



To Carve A Wolf

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: This isn't a love story. It's a hunt.

Lexa: I carved runes into my spine to silence the wolf.

I bled under moonlight and bit down on screams.

I didn't run to be saved.

I ran to never be found.

And if an Alpha dares put his hands on me,

I'll rip out his throat before I let him touch me.

Andros: She smelled wrong. Wild. Buried.

Like something ancient trying to stay forgotten.

She looked at me like a threat.

Fought me like she'd rather die than be mine.

I should've left her alone.

But gods help me... I want her.

And I'll unravel every secret she bleeds before I let her go.

Total Pages (Source): 90

CHAPTER 1

Lexa

The burning started in the middle of the night.

Not the kind of burn that fades with time or eases under breath. No—this was fire beneath the skin, hot brands etched in bone, screaming their defiance through the dark inked runes carved into my back. I woke with my jaw clenched tight, a muffled gasp behind my teeth. The pain was familiar, and that made it worse. I knew what came next. The full moon hung heavy beyond the wooden slats of the shuttered window, pouring its silver gaze through the cracks like it knew my secrets.

The boy beside me stirred, curling tighter beneath the patched wool blanket we shared. Tiny, warm breaths brushed against my arm. I didn't dare move fast. Slow, deliberate, silent—the way I'd learned to move after years in hiding. My feet touched the dirt floor without a sound, and I wrapped the threadbare shawl tighter around my shoulders before rising.

The cottage was barely more than a shack, leaning like an old drunk into the northern wind. Every floorboard groaned with memory, every nail rusted in place by sea air. The hearth was long cold, only ash and ghost heat left from the evening's fire. Our walls were more patch than plank, stuffed with reeds and old cloth to keep the worst of the drafts out. A single iron pot hung over the dead fire, and beside it sat the bundle of herbs I kept for nights like this. Nights when the magic waned, and my body remembered what it was.

I lit the oil lamp with trembling hands, shielding the flicker of flame from the window. The light painted the room in gold and shadow. It caught the hollow of my cheeks, the dark circles under my eyes, the white scars peeking above the edge of my torn chemise. Each rune carved into me had cost more than just coin.

Four more silver pieces. That's all I needed. Four more to give to the witch in the marsh so she could press her cold hands to my back and write the dark language again, tie my instincts in chains, cage the wolf forever. I would not shift. I would not feel the pull of the pack or the sting of heat.

I hated wolves. I hated what they made of us.

I sat at the wobbly table, the tin cup clutched in both hands as if its warmth could root me. I dared not lie down again. If I shifted in bed, even the slightest twitch might wake him. He deserved peace. Dain was only four, and though not born of my body, he was mine now in all the ways that mattered. His real mother had died two winters ago, taken by a fever that swept through the village like fire through dry brush. I had watched her waste away, helpless to stop it.

Pity. That's what started it. A tiny, frostbitten thing left in a world too cruel for the soft-hearted. Any other wolf would have marked him, claimed him as theirs. But I was not like them. I never would be. I didn't want to be.

He called me Lexi.

I stared into the dark liquid, letting the bitter taste of frost-leaf and sorrow settle on my tongue. I whispered a prayer to gods I didn't believe in anymore, begging them to let the runes hold, to keep me tethered one more night. Just until morning.

Somehow, they listened. When the first blush of sunlight crept through the cracks in the wall, the burn dulled to a low ache. I exhaled slowly. My spine still throbbed, but

the worst had passed.

A rustle behind me made me turn. Dain sat up, rubbing his eyes with tiny fists, his brown curls sticking up in all directions. He blinked at me, then smiled, gap-toothed and warm.

“Lexi,” he mumbled sleepily.

I smiled, something small and secret tugging at my chest. “Morning, cub.”

He padded over barefoot, and I frowned. He’d outgrown his shoes again. Just last week, I’d found a second-hand pair in the market—a little too big, but lined with fur and good against the cold. I could have gone to the witch then, but his feet were more important.

Always him first.

I ruffled his hair, then turned back to the hearth. The tea had long gone cold, but it didn’t matter. I reached for the oats and the last of the dried berries, scraping together something that would pass for breakfast. We ate together in silence at first, chewing slowly, still waking. Then he started chatting, his voice bright and eager, telling me about a dream he had where he caught a fish as long as his arm and rode it like a pony.

I laughed, quiet but real.

“Let’s go check the nets,” I said, brushing crumbs from his cheek. “With luck, your dream came true.”

The moment I opened the door, the sharp brine of the sea rolled over me. I gagged, just a little, then buried it behind my scarf. The scent of fish, rotting wood, salt, and

seaweed clogged the air. I hated it. Most wolves did. It masked our scent, twisted it into something foul and human. That was precisely why I had chosen this place.

The village slouched along the coast like a dying beast, its spine made of twisted alleys and sagging roofs. Shacks and huts leaned on each other for balance, their wood dark with age and damp. Nets hung from every porch, and broken crab pots littered the muddy paths. Children chased gulls barefoot, and smoke rose from chimneys like thin prayers.

People watched us as we passed, some with wary eyes, others with the dull indifference of the overworked. They knew me as Lexa—the reclusive woman who took in a dead woman's child and spoke little. That was fine. Mystery was safer than familiarity. Safer for everyone.

The land here belonged to the Crescent Moon pack. Even the humans knew that. The fishermen paid their tithes in blood and silence, hoping the wolves would take what they needed and leave the rest. So far, they had.

This village was never meant to be a home.

It was meant to be the end of the road.

I came here many years ago, half-starved, half-feral, with nothing but the clothes on my back and a pouch of stolen coin I'd nearly died earning. Before that, I crossed hundreds of miles of wilderness and war-torn roads, ducking patrols, sneaking past rogue dens, keeping my head down and my scent masked beneath fire ash and saltwater.

