flowing through me that was ready to erupt. I was only a little remorseful when I saw the look on his face. “My life is not worth more than any other.”

“Aye. Spoken like a true princess,” Calen said. “Perhaps it is not worth more than any other, but I’m your mate, Izzy Ravana, and it means more to me.”

“A life is a life.”

“So it is, but I will honor you with your safety...and your happiness,” he added. “If it is at my disposal to give.”

The retorts died on my lips. Ugh. Why did he have to be so sweet? I was mad!

I reached out, and he took my hand. “I’m sorry, Calen. I didn’t mean to get upset.”

“I like that you’re confident in what you believe in, my lady. You speak out about what you think is right, and you are right. To everyone else, your life is just a life like theirs. Your family has always shown that. That’s why they go into battle when others would sit behind, but can you not see, that your life is not just a life to those who love you? That is a very different thing indeed and you should not get angry about it. It’s natural to want to protect the ones you love.”

He didn’t need to say more. I understood exactly what he meant. If my fathers or mother were in trouble, I would do anything in my power to save them, even give up my life for theirs.

When I looked into his eyes, they were heavy, hooded over as his gaze penetrated mine. “I wish I could kiss you right now.”

My stomach twisted. “Can’t you?” I asked. “We are mates after all.”

Red swamped his cheeks. “I’m afraid I don’t want to just kiss you in a way suitable for public viewing.”

Heat flowed through me as if I had a direct current of electricity scorching my veins. I stepped in, rising on my tiptoes to press a chaste kiss to his lips. I lingered there, letting my lips brush his. “That will have to do for now then,” I said, stepping back to flat feet.

His eyes were closed as he savored the touch, then they opened to me once more. His muddy irises more alive, like my kiss had sparked him to life this morning. “A run, my lady?”

I smiled and took off, jumping into my vampire speed. He raced behind me. My awareness of him grew the more I saw him. We ran to the walled perimeter and then raced alongside it like we used to when I was a student here. We stayed in the natural tree shade and synthetic canopy shade tethered high above the campus so that the sun’s harmful rays wouldn’t tire us unnecessarily.

Calen chuckled behind me. “You are very fast, my lady. You were going easy on me yesterday when we went to the pond.”

I slowed, not realizing I was going as fast as I was. Morning runs were my time to stretch my limits, push myself until I couldn’t go any further and I’d forgotten about Calen for a moment. When I was at an easy run pace, I said, “Thank you for the quai che.”

“Ahh,” he said, easily making his way so that we were running side by side now.
“You researched it?”

I nodded and stopped abruptly on the other side of a tree. Calen had a hard time stopping as quickly as me. He ran a little past and then jogged back toward me.

“It’s beautiful. The sentiment behind it and the quaiche itself.”

He sauntered up to me, his lips twisting into a small smile. “That quaiche was my great grandmothers. It was given to her by her husband when they married. It has been in my family for many, many years. I thought it only fitting you should have it as a representation of what I want our bond to be. Trust. Friendship. To me, those are the truest foundations.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

Underneath the tree, his sparks of red hair were dull, but not less brilliant. His face was weathered, a ruggedly handsome look rather than a baby, or pretty boy face. His deep rumble of a voice massaged my nerves the more he spoke.

He moved closer and closer, pushing my back against the tree. “Do you have any idea how wonderful you smell?” he asked.

He inhaled, dragging his nose up my throat until my legs were like putty. My mouth started to tingle. The area where my fangs sharpened neared the point of pain at his touch.

My heart ricocheted around in my chest as if it was begging to break free. Because I’d known what I wanted from a young age, I’d never taken anything further with another vampire. When someone sank their fangs into you, they claimed you. I couldn’t let that happen. Now though, it wasn’t wrong to want this with Calen. He was my mate. I only needed to choose the others to make it official.

I shivered, and Calen immediately backed away. “I’m so sorry, my lady. I don’t know what came over me.”

I fell back against the tree, limp. I stared at him, my own eyes hooded. “Don’t apologize, Calen. I feel the same way.”

His jaw locked tight as he stood up straighter. The sinewy muscles in his neck protruded like thick vines. “There will be time.”

There was time, but I wouldn’t lie and say I wasn’t eager. While the other guards-in-

training at The Fort experimented and had boyfriends and girlfriends, I'd stayed out of it. I told myself it was because I was a Princess and held to a higher standard, but I didn't think those were always my thoughts. It was others' projections on me. Only one guy had ever asked me out when we were at The Fort and I'd turned him down because I knew what he wanted, and it wasn't me. Well, it was me, but it wasn't me for me, it was my position, my power, my mystery. I had urges like any other my age and finally, I could act on them.

"Calen..." I started. "Do you have experience?"

His gaze narrowed in confusion.

I tried again. "With women? Do you have experience with them?"

My heart thudded in my ears as I waited for his response. What Calen had with anyone before me was none of my concern, but I also didn't want to be the only one who was inexperienced.

"Some," he said. "I've never sunk my fangs into one, but I've had lovers. I'm a fair bit older than you, Izzy, so it's hardly surprising. As far as drinking from them, I never took it that far and would never unless they were to be my wife, my mate for life."

He reached out and placed a stray hair around my ear. "What about you, Princess?"

I shook my head. "Just kissing, and very few with that, too."

His look softened. "I understand that. You had a different upbringing than the rest of us. I remember hearing all about your birth, your life, ever since you've come into this world. I feel like I know you even though I know that's not technically true. But, I know you more than you know me."

That was hardly surprising either. My existence had stretched out far and wide across this Earth. “Is there anything about me you want to know that you don’t?”

His jaw twitched as his lips pulled tight. “I am fine finding out as I go along, Princess. You have much to worry about during this coming week as well as the other things you shared with me yesterday evening. Our bond can grow naturally while you concentrate on what’s ahead of you. I won’t push.”

God, was this guy perfect or what? Even if I’d waited to acquire my mates, I wasn’t sure I’d have been lucky enough to find one quite like quai-che-giving, smile-inducing Calen.

Using the tree as a shield, I wrapped my hands around Calen’s neck and brought him down to me. Maybe he wouldn’t push, but I wanted to feel the touch of his lips right now. I wanted to strengthen the bond we would grow through the years.

Chapter Four

After my morning run, I stepped back into the guardian building and right toward the kitchen. The families of the potential mates were staying at the Rajyvik house itself, so it would just be me and my potential mates here in the dorm room cafeteria. Thankful I was given another opportunity to get to know them besides during training, I went through the line and spotted Kai first. Eager to thank him for the bracelet he’d left in my room last night, I made my way over to him.

“Hi,” I said, sitting down across from him.

I could feel the others’ eyes on me. They were all sitting individually at separate tables, even Alexei. That was so not how I wanted things to happen in my relationships. They’d better start cozying up to one another soon.

“Good morning, Princess,” Kai said. His mouth opened into a wide smile I couldn’t help but return.

I leaned in close. “I wanted to thank you for the bracelet you left me.” I stared down at a similar one on his wrist.

If it was even possible, his smile grew. “I hope you like it.”

“I do,” I said, bringing my hands up and showing him that I wore it now.

His eyes widened and as he worked his gaze up to my face, pleasure spread through him. “It looks more beautiful on you than I could’ve imagined.”

My cheeks heated at his words. I wasn’t used to having the opposite sex praise me like this. Other than my short time at The Fort, I spent most of my time with just my family. “Did you make it yourself?”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

He chuckled and looked at the table in front of him, avoiding my eyes. “I’d like to say it was all me. I did try, Princess, but my fingers aren’t as nimble as my mother’s. She took it from me and finished it. I have a suspicion she even took what I had done out and started from scratch.”

I laughed at this, his words filling me with amusement. He looked up, his eyes questioning, but seeing nothing but sincerity, he sat up straighter when I said, “It’s beautiful either way and I’m glad you tried. I wouldn’t be able to anything like this.”

“Maybe I can show you sometime.”

“I’d like that,” I said softly.

Kai’s gaze rose above my head and I turned to see what caught his attention. Shocked a little by what I saw, I sat and watched. Papa Christian had come into the room with Theo Nolan. They spoke to one another as if they were old friends and then before Papa Christian left, he put his hand on Theo’s shoulder and patted him there.

Right before Theo turned, I swiveled back around in my seat until I was staring at Kai again. His forehead wrinkled. “I didn’t know King Christian knew Theo.”

Neither did I. But, I wasn’t going to say anything.

I shrugged and decided to change the subject. “Are you ready for today’s training?”

“Of course,” he said. “I’ve been looking forward to training with you, though I doubt we’ll be doing anything like how I train at home.”

“Really?” I asked.

He smiled. “For instance, we don’t train indoors usually. We train around the island, with nature. We use trees and the ocean for our physical activity and then move on to our self-made weapons.”

The mention of his weapon made me perk up. “I was eyeing your traditional weapon yesterday. Maybe today you can show me a few moves.”

“I’d be happy to.” His dark hair fell over his forehead, silky like raven’s feathers.

The differing backgrounds of my potential mates intrigued me. Why had we not tried to learn from one another before? It was such a simple notion, but one that was often overlooked when meetings like this were few and far between. There wouldn’t even be a meeting like this if it wasn’t for the danger lingering in the future. Something these men and their families were yet unaware of.

“Is something troubling you, Princess?”

I looked back. “I really wish you would call me Izzy.”

His tan cheeks turned into a ruddy red.

He opened his mouth to talk, but I held up my hand. “I know. King Christian told you to call me Princess Izzy.” It just felt like that title was a barrier I needed to break down in order to bring them to me. Maybe it was all in my head, something none of the others thought about, but just a weight on my shoulders that seemed bigger than it was.

I dipped my fork into the eggs that were growing cold on my plate.

Across the table, Kai fidgeted. He lowered his voice. “If you wish, I will call you Izzy when King Christian isn’t present.”

I lifted my gaze to meet his. His eyes were hopeful as he stared right back into mine. “Please,” I said. “Sometimes the formalities get to me. Though, I don’t want you to get in trouble over it.”

“I’ll risk it for you,” he said immediately, making my insides squeeze.

I couldn’t help the smile that formed on my face. There was just something about being with Kai that made me happy. He was sweet, and positivity seemed to echo through him and outward like soundwaves. “Kai...” I started.

