

ONE | CRUISE AND PERSISTENCE

Henry

"Sunower, you can't be so aggressive in training, especially not with the Jr. warriors; they're just children," I told my ancé, Aires, and mother of my two young children. She'd come to our pack at the request of our Alpha to hunt down a notorious vampire and his coven, but the moment I set my eyes on her, I knew she was the one the goddess had made just for me. Aires became my queen and has been every single day since.

"Aye! He's not a child; he's seventeen and a d**kl If he didn't want to deal with me, he wouldn't have disrespected me. And as soon as he moves up, I'm taking him into the circle and kicking his ass; for real this time."

We'd been training heavily, twice a day, every day, the last two weeks. It was something I always liked to do annually to reassess the warrior's strengths and weaknesses, which in turn were the pack's strengths and weaknesses. As the head trainer for the Blue Moon pack, it was my job to make sure we were always healthy and ready to defend our Alpha and Luna.

As a vampire and werebear hybrid, my sweet Sunower was a phenomenal ghter and stronger than almost any man on our eld. She could maneuver in ways I'd never seen done before, and she lived for combat. Every morning she was right there by my side, trading blows, correcting forms, and offering our warriors guidance. She was my right hand and my entire life.

"Why don't you go get a drink and rest? The rings are starting to appear," I cautiously warned.

"I'm ne; I don't need a drink yet," Aires deantly replied.

"You're not ne; we both know it. You've never gone into bloodlust before, and I'd like to keep it that way. If you don't want to go back to the cottage, I have your cup down the hill with the rest of my stuff. Go get it and drink," I demanded.

At any given time, Aires knew that I would do absolutely everything in my power to make her smile. She never had to ask for anything from me; I always knew what she needed and wanted, even before she did, and I spoiled her every opportunity I got. It was only when she was pregnant or tired that I would put my foot down.

Aires was a rare and beautiful hybrid, but her vampire genes were dominant. And that could become dangerous if we weren't careful. If ever she exhausted herself, we would know in her usually jet black eyes turning a deep and bloody red. Blood-red eyes meant bloodlust, and that meant I'd have to make a choice I never wanted to make.

I took a vow to protect my pack until my nal breath, and if ever we had a blood-thirsty vampire on the loose, I'd have to do everything in my power to neutralize the threat, even if that threat was my mate. And that would be the very last thing I would do for my pack, because as Aires would take her nal breath, so would I. I couldn't live if I ever lost her, and I never wanted to try.

"Mi Amor, you don't know--"

"I do know. Down the hill, and take a fteen-minute break while you're there," I cut in.

"Down the hill? You did that on purpose, didn't you? You always bring my cup with you; you've never left it."

"You tend to get a little more irritable when Efrain is training with your group. Let's just say I was prepared."

Aires turned and walked away, cursing me and everyone else in her thick Barcelona accent that had become like the sweetest song to me.

"What's got gorgeous so red up today?" Kade, our pack Beta, walked over to me and asked. He was married and had two children of his own, so no one thought anything of his pet names for Aires. Their friendship had always been irtly but never inappropriate and was second nature to us all.

"It's Tuesday. That's all Air needs to get her red up; you should know that by now," Tyson replied. He was a full-blooded werebear and Aires' oldest friend. It was actually him who brought her to our pack, and besides me, no one knew her better.

"Efrain still has that mouth on him. He's not a fan of vampires, and we all know that whenever anyone brings up Aires' vamp heritage as a negative, she sees red, literally. She almost killed the kid with a bo staff a little while ago," I explained to the group.

"Do I need to speak to him? Aires outranks Efrain, so any disrespect is unacceptable and won't be tolerated," our Alpha Xander Black asked.

"No, Alpha. If you don't mind, I'd like to this. Rank aside, Aires is my mate and mother of my children; that alone is enough for me to demand that she is respected. I'll let everyone else go for the day; Efrain and I have a bit of extra training to do."

"Alright. I'll trust your judgment and let you handle this how you see t. It was a good training today; I don't think I'll be able to lift my arms above my head tomorrow."

"Thank you, Alpha; I do my best."

After we called the session to an end, I grabbed Efrain as he was attempting to talk one of our female Jr. warriors into going on a date with him.

"I'd hold off on accepting that date, Star. He might not live to see tomorrow morning," I said as I walked up to the two of them.

"Uhm, okay, Mr. Marshal. I'll just go now; see you tomorrow."

Star quickly turned and ran off, leaving poor Efrain annoyed and probably more than a little sexually frustrated.

"Sir! Why did you do that? She was about to say yes, I know she was."

"You like Star?" I asked.

"Of course I do; she's beautiful."

"Do you love her?"