I still remember the moment I left home. I was fifteen. My sisters were already spoken for, branded with heat collars and caged smiles, taught to kneel pretty and speak softly. The elders called it training. The alphas called it preparation. I called it

death.

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It was suffocating. That pack, that house, that future. The weight of what I was supposed to become pressed down on me every time I breathed. My wolf scratched at my insides, not from the call of heat—but the desperate need to run.

So I did.

I waited until the night of the blood moon, when the alphas were deep in ritual and the air stank of smoke and sweat. I stole a horse. I didn't even take food. Just a waterskin and a knife. I rode until the beast collapsed beneath me—then I walked.

When I finally reached the southern port, filthy and half-starved, I thought I was safe. But the second I let my guard down, humans robbed me blind. Everything I owned—gone in minutes. No one helped. No one even looked twice.

I worked at the docks. In the freezing rain, under blistering sun. I hauled crates twice my size, tied ropes until my palms bled raw. Ate scraps. Slept in shadows. Spoke to no one. I laboured for a year before I had enough coin to buy passage north.

When the ship docked on this frozen edge of the world, I stepped onto the shore with nothing but calloused hands and a name I never used.

The village reeked of fish, smoke, and human rot—so badly even passing wolves wouldn't catch my scent. Perfect.

I told the locals I was a widow. Wore black. Kept my head down. They didn't ask questions. And when I finally found the witch, she didn't ask either. Just took my coin, carved my silence into my flesh, and told me what I'd pay to keep my freedom.

It was her who told me about the boy.

Not fate. Not mercy. A name whispered from cracked lips as payment for pain. A child left behind after a fever, screaming in an empty house no one dared enter. I found him curled beside his mother's body, covered in dirt and grief.

I picked him up off the floor. Held him close and told him I wasn't going to leave. I didn't want to belong anywhere again. Belonging meant chains—meant pain. But somehow... his small hands clutching my clothes, his wide eyes trusting me not to vanish, he made me stay.

Fortunately, the Crescent Moon pack never sniffed me out. I'd seen their shadows slinking through the mist, sensed their predatory presence brushing my senses in the dead of night. But the witch's runes held. Her dark magic came at a brutal price, but it worked.

As we made our way toward the docks, Dain skipped ahead, oblivious and cheerful. I breathed carefully through my mouth, swallowing back bile. The reek of fish, salt, and rot burned my throat and stung my eyes—but it kept me hidden.

And for now, that was all I needed.

CHAPTER 2

Lexa

I screamed until my throat went raw.

The witch didn't flinch. Her hands, steady as stone, moved with the slow, precise rhythm of a ritual practised a thousand times. Her blade—a thin sliver of iron etched with runes older than our gods—bit into my back, again and again, dragging fire

through my flesh.

“Keep still,” she muttered, her voice like gravel soaked in honey. “You want this done or not?”

I couldn’t answer. My mouth was open, soundless now, my fingers twisted into the fraying edge of the table beneath me. The wood was stained black from years of blood and magic. The scent of both filled the air, thick and metallic, laced with the sharp burn of herbs I couldn’t name.

The witch’s hut was half-sunken into the marsh, its roof swallowed by creeping moss and the bones of birds strung from every beam. A hundred glass jars lined her shelves, some filled with liquid and shadow, others with things that blinked or twitched when I looked too closely. Candles burned low, their flames guttering blue.

She was a tall woman, lean as a blade, with golden hair streaked in gray and cold, ocean-blue eyes that saw too much. Her name wasn’t one she gave lightly. I never asked it. She preferred it that way.

“You didn’t bring full payment,” she reminded me, voice flat, impassive. “So I do half the work. Enough to hold until next moon, if you’re careful.”

The blade bit into my back, sharp and merciless. I bit down on a sob, grinding my teeth so hard my jaw ached. The pain wasn’t new, but it never dulled. Not really. She traced the old scars with practised precision, cutting along familiar paths as if refreshing a map drawn in blood.

I’d been coming to her for years. Since the first winter after I arrived on the coast. Word of her had passed in whispers through the human markets—the witch who worked with wolves, if the price was high and the secrets dark. I found her in the marshlands, beyond the last bend of the river, where the fog never lifted and the trees

leaned too close.

Each time I came, she jacked up the price. A few coins more. A trade for herbs I had to risk stealing. A lock of hair. Blood. One year, she took my only coat and left me walking home in sleet with just rags and a fever. She always reminded me, like it was a curse etched into the air between us—dark magic has its cost.

My blood was dark on the stone floor, thick and sluggish, soaking into the circle of rune-salt she'd poured beneath me. It hissed where it touched, steam rising, the magic greedy as ever.

“You’re lucky I like you, wolf girl,” she said casually, rinsing the blade in something that steamed and stank of metal and rot. “Otherwise I’d let the beast take you. Let it rip out of you. Just to see what’s left.”

I wasn’t lucky. I was desperate. And desperation, like pain, was something I knew far too well. It lived in my bones, in the hollow space behind my ribs where others kept faith and fire. I didn’t believe in salvation. I believed in survival.

The blade withdrew.

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The pain didn't. It lingered, hot and raw, like embers pressed into open flesh. My limbs shook. Sweat clung to my face, pooling at my jaw. My breath came fast and shallow. I didn't cry. Not now. The sob had already been swallowed. I lay there, panting, muscles twitching from the effort of holding still.

I couldn't move yet. I didn't even try. She leaned against her cluttered table and watched me, arms crossed, eyes gleaming in the candlelight.

"You know without the full set, an alpha could scent you if they got close."

I forced my head to the side, meeting her gaze with a grimace. "I know how to stay away from alphas. I've done it my whole life."

The witch tilted her head. "But why? Why go against your nature so hard? Why bleed for it, month after month, year after year?"