“Yes?”

“Do you think you could show us how you train? I’d be interested in seeing it. Perhaps tomorrow the Nolan Clan can show us and so on until we get to my training?”

His pearly white teeth glimmered. “Really? I would love that, Princess.”

I gave him a stern look.

He looked around quickly and then said, “I would love that, Izzy.”

Finally. I beamed at him and then stood where I sat. The sudden movement caught most of the others’ attention. Or, they had already been looking at me, anyway. “Instead of using The Fort techniques, I think each of the potential mates should take us through their training routines. We will start with the Iona Clan today.”

I looked down at Kai, who stood, taking on his role of instructor today more easily

than I would've imagined. "We'll meet outside in fifteen minutes. Bring something to swim in."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

I nodded at him and started to move away, but he grabbed my hand. “Izzy, is there a place nearby where we can swim?”

“There’s a pond a few miles out. We can run there if that’s okay?”

“Perfect.”

He double squeezed my hand and let it linger there before we both pulled away.

I wasn’t sure what I had that could pass for swimwear. I knew I had a tank top and possibly some boy shorts, but a swimsuit wasn’t something I’d thought to bring here. If I hadn’t, the others hadn’t either.

This should be interesting.

Chapter Five

Just our luck, the sky was overcast today. I stared up just as I exited the building. There would be no worries about too much sun exposure.

Calen and Theo were already outside close together, speaking in hushed tones. I couldn’t help but think they were talking about me. Soon, though, Kai came out. I made a sharp intake of breath as he stepped outside. He wore a wreath of bladed glass around his head and a short grass skirt around his waist.

He bowed to me. “Izzy.”

“Kai,” I said, shocked. “This is what you wear to train?”

He nodded. “It’s our custom.”

I took in his expansive chest along with his thick thighs. Was there something wrong with me that I seemed to like the way guys looked in skirts? Muscled legs were just plain sexy. Especially when they had Kai’s coloring highlighted by the pale grass on his skirt.

He lowered his voice. “Don’t worry. I’m wearing something under this.”

My cheeks blazed red. My mind hadn’t even gotten that far yet though it would’ve at some point. “Good to know.”

For myself, I wore the form-fitting tank top I had. I had the boy shorts on too, but over them I wore some athletic shorts that I would run in while we made our way to the pond. I’d also put my hair up in French braids, so I wouldn’t get any of it in my face while swimming and running.

Shortly after, Alexei, Rafe, and Felix walked outside. Felix made a smart remark under his breath after taking Kai in, but I didn’t care. I hoped it didn’t bother Kai either.

“The pond, Izzy?” Kai asked, ignoring everyone else.

I pointed out past the walled barrier around the school. “To the East.”

“Follow me,” Kai said. “Do everything I do. It’s customary in my country to train outside. We use nature to its fullest extent.”

And it seemed to work out well for him. Since he was shirtless and had little clothes

on other than that, I could see his muscles popping out everywhere. He wasn't as big as Calen, but he was endowed with ripples and dips that would make women stare.

Without a warning, Kai took off. He turned and ran full-blaze toward the perimeter wall. I scurried after him, not wanting to waste any time and still eager to show what I could do too. It was them picking me as much as it was me picking them. If I acted like a princess who didn't deign to get herself dirty, I highly doubted any of them would want me.

Kai was fast. His muscles weren't a hindrance as he jumped over the wall in one leap. I couldn't even do that. I had to touch off the top to clear it. Impressed, I tried my best to keep up with him. Alexei was right next to me. We'd always had similar strengths, and we'd ran together for years so it wasn't surprising to see him there.

Rafe was the one who surprised me. He kept right with Kai. Before we knew it, we'd run a mile, but not just straight running. Kai belted out instructions as we went. Soon, we were climbing trees and jumping from one to the other like monkeys before falling from high branches and landing in crouches.

We cleared ravines, jumped onto boulders, and climbed up even more trees. When we got to the pond's edge, I was out of breath and my muscles were straining.

Kai had a glint of satisfaction in his eye.

We waited for Felix and Theo, then Calen to come. Kai then looked around with one of his infectious grins. "We usually shimmy up palm trees to grab coconuts for training, so I had to replace regular tree climbing with that." Out of all of us, he was the least out of breath. It wasn't that we never did anything to tax us, these were just different moves meant to work different muscles. For instance, I wasn't used to swinging off tree branches though it had been fun and exciting at the same time.

Kai turned, taking in the pond. “Again, we usually use the waves as resistance, but this will have to do.”

“I miss the ocean already,” Rafe said, his blond hair matted with sweat to his forehead. He caught my eye and gave me a wink.

I hadn’t seen the ocean very many times at all, and I’d never seen it while on a vacation where I could sit and stare and embrace its beauty. It was always in a passerby fashion, just as on onlooker as we made our way to the reason we came to that part of the country for.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

A startling thought hit me at that moment. Rafe missed the ocean, and Kai would too, I was sure. What if these men—if I chose them—didn't want to stay here? What if they wanted to return to their homes? Could I stand to live somewhere else away from my family?

I looked up at Alexei. He was staring out over the pond. We'd come here many times to cool off after a sweaty training session, but we'd never used it as part of the training. Like Rafe, his dark hair had matted to his head with sweat. He belonged here, at the water's edge because this was as much his home as it was mine. Looking at the others though, it was evident they were out of their element. Especially Kai. I'd never seen anyone dress like him around here.

Kai took off this wreath crown and then pulled at the strings of his grass skirt. Underneath, he wore tight shorts that left nothing to the imagination. He dropped the skirt to the floor and looked up, not a hint of embarrassment at all. "A few laps should do."

He dove into the water, sending a shower our way. Alexei was next. He tore his shirt off, then stood there in his training shorts for a few beats. He dove in like I'd seen him do so many times before, but this time seemed different. He was my best friend but not. There was a whole other side to him I hadn't recognized, hadn't been privy to. He liked me. As weird as it sounded, he was a bit of a stranger to me too.

Rafe wasn't going to be left behind when it came to water. He also pulled his shirt over his head and dove in with the gracefulness of a dolphin. He didn't come up for several feet. So long that I became worried for him when he didn't surface. But then he came up with a fountain of water shooting from his mouth. He smiled back, the

widest grin on his face I'd seen yet. "No salt. It's kind of nice." Then, he raced ahead to meet up with Kai.

I tugged on my shorts, pulling them down to my ankles as Theo and Calen jumped in. Felix and I were the last ones in, both diving in at the same time. I had barely a glimpse of his body as he made the jump, and I had to say, I was impressed. The Dumont Clan had not rested on their laurels when they were exiled to Australia. Felix was certainly a trained guardian as I had witnessed in my sparring match with him. His body was proof of it even if I hadn't known the other part.

Swimming had never been my strong suit. I could stay afloat and was faster than a normal human, but the others were faster than me. Kai and Rafe lapped me more than once. My pride was hurt—a little.

After they'd lapped me again, Alexei came up and splashed me. "Come on, Princess. Let's see those swimming muscles."

I bit my lip and splashed him again. "I swear to God, Alexei."

"You swear what?" he said, moving to a backstroke as he looked back at me. "You can't even catch me to do anything."

"We have time out of the water too."

"Ooh," he said, mockingly.

Some of the others laughed. I stared around, trying to see who it had come from. Of course, when I looked at them, they all looked straight faced, except for Kai and that was only because he was always smiling. "Alright, laugh it up. All of you. Wait until we do my kind of training. We'll see who gets schooled then."

“That sounds like a challenge,” Rafe said. He was clear on the other side of the pond now. He winked at me, letting me know he was only intent on joking.

“You bet it is,” I said, trying hard to dig deeper so I wouldn’t seem like such a poor swimmer. If we ever had to fight in water, I would need Rafe and Kai around me because I certainly wouldn’t be able to do much by myself.

“The princess has thrown the gauntlet down,” Rafe said, an edge of teasing in his voice.

This was the most I’d ever heard him talk. I was glad for it. The water seemed to bring out his personality more.

Felix grunted as he passed me, almost like a token of satisfaction.

Now I was really butt hurt. I hated to see him beat me in anything. Since he’d resorted to making noises instead of sharing his opinion, I supposed we should all be grateful.

I still couldn’t quite figure him out though. He seemed to hate every minute of being here, yet, he was still here.

Theo was the only one not to say anything. He kept at his stroke, strong and steady. He didn’t say a peep about the trash talk going around. It was almost as if he didn’t hear any of it. He was just focused on the task ahead of him, which was working out for him. He’d just passed Alexei and was working on overtaking Rafe.

We swam a few more laps with Calen and I bringing up the rear though I did beat him by a little when Kai called our swimming session to an end. He pulled himself from the water in an impressive display. Water rolled down in rivulets from his hair and face, tracing the curves and dips of his body. Over his chest muscles, his abs,

then finally the v that led to his shorts.

A hushed voice came from right next to me. “Don’t drool, Izzy. It’s not becoming of a princess.”

I splashed Alexei and then locked my jaw down tight. I’d been caught. I shouldn’t have been such a poor sport about it, but Alexei and I had that type of relationship.

His gaze never left mine. It only narrowed. “That’s it, Princess.”

He swam forward, catching me without barely trying. He then heaved me over his shoulders and threw me. I landed in the water back first, knocking the air out of me briefly. I came to the surface of the water, sputtering.

I zeroed in on my target. “Alexei.Rajyvik.”

“Yes?” he answered, a smirk the size of the United States on his face.

“You’re going to pay for that.”

Using every ounce of my strength, I lunged at him, grabbing him around the hem of his shorts. He eyed me warily, but I wasn’t that cruel. I switched my grip, latching onto his waist as I scrambled up him, putting my arms around his head in a choke. He laughed and then dove into the water, taking me with him.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

We came to the surface, both of us sputtering, but he'd done as he intended. I no longer had a grip on him.

Calen and Theo looked on as if they weren't sure whether we were playing around or not, but Rafe, Kai and Felix laughed.

Kai jumped back in first, swimming toward us. We both tried to corner Alexei.

"Not fair," Alexei shouted, splashing both of us.

"Of course he's going to take her side," Felix called out. For the first time, he didn't sound combative, just to the point.

Kai pulled on my arm. He then took my leg and picked me up in the air, forcing my legs on his shoulders. "We got him now, Izzy."

