

An Extract from *Invincible*

Chapter 1

They say when you're about to die, you see your entire life flash before your eyes.

They lied.

The only thing Nick Gautier could see flashing was Kyrian Hunter's vampire fangs. That horrifying sight froze him in place on the elegant mahogany staircase at the front of Kyrian's sprawling antebellum mansion.

I'm going to die . . .

Again.

Yeah, since he'd attempted to go to school about twenty-two hours ago and had found out his principal had been eaten by a zombie, everything and its brother had been after him.

Now his friggin boss was a vampire.

It figured. So much for his paycheck, unless the devil could cash it he'd never see a nickle out of it.

Would this day ever end?

Dude, right now, you're the one who's about to end. That thought finally shattered the terrified fog in his head that had held him immobile.

Run, dude, run!

He couldn't go downstairs cause that was where Kyrian stood. The only place to run was upstairs, after his mother who'd already gone into the bedroom Kyrian had loaned them for the night- she was completely oblivious to the fact that they were in mortal danger and that their blood was about to be drained. He spun around to warn her.

"Nick! Wait!"

Wait, my gluteus maximus. Vampire was shy a few quarts of blood if he thought Nick had any intention of not going Caspar on him.

I'm too young, too smart and too good-looking to die. Yeah, and then some. They needed him to improve the gene pool. Not to mention, at fourteen he hadn't even had his first date yet. He'd only just, this night, had his first kiss. He should have recognized that alone as a sign that the apocalypse was coming and that his death was coming.

As he neared the top of the stairs, Kyrian jumped straight up from the floor twenty feet below and flipped over the shiny railing to land gracefully in front of him and cut off his escape. Kyrian's black eyes flashed in the shadows. Dressed all in black and at over six feet in height, Kyrian made a deadly, impressive sight even with his boyish blond curls.

There was no way to get past him.

Crappola . . .

Nick skidded to a halt. What should he do now? His mom was in a bedroom a few feet behind Kyrian. He'd yell for her, but the last thing he wanted was for Kyrian to kill her too. Maybe if he kept quiet, Kyrian would only drain him.

"It's not what you think, Nick."

Yeah, right. "I think you're a bloodsucking demon vampire who's going to kill me, that's what I think."

Before he could so much as blink, Kyrian reached out and grabbed his neck with some kind of Vulcan death grip. He wanted to fight, but he was as helpless as a pup being held by the scruff. With the inhuman strength you'd expect from the undead, Kyrian hauled him past his mother's temporary bedroom and into Kyrian's upstairs office.

Like the rest of the house, the floor to ceiling curtains were drawn shut to protect against the dawning sun- something that should have clued Nick in the first moment he stepped into the house that Kyrian was a ghoul. The dark wood of the desk blended in seamlessly with the dark green walls. Without breaking stride, Kyrian flung him into his black leather chair.

When he started to bolt, Kyrian slammed him back into it. "Stop a minute and listen. I know I'm asking the impossible from you, but for once in your life, shut your mouth and open your ears."

"I'm not the one talking."

Kyrian glared at him. "Don't get smart with me."

"You want me stupid?"

"Nick . . ."

Nick held his hands up. "Fine, just don't eat my mom, okay? She's had a bad enough life without becoming the Bride of Dracula."

"I don't drink blood."

He arched a brow at that. "Yeah, right."

"Yeah, right. I don't. I'm not a vampire."

This from the one with the freaky long canines? "Then what's with your peculiar dental problem, huh? And don't even try to tell me they're fake, Mr. Armani suits and fancy car, cause you ain't the type to have false ones and all that also says you have the money to fix them if you wanted to. Not to mention the fact you don't go out in daylight and how did you ninja flip up the stairs just now if you're not one of the undead?"

"I'm gifted."

"And I'm gone." Nick tried to bolt and again, Kyrian body slammed him into the chair hard enough to get his attention.

"You know about Acheron and you accepted it. Why don't you trust me?"

Acheron Parthenopaeus was a giant immortal... something. But even so, he'd been nothing other than nice to Nick and his mom. And most importantly... "He don't got no fangs."

"Yes, he does. He's just better at hiding his than I am mine. He's also my boss."

Nick would argue he was full of cow manure, but that actually made sense in a weird way. Ash was over eleven thousand years old and had seemed a peculiar friend for Kyrian to have. But if the immortal giant was Kyrian's boss...

That explained everything.

Still, Nick wasn't a fool and he accepted nothing at face value. For all he knew, Kyrian was lying his fangs off. "What line of work are you in?"

"People protection."

"Like saving punk kids getting beat to death by people who're supposed to be their friends?" I.e. me getting shot by Alan and stomped into the ground by Tyree and Mike a couple of weeks ago. That had been how the two of them had met and led to his working part time for Kyrian after school.

Kyrian inclined his head to him. "Exactly."