I didn't answer at first. The words came slow, cracked around the edges.

"Because I saw what it means to be what I am. I saw what they did to my sisters. How they were groomed, caged, broken down into pretty little things meant to please the monsters who claimed them. I won't live on my knees."

She studied me a long moment, then shrugged and turned back to her workbench.

"You keep telling yourself that."

But she didn't say I was wrong. She handed me a small vial. The liquid inside

shimmered, opalescent and cold.

“Drink this. For the pain. It won’t take all of it, but enough to walk.”

I drank. It tasted like copper and nettles.

“You know the cost of this magic,” she added softly, almost to herself. “It takes. Always takes. From the blood, from the bone. It’ll catch up to you one day.”

I nodded. I knew. I just didn’t care. The pain dulled slightly, enough for me to sit up, to pull on my cloak and limp to the door. Each step on the road back to the village was agony, like walking with fire stitched into my spine. But I kept moving. I had to.

I stopped at Jena’s house, a squat little home near the town centre. Baskets and wicker hampers lined her porch in neat stacks. She sold them in the market for just enough to feed her three children.

Jena answered the door with flour on her hands and a baby on her hip.

“Back already? Feeling better?”

I nodded, offering a tight smile. “Much. Just a stomach ache.”

Jena nodded in sympathy. “That woman’s got hands like magic. Scary eyes though.”

“Don’t I know it.”

She handed Dain over with a fond pat to his curls. “He was good. Helped me sort the reeds. Ate half the bread, too.”

“He’s growing,” I said, and Dain threw his arms around my waist with a laugh.

Jena and I spoke a bit more, casual and light, as if I wasn't bleeding beneath my cloak. Then I took Dean's hand and we headed home, one slow, painful step at a time.

The door creaked shut behind us, muffling the sounds of the village. The wind clawed at the wood, but inside, it was still—dim and familiar. Home.

I hung my cloak on the bent nail by the door and sank slowly onto the stool by the hearth, every movement sending a fresh ripple of fire down my back. Dain dropped to the floor and started rummaging through the basket of river stones and driftwood I kept for him, humming under his breath. My ribs ached just watching him bounce and move so easily.

He looked up suddenly, serious. "Did the lady make you better?"

I nodded, forcing a small smile. "She helped."

"She has scary eyes," he said, wrinkling his nose. "Like owls."

I chuckled, low and tired. "Yes. But she sees things others don't. That's her gift."

He brought over a rock, oddly smooth and round, and pressed it into my palm. "This one's lucky. I kept it for you."

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The stone was warm from his small hands, and I curled my fingers around it. “Thank you, cub.”

Dain clambered into my lap carefully, trying not to touch my back, and rested his head against my shoulder. “When I get big, I’ll protect you. You won’t have to go to her anymore.”

The breath hitched in my throat. I held him tighter, my hand still wrapped around the lucky stone.

“Maybe by then I won’t need her.”

He looked up at me with that pure, unfiltered devotion only children have. “You’re the strongest person in the world.”

No, I wanted to tell him. I was just the one who never stopped running.

But I didn’t say it. I just leaned my cheek against his and closed my eyes, letting the moment wrap around us like the last warmth before the storm.

Dain stirred against my chest, then looked up, rubbing his eyes. “Lexi, I’m hungry.”

Of course he was. It was well past sundown, and I hadn’t made anything yet. I pressed a kiss to his curls and whispered, “Alright, let’s see what we have.”

Every step to the shelf hurt. My limbs felt like soaked wood, heavy and splintered. Still, I moved. For him, I always would. I found the last heel of bread, a bit of

smoked fish, and a wrinkled apple. Not much, but enough for a child.

He sat at the table, swinging his legs, and smiled wide when I set the food down. “A feast!”

I ruffled his hair and sat across from him, hands wrapped around an empty cup. I didn’t reach for a bite.

He paused mid-chew, frowning. “Why aren’t you eating?”

“I’m not hungry,” I said with a soft smile.

He stared at me, lips pressed together, but didn’t push. I was grateful for that. The truth was, there wasn’t enough for both of us, and he needed it more than I did.

Later, after he yawned three times in a row and blinked slow, sleepy blinks, I carried him to the bed. He curled into the blanket like a pup into fur.

“Lexi,” he mumbled. “Can you tell me a story?”

“Which one?”

“The one with the white fox.”

I smiled and pulled the blanket up under his chin.

“Once, in the heart of a silver forest, there lived a white fox. Her fur was so bright, she glowed under moonlight. She was clever and silent, and she never let herself be seen by humans. Until one winter, a hunter came to the forest. He didn’t hunt for food or sport, but because he was lonely. Every day he walked the woods, talking to the trees and humming songs he didn’t know he remembered. The fox watched him from

the shadows. She listened to his songs. And little by little, she began to follow him.”

Dain’s breathing slowed, soft and deep.

“She fell in love with the hunter,” I whispered, brushing hair from his forehead, “but she knew if she showed him her trueself, he might fear her, or worse, try to claim her. So she stayed hidden, content just to be near. One day, the hunter stopped walking. He sat on a fallen log and whispered into the woods, ‘I know you’re there. I don’t want to catch you. I just want to talk.’”

My voice caught, but I swallowed and went on.

“The fox stepped out of the shadows. And instead of running, the hunter smiled. He sat and talked with her, and though she never spoke back, she stayed until dawn. Every night after that, they met under the moon. No lies. No traps. Just silence and company.”

Dain was asleep, a hand curled beneath his cheek.

I watched him for a long moment, then leaned in and whispered, “Even wild things deserve love.”

CHAPTER 3

Andros

The scent was unbearable.