"Oh, no you don't," Rafe said. He dove in, not coming up for air. I tried to see him through the water, but it was too difficult.

Alexei yelped and soon, he was sitting atop Rafe's shoulders looking mighty uncomfortable.

"Stop moving," Rafe chastised. "I don't really want your balls on my neck either, but the alternative is letting them win."

I burst out laughing, one that squeezed my stomach and made my shoulders shake. Kai too was laughing underneath me, which was probably why we missed the attack.

Alexei stopped moving. They leaped toward us. I screamed out, laughing at the same time while locking arms with Alexei. I felt confident having Kai underneath me. He was big and strong, bigger than Rafe. If anything, Alexei should've been the base with Rafe on top, but the fact that Rafe could support Alexei's weight was impressive.

"Secede, Princess," Alexei said.

I was the only one who was wobbling as Alexei tried to push me. Kai was as strong as a statue and had a death grip on my legs. I wasn't going to fall. I may be forced down, but Kai wasn't going to let my legs go for anything. "Nice try, Rajyvik."

We wrestled back and forth when I decided to take a different approach. I broke away from him. We circled, but then came at one another again. Instead of locking arms with him, I went for his sweet spot. Throughout the years of training with Alexei, I'd learned he was extremely ticklish in the midsection. I grabbed a hold of his waist and squeezed. He jumped and squirmed.

"Chill, Rajyvik," Rafe shouted.

They were already starting to lean, and I kept going. Alexei stared at me as if he wanted to murder me, but soon, Rafe couldn't take his fidgeting anymore and they soared backwards into the pond.

I held my hands up in the air, thrusting them high into the sky. "We did it, Kai."

Kai chuckled beneath me, his shoulders moving against my slick skin. His hands moved up past my knee and squeezed my thigh.

Calen MacDougall's gravelly laugh sounded from the banks of the pond, along with Felix and even Theo.

“Technically,” Theo said. “That wasn’t fair. Princess Izzy knew Alexei’s weakness.”

Calen laughed harder. “Now we all know Alexei is a wee bit ticklish.”

Alexei splashed us both again, but Rafe swam up and shook Kai’s hand, then my own. Except, he didn’t shake mine. He yanked—hard.

I screamed as I tumbled over Kai’s head and right at Rafe who switched positions and allowed me to cannonball right into the pond. I scrambled to the surface. Rafe had a grin a mile wide on his face while Kai looked sheepish.

I bit my lip. “You...sneaky little jerk,” I said. Laughing.

I lunged at him, but he carefully avoided me. Moving himself out of my grasp by mere inches each time I attempted to try to take him down. It was the water. On land, I could’ve taken him in an instant.

Behind Rafe, I saw Felix slowly wade into the water. He came up behind him as we circled one another. Felix wrapped his arms around Rafe while I lunged at him and finally, I got my hands on him. Felix let go as soon as I had him and then I pushed down, dunking him in the water for a split second.

When he came up, Felix had already run back to the bank as if he’d never been in the water. Rafe looked around, laughing the whole time. “I see how this is going to go. Everyone’s going to always be on Izzy’s side, huh?”

“You bet,” I said. “If you know what’s good for you.”

I winked at him and then wrapped my hands around his shoulders in a piggy back fashion. “Please take me ashore now.”

“What am I? A pack mule?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

“Nope. But I won, so you get to walk me out of here.”

“Or...” Rafe said, twisting me violently to the side, but catching me at the last moment. “I could just throw you in again...” he teased, holding me just above the water’s surface.

I laughed and clung to him while he stepped out. “You really love the water, huh?” I whispered into his ear.

He nodded, his shoulder tightening. “Very much so, Princess.”

He kept hold of me as he waded out of the water. We stood there a few seconds while the water dripped from us. Kai and Alexei splashed out afterward and now we were all on the bank beside the pond. Rafe let me go and I slid down his body until my feet hit the grass. I then took a seat and lied back, stretched out on a bed of grass. “Well, that was fun.”

“Water training doesn’t usually end in a water fight at home, but yes, that was fun,” Kai said.

I opened one eye and stared up at him. “Training should always be fun.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he murmured.

I looked around and all of them were nodding. Alexei and I always had fun while training. Then again, we were both competitive and never wanted to stop unless we had the upper-hand. To us, that was the fun part. It pushed us to go harder even when

we didn't feel like it.

I turned my head to look at him and he was already looking at me. He gave me a small smile, and I returned it.

A noise sounded in the distance. I spun to my feet, crouching. The rest of them did the same, Calen taking the lead. He held his arm out as he walked toward the noise. His back stiffened. "Someone's approaching."

"Who is it?" Alexei asked. Stealthily, he made his way toward Calen.

"They don't appear to be hiding their arrival."

"Stand down," a voice yelled.

All of us instantly relaxed. My heart had been thumping in my chest, but I fell back on my butt and held my knees to me. Alexei looked back to check on me. "It's a perimeter guard."

The voice rang out again. "I bring lunch courtesy of the queen and kings."

I waited for my heart to gain control of itself again. It was hard bearing the weight of the future without knowing when it would start. Any little thing like this sent me in a panic.

The guard finally arrived, holding a picnic basket. "Queen Ariana thought you would all be making yourself hungry and since there was no way to contact you..."

"Thank you," I said, standing now. "It's much appreciated."

The guard's mouth closed as he took in my appearance. His gaze dragged down my

wet tank top that now clung to me like a second skin and then the boy shorts that had ridden up on my legs.

I didn't recognize this guard and wondered if he was new.

Alexei grabbed the basket from the guard's hand. "Thank you," he said, his voice sharp. "You may leave now and take care not to ogle the princess again as if she's just an object. She's more than likely to kick your ass."

The guard's face reddened. "I apologize."

"Apologize somewhere else," Kai fumed, not letting Alexei get the only word in. "There are only men here who are respectful of women and their form."

The guard spun and left, leaving the rest of us silent for some time. I didn't know what to say. I was happy they'd called the guard out, but left feeling like crap, nonetheless. It was difficult to be a warrior when things like this happened. When I was looked at just for my body—or the fact that I was a princess. There was just so much more to me than that.

"That was very wrong of him," Theo said. "Where I am from, we always have respect. You should be able to walk around naked and not have others treat you like a...thing."

"I didn't recognize him," I said immediately, trying to stick up for my clan. We didn't hire guards who did that. At least, that had been my experience.

"Me either," Alexei said. "I'll talk to King Nicolai about it when we return to The Fort."

Lovely. Papa Nic would love to hear this. I rubbed my forehead and sighed.

We ate in silence. That was my fault. I wasn't in the mood to talk, feeling the shame the guard had put on me, but also feeling shame because he represented my clan and had just disrespected me in front of my potential mates. Before he was even done with his food, Alexei excused himself, followed closely by Theo and Felix.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

The others left until it was just Kai and me. He helped me pick up the makeshift picnic and then stared me in the eyes. “You may look like a trophy, but you are far more to me, Izzy. My clan could use your bravery, your skills, and your intellect. I fully support you wanting to unite the clans, along with Alexei Rajyvik. He seems to have loved you first.”

Kai offered me his elbow, and I took it. We walked back to the training facility more slowly than we had come. My mind buzzed with thought after thought, not making any clear sense of anything at the moment, but I felt stable with Kai next to me and his arm as a guide.

He had formidable skills, and I genuinely liked him.

Now I just had to figure out if I saw him as part of my harem.

If you chose to add Calen MacDougall to your harem, please continue onto the next page.

If you refused him, please go to Chapter Seven or Location 645.

Chapter Six

Kai excused himself to get his weapons, so I continued into the training room by myself. I trusted Alexei to deal with the ogling guard even though I was sure I’d have to have a conversation with Papa Nicolai about it. That was at the bottom of a long list of things I didn’t want to do.

A hand snaked around my wrist and I jumped.

“My lady,” the voice said, and I immediately relaxed, letting myself be pulled into an empty hall. My footsteps echoed through the cavernous darkness.

“Calen?”

His hand came up to touch my cheek. “I apologize if I scared you.”

“You didn’t,” I assured him, chastising myself internally for not being aware of what was going on around me. If Calen sneaked out to grab me, someone else who didn’t have the best of intentions could have too.

Calen pulled me to him. Dwarfed in his presence, I leaned into his stature. His fingers played in my hair. I’d taken it down since we went in the water, allowing it to air dry on the walk back to The Fort.

Cautious at first, I placed my hands on his hips, then moved them up his back. “Is something wrong?”

He let out a breath, long and low until the air sparked around us.

“What is it?” I asked, fear suddenly striking me. Did he not want to be here anymore? My heart thumped in my chest as I waited for his answer.

“That guard,” Calen said, his voice barely restrained. “I did not like him looking at you like that.”

My lips thinned. “You and me both.”

He pulled me back, simultaneously leaning me against the wall. “No, I mean

I really didn't like it. I nearly took his head off for disrespecting you like that."

His jaw feathered, and I reached up to touch it. "I'm sorry he upset you."

His look changed. What was once murderous was now confusion. "You're apologizing to me?" He shook his head. "Don't do that. I didn't say that so you would apologize to me. I was just surprised at how angry he made me."

"Alexei will take care of it. I'm sure he's already gone to Papa Nicolai."

"But what about you, Izzy? Are you okay?"

My first instinct was to tell Calen I was fine, but he was my mate now. I could open up, tell him whatever I wanted. "I'm upset he did that, but I'm more upset that it makes my clan look bad. We don't employ those type of people, and I'd never seen him before in my life before that moment."

One side of his mouth pulled up. "Spoken like a true princess. Clan over everything else."

I shrugged, watching the tense muscles in his body soothe the more we talked. "What did you think of swimming earlier?"

"I enjoyed it. Seeing you laugh and have fun was more than worth it. I kept telling myself to stay away so you could have your time with the others. I want you to make the right choice for you and not be at all influenced by my presence."

"And that," I said, pulling myself up to my tiptoes. "Is why I said yes to you."

"I thought it had something to do with my kilt."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

My heart tripped over itself. The air between us shifted.

He shrugged my hand off his shoulder and then caught it in his. He pulled it to his lips for a kiss and then pushed it down until it hit his thigh.