Nick relaxed a degree as he reminded himself how much he owed Kyrian. But for Kyrian, he'd be dead right now. "So you're not going to attack my mother or suck my blood?"

"Good gods, no. I don't need the indigestion. You've caused me enough of a headache for one night. I don't need anymore."

Nick sat in the chair, staring up at him. If Kyrian had wanted to kill him, he'd had plenty of opportunities. Instead, he'd protected them both and had allowed them to spend the night in his mansion.

"If you want to know the correct term for me, I'm a Dark-Hunter."

Nick digested that term slowly. "Which means what? You hunt darkness?"

"Yes, Nick. That's exactly what I do. There's just not enough of it." Now there was some sarcasm you could cut with a knife.

Nick wasn't amused by it. "So are you going to explain it or not?"

"We're immortal warriors who sold our souls to the goddess Artemis. For her, we fight and protect humanity from whatever stalks the night, trying to prey on them. For the most part that means we track and slay Daimons."

"Which are?"

"To put it in terms you can relate to, they're vampires who live on human souls. Instead of blood, they take your soul into their body and once it's there, it starts to wither and die. We have to kill the Daimon before the soul is completely used up."

"I don't understand. Why take souls?"

Kyrian shrugged. "It's what nourishes them. They have to keep a living soul in them or they die."

That was harsh. For them and especially for the person they killed to get it.

"How do they take souls?" Nick asked.

"No idea. I asked Acheron that question once and he refused to answer. He's good at that."

"So did he teach that to you too?"

Kyrian smiled, not the tight-lipped smiles of the past, this was a full blown one that showed off his fangs. "He did indeed."

“I give you an A+ then.”

Kyrian cocked his head, watching him as if waiting for Nick to run again. “Are we good?”

Nick considered it. He should probably be terrified and bolting for the door, but Kyrian had been there with him, fighting zombies and protecting his friends tonight. He’d opened his house to Nick’s mom.

He seemed okay . . .

You can trust him. For the first time, he knew who that weird deep voice in his head belonged to.

Ambrose- his whacked out uncle who swore he was here to help him. Strange, everyone kept claiming that. But . . .

“Nick?”

They both jumped at the sound of Nick’s mom in the hallway, calling his name.

Kyrian went to the door and opened it. “We’re in here, Mrs. Gautier.”

Stepping into the room, she looked around suspiciously as if she expected to catch them doing something illegal, unethical or unnatural. Tiny, petite and beautiful with bright blue eyes, his mom had always reminded him of an angel, especially when she wasn’t wearing makeup- something he hated on her. Her blond hair was ruffled and she was dressed in a black t-shirt that went all the way to her knees. It looked like Kyrian had loaned it to her to sleep in. At twenty-eight, she was really young to have a kid his age. But that had never mattered. It’d always been the two of them against a hostile world.

“Nick? Is everything okay?”

“It’s all good, Mom.”

She gave Kyrian an arch stare that said she didn’t believe his answer. “You sure, boo?”

“Absolutely. Mr. Hunter was just telling me that I have tomorrow off since I worked so late tonight. Isn’t that right, Mr. Hunter?”

There was an amused gleam in his eyes as he realized Nick had manipulated the situation to his advantage. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“Couldn’t you have told him that outside?”

Kyrian pressed his lips together in an effort not to smile and expose his teeth. "Nick came in here to get online and play. I was just telling him he needed to go on to bed."

Oh the rat . . .

Pulling the parental censorship card? That was just rude. Unconscionable. If Nick wasn't the victim, he'd applaud the quick thinking. But the last thing he needed was for his mom to have yet another reason to ground him.

She leveled an angry glare at him. "Nicky . . ."

Nick held his arm up in surrender. "Mom—"

"Don't you 'Mom' me, boy. I can't believe you'd do this when you know better. Get your butt in bed. Right now. March!"

Rising from his chair, Nick growled low in his throat and cast a warning glare at Kyrian. He'd get him . . .

Eventually.

Kyrian let out an evil closed lipped laugh. "I'll show you to your room."

His mom was having none of that as she blocked the doorway. "He can sleep in my room. With me."

Kyrian released a tired sigh. "I wondered where Nick got his suspicious nature from. You've taught him well."

His mom smoothed a stray piece of blond hair back from her face and tucked it in behind her left ear. "Yeah, well, I've seen the ugly side of people too many times. No offense to you, Mr. Hunter."

"I assure you, I've seen an even uglier side of them than you have. Many times myself. Call me Kyrian, please."

That seemed to embarrass her. She gestured to Nick. "Come on, babe. The sun's already up. You need to get some sleep. You're still getting over that gunshot wound."

What she didn't know was that it was healed courtesy of some powers he didn't want her to know about. If she did, his luck, she'd report him to the authorities and he'd end up in a lab somewhere as an experiment. "Do I have to go to school?"

"Since it starts in less than two hours, no."