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Cloying sweetness, heavy and ripe, coated the air like too much perfume. My wolf growled low in my chest, restless, irritated. I sat up, the silk sheets sliding from my bare skin, and ran a hand through my hair, tugging slightly at the roots. My head throbbed, not from the alcohol—I could handle that—but from the scent. Her scent.

Tanya.

She lay sprawled beside me, tangled in the dark crimson sheets, one perfect leg thrown over the edge of the mattress. Mid-twenties, maybe younger. Glossy brown hair fanned out across the pillow like spilled wine. Full lips, flushed from use. Dark eyes still closed in sleep. She was beautiful. Of course she was. One of the Blood Night pack's prized Omegas. Trained to please, bred to obey. But now that the night was over, she made my skin crawl.

The room was wide, high-ceilinged, cold. Stone walls draped in tapestries, velvet too old to be rich anymore. The hearth burned low, casting a dim orange light across the marble floor. My armour hung on the chair, forgotten in last night's haze, and the scent of wine, sweat, and sex clung to every surface.

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, exhaling sharply. I should have sent her away last night.

But I had been drunk, distracted, riding the high of blood and power. She had been eager, pliant, everything I needed in the moment. But now?

Now I needed her gone. Her scent was in my sheets, on my skin, clawing at my lungs like a sickness. I stood, naked and unbothered by it, and walked to the basin. Cold

water splashed over my face, a shock that cleared my head. In the mirror, I looked like myself again. Sharp. Controlled. Alpha.

Behind me, she stirred.

“Andros?”

I didn’t answer. Let her feel the silence. Let her understand what she was: temporary.

She sat up, the sheet slipping down to reveal the curve of her shoulder. “Do you want me to stay?”

“No.” I turned, slow and deliberate.

Her face fell, just slightly. She nodded and began to gather her things.

Good. Let her leave quietly. Let the scent fade. I needed air. And distance.

As I pulled the last strap tight, the scent of leather and steel wrapped around me like a second skin—familiar, grounding. But it was the memory of last night that truly stirred my blood.

Victory.

Not the hollow kind, not the tame declarations of banners raised or treaties signed. No. This was conquest, raw and absolute. The Crescent Moon alpha—Arlen—had finally broken beneath my heel. For too long, that self-righteous mongrel paraded himself like some noble beast, cloaking weakness in tradition, hiding behind treaties and ceremony. But his fortress burned last night. His men—his legacy—were reduced to mangled corpses and black ash.

We stormed his mountain stronghold like a divine plague. My warriors howled through his halls, red with bloodlust, claw and blade ripping flesh from bone. The stone walls still wept with the blood of his pack, and the fire hadn't stopped smouldering. I made him watch. Made him listen as I tore his legacy apart.

And now Arlen rots in chains in the deepest pit of my dungeon. Broken. Beaten. Silent.

His land is mine. His pack will kneel or die. But it wasn't enough. He had four sons. Three of them I ended myself.

The first—oh, the arrogant little bastard—thought honour was a weapon. He challenged me in the great hall, sword drawn, chin raised like some storybook hero. I carved him open mid-sentence, spilled his guts across the marble while his own men watched. They didn't cheer. They didn't move. They knew what I was.

The second lunged at my Beta in the chaos of the siege. Brave, I'll grant him that. But bravery means nothing without power. I caught him by the throat and crushed his windpipe with one hand. He gurgled like a hog before he died, eyes wide, the scent of his fear sour in the air.

The third ran. Coward.

He tried to vanish into the forest, thinking shadows would save him. But I am the shadow that stalks the trees. I hunted him myself—felt his heartbeat from a mile away. I waited until he thought he was safe, then took his head beneath the moon, bathed in silver light and fresh blood. I left his body for the crows and brought his severed head back as a gift.

But the fourth...

The fourth slipped through the cracks. Too young. Too clever. Too lucky. No name on the wind. No scent on the air. A ghost.

Arlen refuses to speak of him. But I will tear the truth from his throat if I must. Bone by bone, I will break what remains of him until he begs to tell me.

This isn't about territory anymore. This is about dominion. Legacy. Eradication. There will be no one left to challenge my claim. No son to avenge a fallen father. No name spoken in rebellion.

I will find him.

And when I do, I will make his end so absolute the gods themselves will avert their eyes.

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The snow had painted the world white overnight.

From the high glass windows of the great hall, I could see it blanketing the stone courtyard below, fresh and untouched, save for the bloodied prints left by the guards returning from patrol. It glittered in the soft morning sun like crushed bone under crystal. The mountains beyond stood tall and merciless, their peaks slicing into the sky.

Inside, the warmth of the hearths and the scent of roasted meat chased away the cold. Flames danced in the twin fireplaces that flanked the room, licking at carved stone wolves with ruby eyes. The long table was set for two, draped in dark cloth, silver goblets already filled with warmed spiced wine. Platters of smoked venison, fried duck eggs, thick slabs of bread soaked in butter, and baked apples filled the air with the rich perfume of power and excess.

My Beta arrived late, as usual. Garrick was a brute of a man—broad, scarred, and always smiling like he knew something no one else did. He dropped into the seat across from me without ceremony, snatched a drumstick from the tray, and bit in before offering a word.

“Well,” he said through a mouthful, “you look like shit.”

I poured my wine, slow and unbothered. “You reek like it. Balance.”

Garrick chuckled, licking grease from his fingers. “Heard you kicked Tanya out before sunrise.”

I didn't answer. Just raised a brow and took a long sip.

He smirked. "Was she too much for you, old wolf?"

I leaned back in my chair, stretching my legs, letting the fire warm the ache still lingering in my bones. "She was... fine. Until she wouldn't leave."

"She's still scenting your rooms. Poor girl probably thought she'd wake up mated."

I grunted.

Garrick leaned in, dropping his voice with mock seriousness. "You know... she wouldn't be a bad choice. Omega like that—trained, loyal, sweet as summer fruit. She'd give you strong pups."