My mouth went dry. He trained his eyes on me and then flatted my palm against his skin. With his hand over top of mine, he moved it up. The curve of his muscular thigh gave way to a sinewy upper leg. His kilt bunched in between us as he moved my hand upward. At long last, while my heart beat like crazy in my ears, I felt the hem of boxer briefs beneath my palm.

My breath caught, and Calen snickered. “You’d probably been wondering what I had under here, lass. Now you know.”

He shifted and instead of me following with him, I stayed still. My thumb ended up perched precariously close to another part of his anatomy I was interested in.

Footsteps sounded down the main hallway. He quickly removed my hand from him and we stepped apart from one another. I stared at him with my heart in my throat. There was so much I wanted to experience before my visions started to come true.

“Go,” he whispered. “I’ll wait here and then come out in a bit.”

My mind drifted away, and I looked down. If I wasn’t mistaken, his kilt had come to a point in the middle when it hadn’t earlier.

“Go,” he whispered again.

I turned, my heart still beating like crazy.

I rather enjoyed that side of Calen. The risk-taking yet vulnerable side too. Before I got to the mouth of the hall, I turned back. I couldn't see him in the shadows, which was probably exactly what he wanted.

Quickly, I turned back around and headed for the training rooms, trying to make myself relax. This time, it wasn't the prospect of playing with Kai's weapons that had me excited, it was something much more primal.

Chapter Seven

Kai stood in the center of the training room and took us through a form for his special weapon. My mouth fell open. This one had a curved blade with a handle that was no bigger than the four fingers we used to wrap around it. It came to a startling point that looked like if it just nicked someone, it would slice the person open in a heartbeat.

I was enthralled.

My mother came too. She stayed off to the side, Papa Nic to her right while they watched. I could see her muscles twitching to get in on the action, but I knew she wouldn't. Not when what was going on was also important. It would be my duty to learn this and bring it back to them.

We were all surprisingly quiet while Kai worked. I expected Felix to make some sort of smartass comment, but he was as engaged with the form as I was.

When Kai finished, he showed us the first part again and then walked around while the rest of us tried to execute it to the best of our abilities.

Calen looked a little out of place with the weapon as well as Theo. But they were

trying. The rest of us slashed through the air using the same angles Kai had demonstrated, tearing up imaginary opponents.

“Very good, Princess,” Kai said as he approached me. “You work a blade like it’s an extension of your arm.”

I smiled up at him. “It might as well be. I’ve been using weapons since I was a little girl.”

Kai glanced over at my mother. “I can see why. Why won’t your mother come out here?”

I didn’t even need to look over again to know she was probably sitting on the edge of her seat. “Because it’s not about her,” I whispered. “It’s about us.”

He nodded slowly. He still wore the wreath of grass around his head and the paler skirt, his chest bare to everyone. It made what he had shown us look more impressive as if we were transported back in time and watching an island chieftain defeat his clan’s enemies.

“Do you have to fight much back home?” I asked.

He twirled the blade and then held it under his arm as he looked at me. “Not often. Every once in a while, a rogue vamp will show up. Sometimes even a rogue clan. Because we’re such a small island, they think they can come in and takeover, but we don’t let that happen.” His teeth gleamed white, almost threatening when he smiled down.

“How many warriors do you have?”

“A fair few. I train them as my father trained me.”

I thought back, realizing Kai's mother was the only one who accompanied him.

Before I could even pose the question, Kai said, "He fell during the blood shortage. As isolated as we are, my clan was hit hard. It was a rough time for us."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

Shortage. That was a nice way of putting it.

My teeth ached just thinking about blood, and my forehead broke out in a cold sweat when I thought about the lack thereof. I was not yet born when it happened, but it was a terrible time for my parents. One of scarcity and danger. “I’m sorry to hear that, Kai.”

His eyelashes lowered. “I don’t know if I told you yet, but I think what you’re doing is a generous thing. You could’ve picked your mates from anyone. To use the other leadership clans...I am immensely grateful for the opportunity.”

The rope-like cords in his neck tensed. I frowned at him. “What is it? Is something going on back home?”

A tentative smile appeared. “Nothing to concern yourself with now.” He smiled wider and leaned in. “...Izzy.”

A genuine smile graced my lips. At least I’d gotten him to call me Izzy.

But there was something wrong. I knew it. What clued me was that for the first time, Kai wasn’t his usual happy self. He showed raw emotion when discussing his clan.

“Iona, might you show us the second part?” Theo called out.

Theo’s serious exterior never wavered. I liked that he took his training seriously, but did he never smile or laugh? Or, gasp, have a good time?

I was serious when I needed to be, but I could relax, too. It was important to me.

Alexei sauntered over to me as Kai walked toward the center of the room again. “So, what do you think?” he asked, gesturing toward all the guys.

“About?”

“You know, your options.”

I held the curved blade up in front of us. “You’re my best friend, Alexei, but I’m not going to tell you my thoughts about this. Especially not now.”

“Why? Because I’m curious if I’m going to make the cut?”

My stomach knotted immediately. He saw the change in me and took a step back.

“Alexei...”

He shook his head. “I was just joking around.”

Maybe, but that wasn’t all of it. Not when he looked at me the way he did now, with about as serious of a face as Theo usually shared with everyone.

Before long, he turned and watched Kai as he added the second part of the form to the first so we could practice it in succession.

My mother cleared her throat. I looked over at her and she tipped her chin in the air.

I mimicked her. She used to do that when I was a child when we were visiting important people. She would tell me that acting as if I was brave and belonged would take me a long way. Before long, I would start to believe it.

She was right.

I couldn't let Alexei's feelings get to me right now. I had an inkling Kai would be the next to offer himself to me and that was going to be a big decision on its own. Focusing on that was a priority. We weren't just talking about adding these men as my protectors, they were going to be my mates for life. And life when you were a vampire was a very long time. Years and years. Decades. Even centuries.

If I chose poorly, this could be hell.

Drawing myself up, I watched Kai as he went through the second part of the form. I added it to the first and felt comfortable with it. Progressing through the angles, I spun, maimed, and sliced up my fictional opponent.

Catching the eye of Rafe, I only nodded when I finished the form out of breath and twirling the blade around in my hands. He smiled appreciatively and nodded back before launching into the form himself. I'd already known he was good with blades as that was the chosen skill he decided to show off the first night, but this was on another level. He was methodical, yet smooth. He was probably a sight to be seen in a blade fight.

Kai walked by and commented on a few things he saw that were off as he'd done with all of us. Surprisingly enough, they all took it in stride. A relief washed over me as I watched the interactions. At least we could all agree on one thing, training was important.

Afterward, Kai called us to attention and then told us it was time to try our hand at throwing before we broke for dinner.

Rafe's eyes blazed a brilliant blue as a few of the guards wheeled out targets for us.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

Kai explained the mechanics of throwing the curved blades and then demonstrated. I watched every little detail from the flick of his wrist to the angle at which he threw at. Even guesstimated how much force he used to send it to the other side of the room.

Unsurprisingly, Kai's blade sank directly in the center of the target with a satisfying, sheer cut.

The rest of us stepped in front of our targets and tried. I held my hand up over my opposite shoulder as I'd seen Kai do and brought it forward a couple times to get used to the movement. Then, I let it fly. It sliced through the air and landed just below the bullseye.

A smile peeled my lips apart. The blade was well-balanced and felt like a dream to throw. I looked over at my mother, almost giddy. Forgetting all pretense, she rose to her feet and came over.

"You have to try this," I told her.

Already dressed in an all-black tactical suit, she accepted a curved blade from Kai. The room silenced as my mom took up stance next to me. Papa Nic and I moved back to give her some room as she eyed up the target. As if she'd been doing it for a while, she went through the motions exactly like Kai had shown. She tested the weight of the blade, the forward movement, and finally, after a few practice swings, she finally let the blade go. It whistled through the air then sank into the target just above my own.

She turned to me, her eyes almost electric. "We need these."

“I couldn’t agree more,” I beamed.

After that, Papa Nic had to try too. Kai held him out a blade as if he were a servant serving his king. Like my mother had done, Papa Nicolai tested the weight and angle of the delivery several times before letting go. His blade sank just to the right of the bullseye. When he turned, he shook Kai’s hand. “We’re going to be purchasing some of these blades from you, Kai Iona. Do you make them yourself?”

He shook his head. “No, Sir. We have a bladesmith in town. He’s been making these blades for almost a century, learning from his father before him. He can’t bring himself to cross over because he loves making blades so much.”

Papa Nic smiled at Mother. “I well know the feeling when you love something—or someone—so much you can’t bear to go.” After receiving a smile back from Mother, Papa Nic looked at me. “Or two somethings.”

The noise picked up in the room again as more blades cut through the air and landed in the targets on the other side of the room. Mom watched it all with an unwavering eye before looking up at Kai. “We’ll break for dinner soon. It will be served upstairs in this building. It’ll be less formal, more intimate, but I thought it was better than eating in the dorm cafeteria.”

Kai bowed to her. “I’ll wrap up in a few minutes, my queen.”

My mother’s mouth pinched. She had the same hang-ups I did about being called after a title. She’d never asked for the title. She’d only been brought into this world by my fathers.

It was the same for me though perhaps a little less reason to get bent out of shape at being called princess. I was actually born into the role.

“We’ll be stealing Princess Izzy right now, too. I have something to discuss with her,” Papa Nic said.

His face was gruff and serious, but it usually was. It was hard to trace down Papa Nic’s emotions until he spoke.

Papa Nic held his hand out for my mother and she accepted it while I walked beside them. Behind us, I heard Kai giving last-minute instructions, but the sound died out when we reached the hall. Once we were far enough away that we weren’t going to be overheard, Papa Nic turned his head toward me. “Alexei came to me earlier.”

“And Theo,” Mother added.

“Yes,” I said, already knowing what this was about. “The guard. I didn’t recognize him. Did you figure out who it was?”

Papa Nic’s lips thinned. “No, we haven’t.”

A dead weight fell into my stomach. “What? How—?”

“Our best guess is that a young gentleman arrived at the gate earlier in the day pretending to be from Clan Dumont and needing to get Felix a message. Because Felix came by himself, no one thought it odd he would have someone come. However, now we can’t find the guard, and with what Alexei explained happened at the pond, we’re thinking this is the same person.”