"No. I don't love any woman, but I have needs, and I've heard things about her," he replied with a smirk.

"Well, I love a woman, and you seem to have a problem respecting her and our pack's hierarchy. What do you think I should do about that?"

"Aires? I don't have to respect her; she's a lthy bloodsucker; we should stake h--"

Before the nal words could escape his lips, I found my hand clamped around Efrain's neck and squeezed as hard as I could. When he turned red, I pressed harder. When he turned purple, I squeezed just a little tighter. It wasn't until the blood vessels in his eyes began to burst that I loosened my grip just enough for him to sneak a breath.

"That woman is my mate and will soon be my wife. Whether you like it or not, you will respect her, or I will snap your neck right where you stand. You understand rank. You know what mine is, and you also know that you have none. That puts Aires and me above you on the totem pole. So, if you even ever think of staking her again, it will be the last thought ever to cross your mind. Am I totally clear?" I asked.

I was still holding Efrain's throat too tight for him to speak, so he just nodded his head, terror lling his eyes. I gave his neck a nal squeeze then pushed him backward and on his ass a few feet away. When he tried to stand and leave, I quickly stopped him.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Home, sir," he gasped.

"Did I say we were done here?"

"You let everyone go," Efrain replied, confused.

"Everyone but you. Put this on," I tossed a two hundred and fly-pound sandbag at his feet, which had been specially made to be worn on the back for resistance training.

"But...I can only handle one hundred, one twenty-ve max," he replied.

"Did I ask you that? No, I didn't; I said put the bag on. Now."

Efrain could see in my eyes that I was not joking, and I was not going to take no for an answer, so with all the strength he could muster, he dragged the sandbag up and slung it on his back. I could see his knees wobbling from the extra weight and didn't even know if he would be able to keep on his feet. I guess we would see.

"Five hundred burpees. Then ve hundred push-ups. If you're still alive, we'll nish off with a twenty-mile run; then you can go home. And if you say anything other than "Yes, sir" or "Yes, Mr. Marshal," we will double it all. I'll stay out here all night if I have to, but you are going to learn some respect, and you're going to learn it the hard way."

Surprisingly, he didn't complain. Efrain wiped the sweat that was already forming on his face, took a deep breath, then began. As I expected, he struggled, and at times he could barely push himself up off the ground, but I'd meant every word I'd said, and neither of us was going home until this kid had learned his lesson or died in the process.

When I nally made it home, it was 8:30, and both the children had long ago been in bed. Aires was sitting at the kitchen table looking through wedding magazines, and when she looked up at me, I was happy to see no red in her eyes.

"Are you hungry, Mi Amor?"

"I'm starving, but don't get up. I can get it. Have you found anything you like yet?" I asked as I walked by and kissed the top of her head.

"Your plate is in the oven; it should still be hot. And si, I've got three or four dresses that I think would be perfect. The ladies and I will go this weekend to try some on."

I opened the oven and saw that she'd made my favorite pot roast with vegetables and mashed potatoes. My stomach rumbled when I saw the tender pearl onions and carrots, and I couldn't wait to shovel all of the food into my mouth.

"Is he dead?" Aries asked when I sat down beside her. She tucked the pictures of the dresses away but made no effort to hide anything else she was thinking of for the wedding.

"Is who dead, Sunower?"

"Efrain! I know you sent me away so you could deal with him on your own. So, is he dead?"

"No, baby, he's not. He probably wishes he was, though," I replied. I took my rst bite of tender beef, then immediately leaned over and kissed Aires on the lips. I loved this woman, especially when she made me pot roast.

"Is it that good? Isaiah and Isabella inhaled their dinner like they hadn't eaten in years. What is with you guys and pot roast?" she laughed.

"I've always loved it. My mom would make it every Sunday without fail; it's in my DNA, I guess."

"So, digame, what did you do?"

"We did a sandbag workout, that's all."

"How heavy?"

"Two-fly."

"How many reps?"

"Five-hundred," I admitted.

"Amor! Five-hundred? With a two hundred and fly-pound sandbag? And you told me I couldn't be so aggressive? You probably destroyed that little fucker tonight!"

"I did. He literally crawled home, and I think he was even throwing up blood. But the Alpha gave me permission to handle Efrain how I thought was best; this was better than me ripping his throat out or you draining him. He'll never threaten to stake you again; I know that much."

"Stake me? He said that?"

"He mentioned it before I almost crushed his windpipe. Let's let it go, beautiful. I don't want that negativity in our home. Not when we have something as perfect as all of this happening," I said, motioning to all the wedding paraphernalia strewn across the table.

"I'm kicking his balls up into his chest the second he turns eighteen. I swear to you."

"I know you will, sweetness. And he'll deserve it."