My jaw tightened.

"I need heirs," I admitted. "But I need more land first. My name should be carved into stone from the Frostfang coast to the burning gates of the East. A child now would slow me."

He raised his goblet. "And yet... you're not getting younger."

I gave him a sharp look, but he didn't flinch. He never did.

"I have time," I said flatly.

"You do," he agreed, nodding. "But not forever. You want a legacy, Andros? You'll need blood to carry it."

My gaze drifted back to the snow-covered world beyond the window. I would build

an empire soaked in blood and crowned in ice. There would be time for heirs once the world knew my name in fear. For now, I only needed war.

The cold bit deeper as we descended into the belly of the castle. Stone gave way to older stone, slick with damp and shadow. The torches flickered violently, their light dancing over iron rings, dried blood, and chains that had never known rest. The dungeon was old, built by the first alphas of Blood Night—long before I took the title. But it had always served the same purpose.

Fear.

The air reeked of it. Faintly copper, mixed with rot and piss. Garrick walked beside me, silent now, his earlier humour gone. He knew what I was like down here. Everyone did.

The guards stepped aside as we entered the last chamber. The iron door groaned open, and there he was—Arlen, or what remained of him. The former alpha of Crescent Moon slumped in chains, his body barely holding itself upright. Strips of skin hung from his back like shredded cloth, and one of his eyes had swollen shut. Blood crusted over his mouth, his chest, the floor beneath him.

My men had done their work. I stepped into the cell, boots echoing, slow and heavy. He raised his head with great effort, the one good eye glassy but aware.

“Didn’t think you’d last the night,” I said, voice like a growl soaked in ice.

He coughed—wet, broken—and spit blood onto the stone. Garrick crouched beside him, fingers tapping the hilt of his blade.

“You ready to tell us where your little pup ran off to? Or shall we keep peeling?”

Arlen wheezed a laugh. “You’ll... never find him.”

I slammed my fist into his jaw. Bone cracked. He slumped but didn’t fall.

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“Try again,” I snarled.

He blinked slowly, the pain dragging truth from his mouth. “A village... south. Coastal. Human-run. Fishing port. He... he’s hiding there.”

A grin crept over Garrick’s face. I could feel my own wolf pressing at the edges of my skin, snarling beneath my flesh.

“What’s the name?” I snapped.

“Didn’t... catch it,” he muttered. “Just... told him to run. Disappear. Might not even be there anymore.”

I leaned in, my breath hot against his ruined face.

“Don’t worry,” I whispered. “I have trackers. The best. Wolves who can follow a scent through flame and ocean wind. We’ll find him. Drag him out by the spine if we must.”

His shoulders sagged. There was nothing left in him now. Not defiance. Not pride. Only pain.

I stood tall, looked him over one last time. This was the alpha who once dared to challenge me. Who called himself my equal.

What a joke. I grabbed him by the throat and lifted him to his feet. His body was nothing but blood and bones, but I wanted to see the light leave his eyes.

“This is for wasting my time.”

I crushed his throat. His neck cracked like dry wood, and he went limp, his final breath a soft rattle in the silence. I dropped him. The wolf inside me howled in triumph, clawing at the surface. I let him rise, just a little—enough to feel the heat in my blood, the madness in my grin.

Garrick didn't speak. He didn't need to. We had a scent to chase. And soon, we would have a body to bury.

We emerged from the darkness like revenants. The door to the dungeon slammed shut behind us, the echo ringing through the stone halls like a war drum. My men stood waiting—silent, disciplined, blood still crusted on some of their hands from the night's work. They straightened the moment they saw me, heads bowed in deference, eyes burning with expectation.

I stopped at the top of the stairs, the cold wind rushing in from the open corridor beyond, sharp with the scent of snow and steel. My voice was low, but it carried like thunder.

“We have a lead.”

Their attention snapped tighter.

“There is a boy. Seventeen, maybe nineteen. Blonde hair. The last son of Arlen, the only stain left on my claim.”

A ripple of growls echoed through the gathered wolves.

“He's hiding in a coastal human village somewhere in the Crescent Moon territory. We don't know the name—but that won't matter. You will search every village on

the coast. Every fishing town, every port, every rotting hut clinging to the rocks. You will tear them open if you must. No stone left unturned. No door left unopened.”

They nodded, fists clenching.

“Be careful,” I added. “There are still loyalists. Humans who bent the knee to Arlen or suckled from the scraps of his table. They may try to help him—smuggle him out, hide him, ferry him to foreign lands.”

My wolf surged beneath my skin, sharp and hungry. I let that violence show.

“Any human who smells of wolf is to be questioned. If they lie—break them. If they resist—bleed them. And if any of them dare hide him... Burn their homes to ash.”

The pack saluted, fists over hearts, ready to obey. Blood would flow. Screams would echo. And soon, the last of Arlen’s line would lie dead at my feet.

CHAPTER 4

Lexa

It had been almost a week since I went to the witch, and the pain had finally dulled to a whisper. It lingered in the mornings, when the cold wrapped around my spine and reminded me of what still lived beneath the runes—but by midday, it was gone. A phantom ache. Nothing more.

Snow had come during the night. Not the heavy kind that blanketed everything in silence, but a thin, fragile layer that clung to rooftops and frosted the dead grass in silver. It made the village look softer, quieter, as if it was holding its breath.

The others in town whispered over their bread and fish bones. They said the snows up

north were worse this year, deeper than a man's height in some places. There were murmurs of war between the great packs. Someone claimed the Crescent Moon alpha had fallen. Another swore the Blood Night pack was marching south like a tide of wolves.

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I didn't care.

Let them rip each other apart.

The wordpackalone made my stomach turn. I had no use for wolves or their wars. What I did care about was the shoreline.