“And is he from Felix’s clan?” I asked, my hands morphing to fists. They didn’t act as if they knew one another, but Felix left the pond early. Maybe they planned to meet...

Mother shrugged. “We haven’t asked.”

“Because we’re not sure he would tell us the truth,” Papa Nic said.

I ground my teeth together. “I’ll ask him.”

“That’s not readily the cause for concern now,” Papa Nic said. “All the guards have been alerted there might be an intruder on campus. We’re telling you so you’ll be careful.”

“Of course,” I said, trying not to sound affronted. I was careful one-hundred percent of the time. “I suppose this means you’ll be sleeping outside my room tonight.”

Papa Nic gave me a sly grin. “I was hoping it meant we could persuade you to sleep at home tonight. But in either case, yes, you will be guarded. We’re not sure as to why this is happening now. It’s been quiet and the only thing we can come up with is that you’re trying to choose mates. Maybe someone doesn’t like the idea. It’s not hard to guess you’re the target since the intruder went to see you all at the pond.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

Just wonderful. As if I didn't have enough on my plate, I now had to worry about a rogue guard somewhere on the premises. A rogue guard that for some reason was intent on seeing me.

Chapter Eight

Instead of the smaller circular tables bunched into the room, one long table was brought in. It was big enough to accommodate the families of those that came with the potential mates as well as the mates themselves. I sat near the head of the table next to my fathers and mother.

Alexei cleared his throat as he sat down next to me. "Mind telling me what's going on? There are quite a few more guards than there usually are."

Of course, he would notice. I took a sip from the wine goblet and held it in front of my mouth as I answered, "The guard from earlier? We're not sure who he is."

"Shit."

"Yeah..."

Alexei pulled his chair up to the table roughly. Since he was a Rajyvik, he took great pride in everything to do with the facility, including the security. "How the hell did that happen?"

"Came in posing as a..." I hesitated, not sure whether to share the guy posed as a member of the Dumont Clan. It certainly wouldn't do Felix any favors. It could all be

a ruse, anyway. The guard could be acting on his own volition and just using the Dumont name because he knew it would get him inside. “He posed as a member of one of the other clans needing to get a message to them.”

Alexei eyed me warily. “That’s it?”

“That’s all we know so far. We’re not sure if he is a member of the clan and is acting under their orders, or is acting on his own, or a mixture of the two. No one has seen him since he came to the pond to deliver our lunch.”

He pulled his napkin down and arranged it on his lap, acting cool and comfortable as he did so even though I could see the strain on his face. “If they were walking around and looked like a guard, they were probably put to use.”

“Exactly,” I said. I didn’t blame the guards for letting him in or giving him access to the pond.

Calen and Kai both looked over at me, so I smiled at them and set my glass back down. The blood in it sloshed. I caught it up with my finger and licked it off.

I looked up, my fingers still in my mouth, and paused. All my potential mates stared at me intensely.

Alexei chuckled under his breath. “Easy there. You’re going to start a frenzy. Bloodanda beautiful woman?”

“Since when do you think I’m beautiful?”

His head whipped toward me, his gaze narrowing as if he couldn’t believe I’d said such a thing. “I always thought you were beautiful, Izzy. Best friends or not, I can still find you attractive.”

He wavered as he said the end of it, and I realized my mistake. If I didn't think it was possible he thought I was beautiful, then, in essence, I'd just said he wasn't handsome.

We were best friends. The truth was, I hadn't really thought about it.

I groaned inwardly. It was hard to navigate this new territory between Alexei and me. Call me a wimp, but I liked it better when I didn't have to second-guess everything between us. I looked at him without the eyes of a best friend. It wasn't that I never thought he was handsome, it was just that I appreciated his looks in a way that you appreciated how beautiful a painting was. There was no sense in appreciating it in any other way because you couldn't become intimate with a painting. It was also like saying how gorgeous a TV actor was. There was no way you'd be able to meet said actor, so you appreciated the looks without going further.

Alexei wouldn't get all that though. He was a black and white, cut and dry kind of person. He didn't easily find a middle ground.

I'd always thought the contrast between his blue eyes and dark hair was stunning. I couldn't count the times his blue eyes sucked me in, but it was usually sucking me into some horrible plan that was going to get us both in trouble. I grew up thinking he was going to make someone a very happy wife, but with the way I wanted my life to be, I never thought it was possible I could be that person.

"You never told me I was beautiful before," I said simply, hoping he would drop it.

It was his turn to sip from his glass and try not to bring attention to us. "It was easier that way for me."

For him. That was the point I was trying to make all along. It would've been easier for me if he'd just told me. Everything. And as soon as he felt it, too.

“Do you know what you’re getting into with this?” I asked, wanting to lay it all out there since he was the one pushing. With the wanting to know if he was still in the running comment and now this, it was evident he wanted an answer, or was nervous it was going to be no.

His jaw ticked. It was a telltale sign he was losing his patience. “Yeah, you. That’s what I’m going to get out of all this.”

“And others. I don’t know how many others because I haven’t made up my mind yet, but you do know it won’t be just you. You’re okay with that?”

He looked away. “Sometimes I want to hit you upside the head.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

I narrowed my gaze, staring at his temple. A muscle bulged and receded there repeatedly. “The feeling is mutual. Trust me.”

He set his goblet back down. “Anyway, I’m sleeping in your room tonight.”

“Excuse me?” I said, almost choking.

“If the guard, or whoever it is, still isn’t accounted for, I’m sleeping in your room.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Yeah, you’re going to have to have that out with Papa Nic.”

He looked at me, a sly smile on his face. “King Nic loves me.”

I gave it right back to him. “You know who he loves more? Me.”

“I’m sure I can persuade him. I’ll sleep in an inflatable bed on the floor. Don’t worry. I’ll make him see it my way.”

“I can always tell him I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“Yeah? How’d that work out for you yesterday? I seemed to remember seeing him outside your door...”

“Oh, suck it.”

At that point, the surrounding chatter decided to die down, so everyone at the table heard my outburst. Mother cracked a smile, but Papa Christian’s face turned red.

Yikes.

Alexei cleared his throat roughly. “What did everyone think about Kai’s weapons today?”

“I loved them,” I said, practically pouncing in the moment Alexei ended his question. Anything to take the attention off me and my ‘suck it’ comment, which took on a whole new meaning when I sat around the table with a bunch of vampires.

While the rest of the table started chatting about the weapons, Alexei leaned over. “I bet you did love Kai’s weapons. You seemed to take a lot of pleasure in it.” He went to pull away but came right back. “Oh, and you’re welcome.”

I gnashed my teeth together. He was the reason everyone heard me say suck it, so he was going crazy if he thought I was going to thank him for “saving” me.

After dinner was served, we sat around talking for quite some time. My gaze landed on each of the potential mates, avoiding Alexei because he was annoying me. Rafe seemed to be opening up just fine. He was in an easy conversation with Kai and Felix. Felix still seemed a little standoffish to me, but he talked more and more and not all of it was him being an asshole. Theo, however, was quiet for a lot of it. He talked with his parents much of the time though he did speak up and say some things when Kai’s weapons were discussed.

His gaze moved up and locked eyes with mine. For a moment, I just stared at him, not caring that he caught me looking at him. That was what this whole thing was about, right? Me trying to decide who I could entrust and bring into my home forever? His brown eyes stared back about as emotionless as you could get. It wasn’t an uncaring look, maybe just a perfectly schooled look that was used to hiding his true emotions. I knew he was a serious person, but he was getting more difficult to get a grasp on.

Papa Christian was the most serious out of my fathers. I'd have to ask my mother how she cracked him, how she let herself into his personal space.

"Princess Izzy?"

I jumped at the interruption and then turned toward Kai. His grin roped me in and I found myself smiling in return. "Yes?"

"I was hoping you might permit me to show the group my tribe's haka. It's a warrior dance used in my clan for centuries. We usually only do it during rituals, but since you seemed interested in the blades, I thought you might like this as well."

"Of course," I said, not skipping a beat.

He bowed his head and then moved away from the table. He walked around the table and faced us. We turned in our chairs and watched, his mother beaming at him as we did so.

With the low light in the room coupled with his native attire, I could just as easily see him under the stars before a bonfire where he and his people would share this dance.

Kai dropped down into a wide squat. With his head bowed, he started stomping his feet, a steady rhythm that echoed through the large room. Then, he looked up, his face a mask of vengeance and the thrill of the fight. He slapped his hands against his thighs, the sound reverberating through the room.

He was completely transformed. It wasn't the always-smiling Kai, this was a battle-blazoned warrior. He beat his fist against his chest, matching the rhythm of his feet.

Then, he chanted. The sound a message I didn't comprehend verbally, but understood it all too well, anyway. A warning. Though I didn't know the words, I could feel it in

everything he did. He punched his fist into his opposite palm several times, a punctuation mark to the staccato rhythm of his growled threats.

I sat there, emotion building inside me. My hands curled into fists as I watched. I understood how this was used to rally the troops. There was something so powerful about it. It was moving. It made me want to get up and yell. It made me want to suit up and run into battle.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

To end it all, he dropped down in his wide squat with a release of breath like a hiss while his arms curved in front of him. Muscles popped out everywhere. Abs, arms, thighs, calves.

For the few first seconds after he finished, I was almost numb. Then, I stood, my hands coming together in a clap. “That was so...beautiful, Kai.” There really was no other way to explain it. Sure, I understood it was threatening and meant as a war cry, but it had beauty too.

Everyone else around the table stood too. I glanced over at my mother who had tears shining in her eyes.

At least I wasn't the only one.

Kai caught his breath, still standing in front of everyone. After a few moments of us clapping, he finally returned to himself as if he'd just released the warrior spirit who'd claimed his body during the dance. He smiled at us all and started to walk back to his seat. Papa Christian stopped him and patted him on the shoulder.

Phew. Okay. The decision was getting closer. To me, Kai was pulling out all the stops to win me over... What to do?

Chapter Nine

After dinner, we all broke apart to retire to our rooms. For myself, I wanted to take a long shower to get the pond funk out of my hair and then veg out in bed. I wasn't going to lie; I missed my house. I missed its normalcy and routine. I said goodbye to

my parents who were all heading back to the house, most likely to watch TV together or something else as a group. Despite missing that, a part of me wanted to be separate. All of this was about going out on my own, so why not start now? That didn't mean I couldn't still want to be there too though.