“It won’t be open tomorrow anyway,” Kyrian said, drawing their attention back to him. “The police are still investigating it.”

His mom frowned. “How do you know?”

“I talked to one of Nick’s teachers.”

“Which one?” Nick was dying to know who on the faculty to avoid for fear of them ratting him out to his fanged employer.

“Ms. Pantall.”

Great. Just great. She’d never thought much of him anyway. She was one of the lead faculty members who wanted him expelled. But there was nothing he could do about that tonight.

Nick yawned as his exhaustion caught up with him.

His mom tsked. “See how tired you are?”

He hated when his mom asked stupid questions. It took all his restraint not to smart off. But he’d already skated past one restriction tonight. No need to court another one.

So minding his tongue, he followed her back to their room. Like Kyrian’s office, it was huge. Bigger than their entire itty bitty condo he loathed. And it had a king-sized bed so his mom wouldn’t kick him in her sleep. She spun around in bed like a rotisserie chicken and he despised anytime they had to share sleeping space.

But the four poster bed looked like it could easily hold a family of ten in it. The neatest part to him was that the blue and gold comforter matched the wallpaper. Even the gold foil looking stuff which was really cool on the walls. He’d only seen that on TV shows.

His mom turned to him. “How’s your arm doing? You need anymore medicine?”

Nick had to force himself not to react to her question. He’d already forgotten about that again. Crap. He better remember, otherwise everyone would want to know how he healed it so fast.

“It’s okay.”

“Good. Now hit the sheets.”

Nick went to the other side and slid in. The moment he was settled, she pulled him against her and started playing in his short brown hair. He cringed and squirmed, trying to escape her. Unfortunately, she was like

quicksand. Once you were dumb enough to get into its reach, it was over.
“Ma! What are you doing?”

“Can’t I hold you?”

He screwed his face up in distaste at the mere thought of it. “I don’t know why you worry about Mr. Hunter when you’re the one who’s always sexually harassing me, Mom. Gah, can’t I even go to sleep without you groping me?”

She popped him on the butt. Not hard enough to hurt. Just enough to get his attention. “Stop saying that. Showing my baby affection with a hug is not sexual harassment. You know there are a lot of moms out there who have no sense of maternal instinct at all.” Those who threw their kids out of the house and into the gutter because of a single mistake, like keeping a baby they didn’t want her to. His mom didn’t say it, but he knew when she ranted on this topic that it was a tirade against her own parents who’d abandoned her when she was his age. “Be glad you have a mother who loves you.”

He was glad of that. A lot since she was basically the only person on earth who did. But now that he was a full head taller than her it was weird when she tried to cuddle him like he was a baby. He could be almost seven feet tall like Acheron and she’d probably still try to pull him into her lap. “Sorry, Mom. I’m just really tired.”

“I know, precious.” She leaned over, brushed his hair back from his face and kissed his cheek. “Good night. Sleep tight.”

“You, too.”

Without another word, she turned over. Then scooted so that she was touching him with her icy cold feet. He would protest that too, but that might hurt her feelings again.

I can’t wait until I’m grown and have my own place...

I know you hate it now, Nick, but savor it. I promise you, you’ll spend many more years of your life wishing you could see her again than you’ll spend wishing she’d leave you alone.

Nick frowned at the intrusiveness of Ambrose in his head. How is it I hear you?

One day, I’ll teach that power to you. You’ll be able to project your thoughts to anyone just like I can.

Will I be able to read other people’s thoughts like you do too?

Yes, you will.

That was cool. He could definitely get used to knowing what other people were thinking. It sure would make asking a girl out a lot easier if he knew going into it that she thought he was a total loser dork.

When can I learn it?

Ambrose laughed in his head. Patience, boy. You still haven't learned everything about controlling the dead that you should have. Or that you need to. Your buddy caused us to accelerate learning that power. And even though you survived you really didn't learn much other than how to run from things out to kill you. Before something gets a lucky shot in, I think we should take things a little slower. Learn to crawl and then I'll teach you to fly. Literally.

Nick's eyes widened at that last bit. I'll be able to fly? Really?

Kid, you have no idea what powers lie within you. What powers I'm going to teach you. But be warned, you are going to have many enemies come at you. Parthenopaeus being one of them.

Nick frowned. Ash?

Yeah. He's not what he seems and if you have any brains in your head, and I know you do, you'll cut him a wide berth...

Before it's too late.

But he really liked Acheron. Surely someone who was so cool to be with and respectful to someone else's mother couldn't be so bad. Everyone had problems. Because he and his mother had been rudely misjudged by so many, Nick hated doing that to other people. He believed in liking, not necessarily trusting, everyone until they personally gave him a reason not to.

Like shooting me when I decide that I don't want to live a life of crime.

He heard the sound of exasperation from his uncle. Go to sleep, kid. Tomorrow will begin a new life that you can't imagine.

With people trying to kill me?

Yes. And that includes your mother.

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