It had frozen again last night—thin layers of ice creeping across the water, jagged and stubborn. Our nets had come back empty for the third day in a row. We didn't have a boat, couldn't afford one, and without deeper waters, the fish were gone.

Dain sat on the edge of the dock this morning, legs dangling over the side, cheeks red from the cold. He held the net in his little hands, untangling it with more patience than I had. My fingers were raw from working the lines, frostbitten in places I couldn't afford to bandage properly.

I crouched beside him, eyes scanning the gray sea. The horizon was empty. Always empty.

"This part's broken," Dain said, holding up a frayed length of rope.

I nodded. "I'll mend it later."

He didn't ask about breakfast. He knew there wouldn't be any, not until we caught something or traded for crumbs.

Behind us, the village stirred slowly to life—people sweeping snow from thresholds,

hauling wood for fires, muttering curses about the cold. The thin layer of white made everything look cleaner than it was. It hid the rot. The damp. The hunger.

But it didn't hide the truth. We were in trouble. And winter had only just begun.

Dain and I walked the familiar path home, our feet crunching over frost-hardened earth, the air sharp enough to sting our lungs. My shawl barely held back the cold, and Dain clung to my side, hands tucked deep into the oversized sleeves of his coat. He didn't complain. He never did.

My stomach twisted in protest, loud and hollow. I hadn't eaten since yesterday morning, but it wasn't my hunger that gnawed at me—it was his. There was nothing left in the cottage. Not even flour dust in the tin.

Wouldn't be the first time he went to bed with an empty belly.

Wouldn't be the first time I lay awake beside him, listening to his breathing, and wondering if I'd made the right choices.

But the gods don't answer those kinds of questions. As we passed the old mill road, I felt it—before I saw it. A shift in the air. The scent of leather, iron, cold steel, and something darker. Something that curled my wolf instincts into a tight knot, even beneath the runes. Danger.

“Dain,” I said softly. “Stay close.”

He nodded and pressed into my side.

Men were scattered through the village—strangers. Not villagers. Armed, armoured, not like our local guards with their patched leather and rusted swords. These men moved like predators, scanning every alley, every door, every face.

My blood turned to ice.

I kept my head down, hood drawn low. We weren't important. Just poor, just tired, just cold.

One of them stepped into our path.

Tall. Broad. Fur-lined cloak. His eyes were the colour of wolves—pale gold and unblinking.

“You,” he said, voice rough with command. “Seen a boy? Seventeen, maybe eighteen. Blonde. Might be hiding here.”

I forced my body to stay still. Forced my voice into something small and forgettable. “No, sir.”

He stared at me too long. My skin prickled. Then he moved on without a word. I didn't breathe until he was gone.

As we kept walking, I didn't look back. Didn't let the fear show. But inside, I knew. Knew with the certainty of instinct, of blood. These weren't Crescent Moon patrols.

These weren't the quiet wolves who passed through once or twice a season and left us alone. These were something else. Blood Night. I knew the stories. Every wolf did, whether they'd run from the packs or not.

They didn't come for tribute. They came for blood.

My heart pounded like a war drum in my chest, but I didn't let it show. I kept my head down, eyes on the muddy path as the soldier gave a curt gesture, allowing me to pass. I nodded once, clutching Dain's hand tighter, and moved. Each step away from

him felt like tiptoeing past a sleeping beast, praying not to wake it.

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Just a few more steps. Just a few more steps and—

The cottage came into view. My breath caught.

The door was hanging off its hinges, cracked down the middle, swaying in the wind like a broken jaw. Inside, I saw movement—shadows. Boots scuffing against the floor. My stomach dropped.

Two of them were inside, digging through our things like scavengers—one already holding the tattered blanket from our bed, the other rifling through the small crate where I kept what little food we had left. They turned the moment they saw me. Sharp eyes. Hungry eyes. Wolves.

“You live here?” one asked, stepping toward me. His voice was too calm, too cold.

“Yes,” I said, barely managing the word. Dain pressed behind me, holding my coat with both fists.

“We’re looking for someone,” said the second. “Young male. Seventeen to nineteen. Blonde hair. Human-born. Seen anyone new pass through?”

I shook my head. “No strangers here.”

They looked at each other, then back at me. The first one stepped closer, nostrils flaring slightly as he sniffed the air. His gaze flicked toward the bed. His lip curled.

“If you’re not hiding anything,” he said, voice shifting into a low growl, “why does

your cot smell like wolf?”

Before I could answer, he grabbed my arm and yanked me forward, hard enough to knock me to my knees. I hit the floor with a gasp, pain flaring up my spine.

“You lying bitch.”

He raised his hand, and the back of it came down hard across my cheek. Stars burst in my vision.

“Lexi!” Dain screamed, darting forward.

“No—Dain!”

He kicked the man square in the shin with his little boot, fists clenched and eyes wide with rage. The wolf snarled and rounded on him.

“Filthy human brat!”

His hand came up again, aimed to strike. And something inside me snapped. I saw red. I moved before I even thought. The runes on my back burned hot, but they didn’t stop me.

I lunged.

My body collided with his, knocking him off his feet and into the wall. The breath went out of him in a surprised grunt. I landed hard, straddling his chest, fists already flying.

“You. Don’t. Touch. Him!”

My fist cracked against his cheekbone, the sound dull and wet. Again. And again. Blood coated my knuckles—warm, slick, righteous. His snarl turned to a grunt, then to silence. I didn't care if he was breathing. He laid a hand on my boy.

Then—ice.

A hand closed around my throat. No warning. No footsteps. No sound. One second I was on top of the soldier, the next I was in the air, hoisted off him like a rag doll. My body slammed back against a cold, unyielding chest. Fingers, pale and long, dug into the sides of my neck—not squeezing, not yet, but owning. Possessing.