When I let myself into the room, I didn't have a guard yet. Papa Nic probably wouldn't play guard again because he would need to catch up on sleep. Maybe one of my other fathers would do it, or Mom herself. That wouldn't be out of the ordinary. Or, they could just transfer one of the trusted guards to sit outside my room all night. The only thing I knew for sure was that someone would be there. What happened today wasn't going to be taken lightly. Even though we were all caught up in the dinner and other mate choosing things, everyone behind the scenes was mobilized. I caught glimpses of it as Alexei had too.

I wondered if he'd actually ask Papa Nic about staying in my room...

I went right for the bathroom, turning the hot water on until the room was filled with steam. I loved hot showers. The hotter the better. I wouldn't come out until my skin was red from the heat and puckered from prolonged exposure.

Tonight wasn't any different. I washed my hair first, then just stood there, thinking about all the important decisions I had yet to make. The mates were a big decision, but nothing seemed bigger than figuring out what to do about my visions. I had to crack them to stop things before they started. The fate of the clans depended on it.

When I had thoroughly stressed myself out, I turned the water off and stepped from the shower, taking care to towel myself off before slipping on my pajamas. The thin tank top and shorts clung to my body. I wrung my hair out and then brushed it back. It was getting pretty long. Almost too long.

A creak sounded in the main room behind me. I whirled, the bathroom still thick with

heat and fog from the shower. Grabbing my hairbrush from the sink, I turned the doorknob quickly and threw it open. I marched out, my hairbrush raised while searching for the source of the noise.

“Whoa, hairbrush killer...” Alexei chuckled. He waved the steam that came billowing out from the bathroom away from his face. “I see you’ve good and roasted yourself again.”

I lowered the hairbrush and put my hand on my hips. He was on his knees, blowing up an air mattress. “Are you kidding?” I asked, gesturing toward the mattress.

His forehead just wrinkled as I stared at him. “What? Would you rather me sleep in the bed with you?”

Ignoring him, I asked, “Did Papa Nic approve this?”

“He did, actually,” he smiled smugly. “I had to swear on my life that I wouldn’t touch you inappropriately.” He rolled his eyes. “But apparently they’re more worried about your safety than your virtue.”

I gave him a short smile which fell off my face immediately as I searched for my cell phone. Alexei chuckled in the background as I pulled it out and checked for any messages. Sure enough, there was a group text in which Papa Nic stated he was allowing Alexei to stay in my room for my safety only, coupled with a threat to Alexei’s personal parts if he tried anything. I wasn’t so sure Alexei knew he’d shared that part with me and my other fathers and mother.

Papa Connor only responded in laughter.

Papa Christian texted:He knows better than to cross us.

Papa Stephan sent me a personal text asking me to be careful.

My mother, however, put all of them in their place. Izzy's old enough to make her own decisions.

I smiled at that, briefly thinking that I could kick Alexei out of my room if I was old enough to make my own decisions. But the truth was, having him around was filling up the void of not being home. As much as I hated to admit that.

"Wonderful," I said, putting my cell phone down and not bothering to answer them.

"Oh, come on," he said, "how many times have we had sleepovers?"

I made my way to the bed, making sure to step right on his air mattress as I did so. "A lot, but not for a few years."

He gave me a death glare after I plopped down on my own bed, then returned to blowing up the mattress.

"Who do you think this guy is, anyway? Did Papa Nic say any more to you about it?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

Alexei shook his head, but I could tell he was lying, which irked me.

“Alexei.” I waited until he stopped blowing up the mattress and looked at me. I swallowed before I started going off on him, a trick to try to get my anger under control. “You do realize that if you want to be with me, your loyalty will have to be to me first. Not my fathers or my mother.”

His eyebrows raised, a look of shock crossed his face. “Wow. We’re going there? Okay.” He finished the rest of the air mattress and then put the cap on it before rising to his feet. “You have my loyalty, but that doesn’t mean I can’t make decisions for myself. If I feel you don’t need to know something, I’m not going to tell you. Especially when you have other things going on and the thing you’re worried about is being dealt with.”

I stood now too. “You’re not hearing me. I want to be involved in everything. It’s my job.”

“Not yet it isn’t.”

I made a frustrated noise of disapproval.

Alexei only smirked. “Princess isn’t getting her way?”

I turned around and fell into bed again. Instead of getting a relaxing night in my room, I was going to spend it being pissed at my best friend turned...what? Love interest?

Who knew?

“Don’t be like that,” Alexei said, his voice softening.

“I’m not being like anything. I just don’t need you, or anyone else, treating me like I’m glass.”

Alexei shoved the mattress out of his way and walked up to the bed. His blue eyes shone down on me and I immediately averted my gaze before he sucked me in. His dark hair glinted in the glare of the ceiling light. “Come on,” he said, nudging me.

I looked up. “I just don’t know why you’re always mad at me lately. I’m not the one—”

“I know. You’re not the one who was keeping something from you.”

Surprised he actually admitted it, I sat up and faced him.

He knelt. “I don’t think you understand what it was like for me. What it’s still like for me.” He swallowed and searched my eyes. “Be as mad at me as you want, but I couldn’t tell you.”

“Why?”

He started to get up and walk away, but I pulled back on his arm.

He whirled, his eyes ablaze. “You want to know why? Maybe because you have no idea what it’s like to be around someone all the time and just wish they felt a fraction of what you feel for them. That having to look at you laugh and cry and not be able to do all the things I wanted to help and support. To look at you and not be able to say the one thing that’s always been on the tip of my tongue. Or for heaven’s sake, just to

kiss you.”

My heart skidded to a halt and then picked up into an erratic rhythm. “Do it.”

“What?” he asked, his face pinching in anger.

“Do it,” I said. “Kiss me.”

Maybe this was what I needed to understand if I could feel something more for Alexei. Maybe it would just be the act of trying it out.

He shook his head. “You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t tell me what I mean.”

His jaw locked, and I stared him down more.

He pushed away from the bed and stood. “Just forget it.”

“Alexei Rajyvik.”

With his back turned and shoulders bunched, he stopped and waited.

“I said kiss me.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

Faster than I could barely comprehend, Alexei turned. His blue eyes radiated with uncertainty, but he moved quick. One second, there was nothing. The next, his lips were on mine pushing and demanding.

It was like how I felt after Kai's haka. It was as if I was suspended, realizing too late that I needed to react.

I pushed back, returning the kiss.

I was going all-in with this. Alexei liked me. Now, I just needed to sort out my emotions for him.

He didn't waste time after that. His hand came up to my neck to hold me in place as his lips parted. His tongue darted forward, pressing into mine, enticing it to play. My head was like a hazy fog as I took all of it in. He kissed me thoroughly until all rational thought was gone. It wasn't Alexei my best friend anymore, this was someone completely different.

He pulled away, and I sucked in a breath before meeting his eyes.

Thoughts swirled.

The air was thick between us.

"You're so in trouble," I said, my voice so breathy I didn't even recognize it.

Alexei's brows furrowed.

“Papa Nic threatened you. I guess you can say goodbye to your balls now.”

A creeping smirk pulled my lips apart. Alexei may not have found that funny, but I certainly did.

Chapter Ten

I awoke the next morning in my bed—alone. I turned quickly, looking down at the air mattress where Alexei had slept.

There was nothing there. No sign that he had even stayed in my room last night even though he had.

With my thoughts a whirling mess, I sat up and brushed my hair out of my face. That kiss was something else. I bit my lip just thinking about it.

My phone buzzed on the desk. I reached out and grabbed it, turning it over so I could see the screen. It was Papa Stephan. Answering and putting it to my ear, I knew automatically that something was wrong.

“Izzy?”

“Yeah?” My heart leapt to my throat.

His words came out in a rush of vowels and consonants that I had to decipher through the growing fear. “Are you in the dorm?”

“Yes.”

“Stay there.”

I pulled the sheets off me and stood. “What’s going on?”

“Just stay there. One of us will come get you.”

The connection cut off before I could argue with him. I threw the phone down on the bed and went to the closet, pulling out my bag to put on some clothes, throwing my shirt over my head in a mad rush. I then ran to the bathroom to grab my hair tie and quickly wound my tangled hair up into a topknot before throwing my stuff in a bag and waiting by the door. I opened it just enough to stick my head out to see if anyone was around and if they were in as much of a panic as Papa Stephan was.

No one was around. Not one single person.

I shut the door again and almost immediately after I stepped back, it opened. I jumped, maneuvering into a defensive position only to find Papa Connor in front of me. “What’s going on?” I blurted out.

He looked relieved to see me and then pulled me close. He let out a breath and shook his head. “We don’t really know.” He stepped away, his eyes set in confusion as if he was still trying to make sense of something. “There are tracks, animal tracks, just beyond the perimeter wall.”

“Okay...?”

“Huge animal tracks, Izzy. Like nothing we’ve ever seen before. Bigger than bears, bigger than...” He shrugged his shoulders. “...big. They’re just large. No one knows what they are. The Fort is on lockdown. We also still can’t seem to find the guy who posed as a guard. It seems unlikely these two things aren’t related.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

Images of monstrous beings floated through my mind, and my mind locked onto them with a shiver.

“Come on,” Papa Connor urged, pulling me to the door. “Christian called a Council meeting.”

I grabbed my bag and followed him out of the room. “Where’s Alexei?”

“He was the one who found the tracks,” Papa Connor said.

I marched alongside him, eager to find Alexei and ask what happened. How had he come to be outside the perimeter walls this morning? Why had he left? There were so many questions going through my brain, but all along the back, there were a set of yellow eyes that loomed in my mind. Unblinking, unflinching. Watching.

I wasn’t sure if it was my imagination or something else.

The Council meetings were usually held at the Ravana Estate, but we had to make do here. When I walked in, all my potential mates were there staring back at me—even Alexei. Papa Connor strode to the front of the room while I held back. “Where did you go?” I asked.

His throat worked, and he looked away. “I just needed a walk. There was a guard stationed with you.”

I shook my head. “What is Papa Connor talking about? Animal tracks?”

