

Chapter 23

It is late by the time we return to the packhouse, just like Axton predicted. News of a possible strigoi has caused citywide panic. Families requesting to leave the city, and others wanting to hunt it down. But exactly how do you catch a ghost when it could be anyone, people accusing their neighbors, their friends, their rivals? It was utter chaos, and I could tell Axton didn't know how to cope with this added stress.

"I need to shower," Axton mumbles. After helping me get the boys tucked into their crib, I watch him move toward the bathroom, locking himself in, and I sigh.

It makes me wonder how my father is coping with the chaos in our pack. While Axton is showering, I check in with my mother, video-calling her to ensure everything is okay back home.

She took the news of Alisha's parents and Tieriny pretty hard, as expected. "When are you coming home?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, unless you need me back there now?" I tell her, and she shakes her head. "No, it won't change anything. I really thought they left when the others did. And Tieriny..."

"I'm sorry, mom," I tell her, chewing my lip, and I hear Luke call out to her. She looks away from the screen for a second.

"I need to go. I will see you tomorrow night. Give the boys a kiss for me."

"Love you." I hang up the phone just as Axton comes out with his towel around his waist. Tension rolls off him in waves as he wanders into the walk-in closet and returns a few minutes later with some boxer shorts on.

"Couch or bed?" Axton asks me, and my brows furrow.

"The bed, but I forgot your poncho," I tell him, and he half smiles.

“Damn it, we can build a pillow barrier then,” he chuckles, climbing into bed. I yawn before quickly ducking into the bathroom to change, having showered quickly before we left. Coming out, Axton is watching the news, a deep frown on his face.

“One of Osiris’s journalists accused me of being the strigoi,” he laughs, shaking his head, and I look at the news anchor who is reporting knowing exactly whose pack she is a part of. I move toward the bed and tug the blankets back. Climbing into the bed beside him, I take the remote and shut the TV off.

“I expect to wake up with my blood still in my veins,” I tell him, and he chuckles.

“No promises,” he laughs before he tenses when I move, putting my head on his chest and arm across his waist.

“Ah.... Elena? You’re voluntarily touching me?” he asks.

“Shut up. It’s the bond!”

“Sure, it is.” He rolls, flipping me on my side and snuggling into my back as he slides his arm beneath my head.

“I was comfortable.”

“Yeah, I don’t want a repeat of last night. These are my favorite boxers!” He laughs, and I elbow him. Axton grunts, tugging me closer, his warm breath sweeping my neck as he presses closer.

“Stop fighting the bond.” He purrs behind me.

“Stop being an asshole, and I’ll think about it.” I chuckle.

“Deal. But I need to ask a favor first?” Axton says, making me look at him over my shoulder, and he sits up, rolling me onto my back. A line creases between his eyes, and a frown settles on his face before he sighs.

“You don’t want to merge packs or lose your packs,” he says, then glances away.

“You already know that. What do you want?” I ask him, slightly confused about where he is taking this conversation, and he looks back down at me.

“You heard my pack tonight. We are outmatched severely right now. Osiris wanted your father’s pack because it’s the second largest. You have an army behind you if you’d use it. That is why Osiris went after you. He knows the power you hold once

you take over. At the restaurant, he was talking about challenging you for your title, saying if we had control of your pack, we could better prepare the city.”

“But my father has been allowing access?” I ask. Axton shakes his head.

“Kind of. He will only let his men patrol his borders, but he has 300 warriors more than any of the packs in this city, more than me.”

“But your pack is the strongest.”

“Yes, because all my pack members are trained, not just my men. But we are running double and sometimes triple patrols. My pack is tired, and your father won’t help out. Osiris has his own agenda, and the other packs won’t fall in line while Osiris and I are at each other’s throats. They won’t step in until there is a display of sides officially.”

“So, you want to challenge my father, challenge me?” Axton shakes his head.

“No, and I don’t want you to, but—”

“You want me to take my title...”

“I can run your pack until it merges, but they won’t listen to me wholly. They’re loyal to your father.”

“But a change of power won’t make them either, Axton.”

“They will if you claim me.”

“That would make you their Alpha, giving you control over not only your pack but mine,” I growl. Axton sighs.

“They’d still be yours.”

“Yeah, but only on paper.” I shake my head.

“Then you aren’t going to leave much choice but to challenge your father and take your pack, Elena. I don’t want to do that, but right now, we need help. If the human governments get involved, they will tear this city apart and dismantle the packs.” I sigh because it has been happening everywhere. As soon as a city turns into a problem, the government steps in.

“I’m not marking you,” Axton growls at me.

“You’ll have to eventually, anyway. What happens when you go into heat?” I shake my head.

“Not yet. Let me think about how to deal with that when it happens, but I…”

“Elena, we aren’t ready to challenge him yet. We’ve barely trained,” Lexa worries. My plan was originally to force him to submit, but I haven’t got enough evidence against him yet to make him do that.

“We have no choice,” I tell her, and her mind instantly goes back to the night he nearly killed us, then the night we went to help mom and Luke.

“I challenge him and temporarily hand the pack over to you,” I tell him, yet my mind is plagued with what if I lose?

“You won’t.” Axton suddenly says, picking up on my thoughts.

“But if I do, I lose everything all over again,” I whisper.

“You won’t,” he says positively, yet I felt sick just at the thought.

“Besides, even if you did somehow lose, he won’t beat the six-foot monster coming up behind you.” Axton growls, his eyes flickering as Khan presses forward.

“Challenge him; worst-case scenario, I take your pack back for you. But I won’t have to. You’ll kick his dusty old ass.” Khan assures me, making me chuckle before he gives Axton back control.

“Set the challenge for your title; I’ll be right behind you. I know you don’t trust me, but you can trust I will be there to back you up if you need it.”

I chew my lip when another thought occurs to me. “If I take my pack back, what is stopping Osiris from challenging me once it’s official?”

Axton smiles, leaning down and brushing his lips against mine gently. “He won’t. He challenges my mate, he challenges me. It would be suicide, and he knows it. Your father he’ll challenge, your father is old. Osiris knows he can beat him, but you?” Axton chuckles. “He would want to have his funeral arrangements prepaid and his eulogy ready if he comes after my mate,” Axton growls before kissing me.

His lips move hesitantly against mine at first, gently like he fears I’ll shove him away, but when I kiss him back, he growls, delving his tongue between my lips. Sparks rush

everywhere, and my stomach clenches as heat invades me when I pull away, feeling him move, pressing his body between my legs.

“What’s wrong?” he groans.

“Are you forgetting something?” He looks at me questionably.

“Poncho!” I hiss at him. He looks at me funny, then his eyes widen slightly, and he laughs.

“No, I haven’t forgotten, but your mind went to the gutter quickly. I was only kissing you.” He snickers, and my face heats.

Axton presses his forehead against mine. “Although blood never fazed me.” He chuckles, rocking his hips against me. His erection presses against me, and I growl at him, shoving him off.

“Fine, but come here and let me hug your butt!” He purrs, tugging me back against him.