My boots kicked uselessly above the floor. The soldier below me groaned, blood dripping from his nose, but no one looked at him. Not even his partner. They were all looking at the man behind me.

I didn't need to turn to know what he was.

The air was wrong now. Thicker. Heavier. It vibrated with something ancient, dark, and hungry.

An Alpha.

Not one of the half-bred thugs that passed through on Crescent Moon patrols. No. This was something else. Something far worse.

Power rolled off him in waves—predatory, absolute. Every hair on my body stood on end, and I went still, the way prey does when it knows the predator is watching. But it wasn't just fear.

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It was the pressure. The unbearable weight of him pressing into every part of me, like he was already beneath my skin. I felt nothing of my wolf. She was gone. Silent. Cowering so deep inside me, I didn't even know if she still existed.

All I had left was the runes. Carved into my spine with blood and sacrifice and dark magic.

Please, I begged silently, teeth clenched. Please, gods, let them hold. Don't let him see. Don't let him feel what I am.

He leaned in. Closer.

I felt the heat of his breath on the curve of my ear, smelled iron and frost and something darker—like smoke curling from burned-out churches.

His voice was a whisper, but it filled the world.

“What pack do you serve?”

Every muscle in my body froze. My heartbeat stopped. Just for a moment. The way he said it... as if it was a sacred question. As if it mattered. As if there would be no lie strong enough if he sensed the truth.

My lips parted, but no words came. My mind screamed—none, none, none!—but my throat was dry, burning, sealed shut by terror.

He hadn't squeezed yet. But he could. He would.

And if he found out, if the runes failed, he would know what I was. What I was hiding. The only thing I had was the lie. And the prayer.

Hold. Please, hold.

CHAPTER 5

Andros

I expected many things when I came to this godforsaken stretch of ice and fish stink.

Resistance from the boy, maybe. Some desperate locals trying to hide him. Perhaps a few Crescent loyalists with enough spine left to bare their teeth. What I did not expect—was her.

A wolf. But not one I recognized. Not Crescent. Not rogue. Not mine. She looked like nothing. And yet...everything.

Long black hair clung to her face, soaked from the snow, dripping like ink down her shoulders. Her skin was too pale, almost translucent under the gray morning light, as though she'd never known warmth. And her eyes—gods, those eyes—were a violent, feral shade of green. Not forest green. Not even emerald. But something alive. Something primal. Like moss growing over stone, like flame burning in the heart of a winter storm.

She was thin, almost sickly. Bones too sharp beneath skin too soft. A body made of hunger and frostbite. But the way she moved...

Chin high. Shoulders square. Jaw set like she would bite down on the world before letting it swallow her.

There was no submission in her. No flinch. No tremble. Not even as I held her throat in my palm and pinned her to the frozen wall of her collapsing little shack. Her pulse beat against my fingers—fast, but not desperate. Not panicked. Controlled.

She didn't plead. She didn't cry. She just stared at me. Like she was daring me to go further. A wolf. And yet... she didn't smell like one.

Her scent was broken. Flickering. Like smoke trying to form a shape and never quite managing it. Wolf, yes—but beneath something else. Covered. Masked. Hidden in salt and seaweed and rot. I'd hunted enough to know when a trail had been tampered with.

This was deliberate. This was magic.

Dark magic.

It clung to her like another skin. Ancient, blood-soaked, stitched into the very air around her. Whoever hid her scent knew their craft. And that should have infuriated me. But instead, I leaned closer.

“What pack do you serve?” I asked, my voice a whisper made of smoke and ash.

Her lips parted—but nothing came. Her eyes widened, just a little, and something in them... cracked.

I felt it then. A shiver, not in her body, but through the air between us. Like something ancient had woken beneath her skin. Not her wolf—no, that was still silent. But the thing beneath the silence? It knew me. And I wanted to know it back.

She looked like a ghost, but she burned like prophecy. And for the first time in years, my wolf stirred in my chest—not out of hunger. Not out of rage. But want.

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I tightened my grip. Her body jerked beneath my hand, heels dragging deep ruts in the frozen earth as she slammed against the wall of the cottage with a dull, brutal crack. The snow-covered planks shuddered behind her. Her breath hitched—just once. No scream. No cry. Just a wince and silence.

That silence said more than words ever could. Defiance burned in her eyes. Not the desperate kind—no, this was old. Tempered. A fire forged in cruelty and starvation. A flame that had survived.

So I drove her harder against the wall, and let my power bleed out of me like smoke from a long-sealed crypt. The air thickened. Turned violent. The men around us stilled, instincts overriding logic. This was no show of force.

This was a warning. She bared her teeth.

“I serve no pack,” she hissed.

Then she spit in my face.

It hit my cheek with a splatter—hot, defiant, and tainted with the acrid sting of hatred. A challenge thrown in the mouth of death. And I didn’t wipe it away.

The world paused. Even the snow hung motionless in the air, suspended mid-fall as if the gods themselves wanted to see what I’d do next.

I could smell the boy’s fear behind her—sweet and sharp like crushed violets—but I didn’t turn.

I laughed. Low, cruel. A sound pulled from the black marrow of my bones, older than language, deeper than wrath. It echoed off the ruined walls of the cottage and into the hollow spaces where hope used to live.

She wasn't Crescent Moon. I would've known. Would've felt it. But she wasn't rogue either. Rogues stank of desperation. Of shame and loneliness. She didn't. She smelled like... absence. Like void. Like someone had ripped her from the world and sewn her back in with thread made of lies and blood.

Dark magic clung to her like a second skin—faint, but lingering. A clever mask. A curse. Which raised only one question: If she wasn't Crescent... then what pack dared plant a wolf this deep in my territory?