“We’ve seen them, Princess,” Kai said. “I didn’t recognize them and neither did anyone else.”

“Wait,” I said, not believing what I was hearing. “You’ve all seen them?”

Alexei tried to stop them from answering because he knew what was coming, but Kai, innocently, said, “Yes, Princess. This morning.”

“And no one thought to come get me?” I asked, my voice rising.

“Actually, I did,” Felix said. “No one listened to me though.”

“That’s because you’re an asshole,” Alexei grunted.

Asshole or not, at least he’d known I’d want to be there. Alexei knew too, but he just let me sleep.

I turned on my heel and marched away from them. With my eyes trained on my mother, I made a beeline right for her. When The Council meeting started, I’d have to sit next to my family among some of the other more prominent members in the Ravana Clan, including Natalie Rajyvik.

Mother’s head tilted when she saw me coming for her with a purpose. Papa Christian opened his mouth when he saw me close in, no doubt going to start the meeting, but Mother pulled on his hand and we all stepped down off the raised platform, partially hidden from the long table and chairs.

As soon as my family surrounded me, I let it go. “I can’t be treated like a child anymore. This is not how you raised me to be. Made to stay in the dorm when something is going on that affects the clan.”

“You’re mad,” Papa Christian said. It wasn’t a question at all, nearly a statement.

“I’m furious,” I countered. “My potential mates are looking at tracks surrounding The Fort while I’m asleep. This is not how my life is going to be. I am the natural successor and I’ll be treated like one whether I have mates or not.”

Mother inclined her head, suppressing a smile. “I told you.”

She wasn’t speaking to me, she was speaking to my fathers.

“She’ll get over it,” Papa Nic said.

“Not likely.”

Papa Nic’s gaze narrowed.

I followed my last thought up quickly with, “I don’t mean any disrespect, but think how I felt when I just learned everyone else was aware of what was going on, but I was still asleep in my room. That can’t happen again.”

Papa Stephan reached up and put a hand on my shoulder. “It wasn’t to keep you in the dark.”

I took a deep breath, Papa Stephan’s touch as soothing as it ever was. “I’m not saying it was,” I said in a much calmer voice. “What I’m saying is, I can’t be made to feel like a figurehead. I want it all. I can handle it. I’m certainly not going to let my mates run out to deal with everything for me. That’s nonsense and goes against everything you instilled in me since I was little. What were all those years at The Fort for if you weren’t going to let me put any of that training into use?” I looked at my mom for help. “You of all people... You should know what I’m going through.”

She nodded slowly. “I do.” She stepped forward, bringing the focus on her. “You’re tremendously strong, but you’re also vulnerable in different ways. I let my feelings get in the way. I’m sorry.”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:42 am

My eyebrows rose. She was sorry? Good. I would take that. “As soon as this is over, I want to be taken to the tracks. I might get a premonition or something.”

“Which is why we didn’t want you out there,” Papa Christian said. It was evident him and Papa Nic weren’t going to be saying sorry anytime soon. “When you get a premonition, you’re in a vulnerable state. We didn’t want your mates, or anyone else, to witness that.”

“Then I should’ve been shown first.”

Mother held her hands out. “Let’s just agree to disagree right now. We can talk about it more later, but we have a room full of people waiting to hear about this.”

“And I’ll be finding out the same time they are.”

Mother glared at me.

Okay. Maybe that last thought was taking it too far, but I was a little like Papa Nic in that way. Sometimes I let my anger get the better of me.

“Fine,” I said.

The rest of them agreed and Papa Christian helped Mother and then me up onto the raised dais while they followed shortly after.

The room quieted like a wave rolled over the talking voices until it was silent. My mother sat first and then the rest of us sat, except for Papa Christian. His voice rang

out as clear and as steady as he always was. “As you may have heard, we have found unidentifiable animal tracks located just outside the perimeter walls. We have people trying to discern what animal this has come from because an initial review did not yield any immediate matches.”

Whispers went up around the room like a cacophony of buzzing flies.

Papa Christian ignored them and kept going. “We also had a man posing as a guard from a visiting leading clan let onto the premises yesterday. The leading clans have all been talked to, and we can discern from this point in time that this person is not from a leading clan, but a stranger to us. The current whereabouts of the stranger are unknown.”

I bit down on my jaw. “That was one thing I didn’t know.”

Though I didn’t say it loud enough for everyone to hear, Mom reached out and placed a steady hand on my thigh and then patted it.

“First thing’s first,” Papa Christian said authoritatively. “I would like to hear from the visiting clans to see if they wish to stay, move the mating ceremony, or leave all together.”

Calen stood with his father. “We’re staying.”

They sat back down again immediately, then Kai rose. “I’m staying, but I wish to find transportation for my mother to return home safely.”

I smiled at him and though he looked at me, he looked away almost immediately, his cheeks flaming red.

“We can arrange that,” Papa Christian said.

Felix stood. “Staying,” he stated simply, then sat back down again.

My eyes flicked to his. I still couldn’t get a good read on him. Though, apparently, he was the only one who thought of me when they were investigating the tracks. That was a surprise.

The Nolan Clan stood. The threesome was as stone-faced as ever. “We intend to stay for the time being.”

The time being? That didn’t give me all the warm and fuzzies.

“Understood,” Papa Christian said.

Rafe was the only one who hadn’t declared what his intentions were. I found him in the crowd sitting next to Felix. He stared at me for a long time before standing. “Staying as well, King Christian.”

Instead of moving on, Papa Christian waited. I looked up at him and then noticed Papa Stephan leaning down and whispering to Natalie. Natalie’s eyes widened and then she looked up. “Staying,” she said, a little flummoxed. “Of course.”

After she turned back around, Papa Stephan leaned back over, most likely explaining that it was all just procedure. Something they had to ask for to be put on record.

Papa Christian nodded. “Very well. More guards will be added to security here at The Fort. If you would like to up security at your individual residences, please see King Nicolai. If you believe you have an expertise that will help in identifying the animal tracks, please see myself. We’ll call another meeting when we have more information. Thank you for coming.”

Just like that The Council meeting ended. People rose from their seats and started to

leave. Something such as animal tracks surrounding the Rajyvik Training Facility wouldn't have been news that was shared with everyone, but since we were holding the mate choosing here and it was getting a lot of attention, it was a smart move by my parents to put everyone at ease. The best thing the Ravana Clan gave their members was communication. We tried not to hold back or keep anything away from them.

“Princess Izzy,” a strong voice said.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:43 am

I looked up to find Kai Iona standing in front of me.

“I wish to speak with you alone.”

His face wavered when I stared into his eyes. Nerves fluttered in my stomach. I took a deep breath and followed him.

Chapter Eleven

I caught Alexei staring as we retreated away from prying eyes and ears. We took the back door out of the room and I held onto Alexei’s gaze for as long as I could, trying to decipher what it meant.

When I looked back in the darkened hallway, Kai was on his knees before me. He bowed his head. “Forgive me, Izzy. I meant no disrespect keeping you from the tracks.”

My stomach knotted. Now that Kai was on his knees in front of me apologizing, I realized I may have overreacted. I put my finger under his chin and made him raise his eyes. Then, I reached for his arm and made him stand. “I may have been too harsh. What I was trying to get across is I won’t be a queen that just stands by.”

“And I would not have you so.” His gaze dropped once more. “I’m sorry to say the thought didn’t even cross my mind to inform you right away.” I must have given him a look because he charged ahead. “It’s not as if I wanted to keep it from you, but when I first heard of the possible intruder, my reaction was to keep you safe. To me, that meant running out there immediately to see what it was. I see now that instinct

was wrong. I would've been furious if I was in your position. You have every right to refuse me if I failed you."

My breath hitched. "Refuse you?"

"Haven't you guessed?" Kai asked. He lifted his face, his features far more vulnerable than I'd seen before. "I wish to have you as my mate. I think you're exactly what we need in a queen. But beyond that, I find myself smiling when I'm around you." He lifted his hand to squeeze my top knot. "You are beautiful, and clever. Hardworking. Fierce. I can safely say I have not met any like you before, Princess. You've turned feelings on inside me I didn't know I possessed."

My stomach dipped. I thought back to the pond and then the dinner last night during his impressive haka dance. It was in those moments I saw who he truly was.

"I'm waiting..." I said, my voice clear and as steady as I could make it. He needed to actually put everything he was alluding to in words.

Kai dropped to one knee again. "I wish to be your mate, Izzy. I pledge my life to you in protection, in guidance, but most importantly, in love."

I dragged in a breath...

If you wish to accept Kai Iona's offer, please continue reading.

If you wish to reject Kai Iona's offer, please skip to Chapter Twelve or Location 1210.

I held out my hand and dragged him up again. He waited for my response, his eyes eagerly tracking over my entire face.

“Smile.”

He did as I asked. His lips curled apart and left me with that blinding white, toothy smile that made my insides melt.

My heart was immediately put at ease. A calmness came over me and I knew I needed Kai in my life. “I accept your offer.”

His eyes widened. After a split second, he shot forward, pushing me against the wall so his solid body lined up with mine. My chest heaved in front of him.

He bent forward, then stopped. “I’m sorry. I don’t know if I need to ask or not. Can I kiss you?”

“Don’t ask,” I said. I snaked my hand around his neck and pulled him closer. My fangs pulsed with need. After the kisses I shared recently, certain parts of my body were awakening that I’d never paid too much attention to before. Now, they were on in full force.

His lips touched mine, and I melted into him. He groaned deep in his throat and moved closer until I was pinned against the wall. His kiss firm and fierce, he broke away to kiss a blazing trail down my jaw to my throat. He nipped at my skin and I clung to him. My breaths came out in short bursts. Between us, he became even more solid. Hard, awakening.

I moaned and pushed against him, picturing the warrior from his dance last night. Kai was like a chameleon. He could be so easy going and happy but turn into a fierce protector in an instant. He was passionate in everything he did. Everything. The kiss only more evidence.

He kissed my ear, not letting any space between us. Then, he whispered, “I fear I’ve

already let this get too far.”

My body shook. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

He placed his hands on either side of my head and arched back, his hips still in solid contact with mine. I breathed in deep, watching his dark eyes and silky black hair as he regarded me. He tilted his pelvis up in a glorious movement that made the area between my legs melt.

“My teeth ache,” he said, bearing down on his jaw. “My whole body does.” He let out a short laugh. “When you were perched on my shoulders yesterday, same thing. I came back from that trip and my mother immediately knew I’d fallen for you.”

I wanted to tell him I’d like to meet his mother again in a more in-depth way, but his hips came forward. This time, I met his movement with my own.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:43 am

His jaw locked tight, and he dropped his forehead to mine. “I have to stop,” he breathed. “Or—”

“Or?” I urged.

His dark chocolate eyes burned with need. I was tempting him on purpose. To see what would happen. It was a bad idea. Anyone could come through that door at any moment.

He gripped my waist. “I promise you, Izzy, that we’ll get exactly what both of us want. Just not now.”

I nodded, and he moved forward slowly, leaving me with one last teasing nibble to my neck. My heartrate shot up a few beats until it came crashing back down once he stepped away. For a second, I felt completely alone. Then, his hand reached out, and he entwined his fingers with my own. “Shall we go tell our parents?”

I beamed up at him. “Yes, we should tell everyone.”

Congratulations on your harem member!

Stay tuned for the next serial installment of The Ravana Legacy starring Izzy Ravana and her search for true mates...

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Power

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Rogue

Paranormal Romance

The Adams' Witch

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:43 am

Bound In Blood

Cursed In Love

Phoenix Series

Flight of the Phoenix

Cozy Mystery

Witchy Librarian Cozy Mystery Series

Wicked Witchcraft

One Wicked Sister

Wicked Cool

Wicked Wiccans

Summoned By Magic

Order of the Akasha, Book One

Chapter One

The point was to watch them, not get sucked in. I failed. Holy fuck, this guy was hot.

I always was a sucker for tattoos and guns. Not the kind of guns that shoot things. Guns, as in thick, muscled arms I could sink my teeth into.

I blew out a breath. For heaven's sake, I needed a cold shower. It might even do these cramps some good. How the hell did I even end up here? Well, technically, I knew how. A long ass bus ride with people who weren't always the cleanest and some men who I could tell didn't have the best of intentions. The more appropriate question was why I ended up here.

I'd been getting cramps—I know, TMI—and a yearning in my stomach for something “other”. Something that wasn't in New Orleans where I'd lived my whole life. The pressure was like a pull, and when you grew up with my grandmother, you tended to want to follow your instincts because that's what she hammered into you day in and day out. Don't trust someone? Don't. They're probably an axe murderer. Feel like you shouldn't go to school today? Don't. Who knows what shitty nonsense could happen? Don't like that guy around the corner? Neither do I, he's a dick.

I smiled to myself remembering Granny. She hated that name, but I called her it, anyway. She was a forever young person stuck in an old woman's body. And, she just so happened to be the local Voodoo Priestess, revered—and feared—by many. Yeah, my childhood was a smash.

The too-loud pop music in the bar where I'd been enjoying my eye candy stopped suddenly. Shoved into the present, I dropped the straw that allowed me to suck down my Amaretto Sour like it was Kool-Aid and turned. Wow. What a dive bar. The absence of Bruno Mars' Uptown Funk and the house lights exposed the thick layer of sticky grime on the bar and the off-brown checkered tile that led to the small stage at the back of the place.

The tall, lanky guy who lived with the Adonis I'd been lusting after since I got to Salem two days ago stood on the cramped stage. He tapped the microphone

tentatively, sending a buzz through the air that made me cringe. “Sorry,” he muttered, while pushing his glasses back up his nose. He stood there awkwardly for a few moments, shifting his weight from foot to foot while I—and everyone else in the bar—watched. He wasn’t used to being the center of attention, that much was evident. My heart went out to him as his face blanched. The blinding white lights all turned on him and he stood there like a surprised animal getting caught taking food.

He was adorable, actually, in a dorky kind of way. All the guys who lived at the apartment I’d been drawn to were good looking in their own way, surprising and confusing me all at the same time. Before I could get sucked back down the rabbit hole of why I was here, he finally cleared his throat and spoke. “Uh, hey.” He waved awkwardly, then put his hand above his eyes to ward off the spotlights. “Just wanted to send a happy birthday out to my friend, Randy. Um, guess I should’ve brought a drink up here with me to toast or something, but uh...”

One of the other guys from the apartment, the blond one who looked like he stepped off a sports magazine cover when he left for practice in the morning, ran a drink up to the front. “Bottom’s up,” he winked.

“Thanks, Gabe.” The lanky one bent over so his lips were almost on the microphone as he raised his borrowed glass in the air. “Happy birthday, Randy.” The microphone buzzed and squeaked as he stepped away.

The blond one—Gabe, apparently—stepped right up after. “Cheers, Mate!” He threw his own drink back, and stepped away from the mic, encouraging the lanky one to do the same with his. He did, his face immediately puckering, and then gave a quick shake of his head as he finally swallowed what was surely some strong, hard liquor.

I leaned against the bar and took a drink of my own. Following them to the bar tonight had been a good idea. I’d just learned two of their names—Gabe and Randy. I also knew that Gabe was apparently British and that it was Randy, Mr. Hot as Fuck’s,

birthday.

I eyed the two as they made their way back over to the bar a few feet from where I stood. The same pull tugged in the pit of my stomach when they were all together. I moaned deep as the feeling became overwhelming. There was definitely something about these four. Was I supposed to know them? Was I supposed to fear them? Nothing seemed off. They were four regular guys. Three of them went to college at Salem State while Randy spent most of his time at the gym and a tattoo parlor.

Frustrated, I pulled the straw from my glass and downed the rest of my drink. I was just about to place it back on the bar when a deep, gruff voice said, “I hope that was in my honor.”

My eyes widened, and I almost sputtered. The guy I’d been lusting after since I got here just spoke to me. Holy bananas. Now that he was six inches away, I got to check him out up close. It was easy to get drawn in. He looked sexy as sin wherever he went. He was either dressed for the gym, showing off his sexy as fuck muscles, or sporting tight ass t-shirts on his way to the tattoo parlor he worked at. Tonight was the same tattoo parlor look, jeans that hugged his hips with a black shirt that looked like it was tailor-made just for him. What I hadn’t noticed from watching him with what was usually a street distance between us, was his dark eyes. They were deep brown, teetering on black. A shiver rocked my spine.

Suppressing my inner freak out, I blinked up at him, doing my best to appear interested. Appear? Who was I kidding? I was interested. “Of course,” I answered. “Randy, is it?”

He nodded in assent before taking his time perusing my body. My insides clenched, a more potent feeling than I’d ever had before as his eyes raked all over me. I hadn’t brought much of anything with me from New Orleans, including clothes, since I didn’t know what I would find here. Tonight, I’d just tied off one of my black shirts

right above my right hip, showing a little midriff. It was about as “bar appropriate” as I got, even when I was home. Coupled with the tight pair of jeans I’d brought with me, I didn’t look half bad in the small ass motel mirror I’d checked my reflection in before making my way here. I’d followed them to the bar and then decided I had to go back to the room and do a little mini wardrobe makeover before heading in after them and seeing what I could find out. It couldn’t help to be as sexy as I could while trying to feel them out. At least, that’s what I’d thought, and it was working too. Randy was actually standing in front of me, his eyes gliding over my skin as if his only thought was what he could do to me.

Chapter Twelve

My voice got stuck in my throat. Maybe I was asking too much of these mates. To win me over in such a short amount of time. We'd had fun at the pond. I'd enjoyed his haka dance, but this morning...maybe that's where it all fell apart. He was so eager to tell me about the tracks, but not the moment they found out. I'd expected more from him. I'd expected him to be a partner like he'd been out at the pond. I wanted him to be able to tell me everything, comfort me with his smile, and face danger with me.

All of that was gone as of this morning.

"I'm sorry, Kai..."

I could barely get the words out. This one hurt. With him, I kind of always thought I'd say yes. My decision surprised me, but again, I knew it was right.

His shoulders deflated. "You are refusing me?"

His face drooped, and my heart reached out to comfort him, but I couldn't be anything more to him. It just wasn't in our future. "Yes. I'm sorry."

His jaw ticked, and he stood slowly. "Maybe we should make travel arrangements for my mother and myself then. I don't know if I can stay..."

My stomach gutted. "If that's what you wish."

He rubbed his forehead and then shook his head. After a while, he finally spoke. “No, I can’t behave like that. Even though I didn’t get my wish, I still can’t leave you all in the state you have here. What kind of warrior would I be if I left you with an unknown enemy knocking on your doorstep?”

“We don’t know that,” I said. We knew next to nothing about the tracks including what they belonged to. “If you don’t wish to be here, I won’t keep you. Like my mother said, it’s entirely up to you. And your mother, of course.”

“No, I’ll stay. I’ll still talk to King Christian about seeing my mother home, but I will remain. I can’t in good conscience leave Ravana Clan like this. I knew when offering myself to you I was taking a chance. Though you don’t return my feelings that doesn’t mean I don’t care. My feelings won’t fall away immediately—if ever.”

His words cut deep. I hadn’t imagined what this might do to the mates who wanted me but not the other way around. In my head, we would both like one another or not like one another. This wasn’t the case here. “I do like you, Kai. I think you’re a great person. Your smile is infectious. Your dance, your training, everything. It’s just...”

I was at a loss for words, but thankfully Kai wasn’t. “I understand, Princess. You cannot make your heart do something it doesn’t want to do.” He smiled for me and looked a little more like the Kai I was used to seeing. “Just know I’m still here for you and I hope you find whatever it is you’re looking for. There seems to be something else brewing behind your eyes. If it’s not me you trust, I hope you use the others to help you and your clan. We, as a species, need to stick together. I realize that more now from being on the mainland. There’s a bigger world than my island. I should thank you for that realization. My clan became bitter after the blood shortage hit us hard, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t help out more. If something is going to happen, all of us need to unite. I won’t let my broken heart get in the way.” He leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, his lips lingering there. “Please excuse me.”

With that, he turned away and walked off. When he opened the door, a triangle of

light shone through on the floor.

I leaned back against the wall and let out a breath. It took me a moment to realize that the thoughts going through my head weren't second-guesses, just a deep regret that I didn't like him the same way he liked me.

But that was okay.

I trusted my heart in this explicitly.