Blood boiled beneath my skin, rage surging behind my ribcage. I hadn't torn the Crescent Moon alpha limb from limb, crushed his sons, burned his holdings, just to have some other mongrel pack sneak in and stake their claim through this silent, defiant bitch.

If she belonged to another, I would find out who. And I would bury them next. But first, I'd break her.

“Leave her alone!”

The voice cracked through the air like lightning across a frozen lake. Thin. Human. I turned, slowly. The boy stood just beyond my reach, trembling like a dying star but burning just the same. Fists clenched, eyes wide with terror—but standing his ground.

“What's it to you, boy?” I asked, my voice low and razored, dripping with violence barely leashed.

He didn't back down.

“She’s my mother.”

The silence was instant. Heavy. I stared at him.

Human. No wolf in him. No trace. No bite. No claim. No mark. Just fragile flesh and fire where there should’ve been fear.

I turned back to her. Her eyes met mine like a blade to the throat—bright, furious, unbroken

What kind of wolf claims a human child?

What kind of beast protects the weak?

And what kind of pack would send such a thing to lie hidden beneath my nose, wrapped in shadows and rot? There was something more here. Something buried so deep it stank of treason. I didn’t just want answers. I needed them. Because if another pack thought to stake a claim on what I bled to conquer, they’d learn what it meant to challenge the Blood Night Alpha.

And she— She would be the first to scream.

“Alpha!” a voice barked from the edge of the road, sharp and urgent. “We found him!”

I let her go. Not willingly.

My fingers unfurled from her throat like claws drawn from flesh, reluctant, the ghost of her skin still seared into my palm. Heat lingered—hers—unnatural and infuriating. The wolf inside me paced with fury, snapping its jaws, furious to release her. It wanted her on her knees, wanted her broken, her scent smeared into the snow like a

mark of ownership.

But I turned. Duty called. I stalked across the frostbitten road, snow crunching under my boots, each step heavier than the last. My soldiers parted, forming a circle around a boy on his knees, his hands bound, blood dripping from his split lip onto the snow like petals of crimson.

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I didn't need to ask who he was. One breath was enough. The scent hit me like fire on old parchment. Crescent Moon. Faint, but unmistakable. The same sharpness Arlen carried, the same bitter pride that had soaked his dying breath.

The last son. The final flickering ember of a legacy I had reduced to ash.

He looked up when I approached. Face bruised, blood caking one brow. Young—too young to have been dragged into a war of blood and dominance. But that fire in his eyes... that damned fire—it was the same. His father's. His brothers'. Their whole cursed line, believing nobility would save them from the teeth of the world.

It hadn't.

I drew my sword with deliberate grace. The steel slid free with a hiss, the edge gleaming even under the gray morning sky. It sang for blood. For finality.

"The Crescent Moon bloodline ends here," I said, my voice as flat and cold as the snow underfoot.

He didn't beg. He simply raised his chin, jaw clenched, eyes still burning. I almost respected him for it. Almost.

Then I swung. One clean motion. The blade whispered through air, bone, sinew—truth.

His head dropped from his shoulders and tumbled into the snow with a heavy, wet thump, blood steaming in the cold, staining the white in thick, arterial splashes. It

rolled once, twice, before settling at the base of a broken fence post. His body remained upright for a moment, then crumpled like cloth.

Final. Absolute. The end of a line. The last howl of a dying house. I had gutted a dynasty and bled its future into the dirt.

Around me, my men exhaled. Some nodded, grim and satisfied. Others stared, pale with awe. But I didn't look at them.

I didn't need their approval. Behind me, Ifelther. Her gaze. Still. Burning holes into my spine. I turned my head slightly, just enough to catch a glimpse of her from the corner of my eye.

"Take them," I growled.

Two soldiers stepped forward, their boots crunching over ice and blood.

"No!" she snapped, planting herself in front of the boy like a shield of flesh and bone. Her arms spread wide, trembling—but not from fear. From fury. "Please... just listen. We've done nothing. I'm not Crescent Moon. I've never served them. If our presence offends your territory, we'll leave. Now. No questions asked."

I laughed, slow and sharp.

"Leave?" I echoed, tilting my head. My smirk was cold, teeth bared beneath it. "Is that what you think this is?"

I stepped closer, slow and deliberate, the heat of my body meeting the frost of hers in the narrow space between us. Her scent hit me again—strange, shifting, wrapped in something that didn't belong. Like death pretending to be life.

“No. You’re some kind of stray,” I murmured. “A wolf trying to rot in the shadow of men. But here’s the thing—strays don’t survive long in my lands. The only question is why you’re hiding. And from whom.”

I leaned in until my breath danced along her throat. Her pulse thudded against my senses—fast, sharp, defiant.

“Who do you serve?” I whispered. “What is that wretched filth that masks your true scent? You stink of sorcery, of broken chains and borrowed names.”

She said nothing. My smile widened.

“But you won’t give up the truth, will you?” I straightened, letting my voice boom again, letting the beast surface. “So the only place you’re going now is my dungeon. And the boy—he comes with you.”

That did it. The fear in her eyes vanished. Burned away. What took its place wasn’t submission. It was rage—raw, blistering, and sharp enough to cut stone.

“That’s what you wolves do,” she spat. “You prey on the weak. You take. You conquer. You destroy.”

The words hit like claws to the face. I paused.

“You wolves?” I repeated, softly now. Too softly. “You speak like you aren’t one of us.”

I stepped in close again, so close our breath mingled. Mine like smoke and blood, hers like frost and desperation.

“Tell me,” I murmured, reaching up—slow, intimate—and brushing a strand of her

wet, tangled hair behind her ear, “do you fancy yourself human?”

She glared at me, lip curled, green eyes burning with contempt.

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“I’ve seen more kindness in that boy,” she said, voice steady, seething, “than I’ve ever seen in any of you monsters.”

I chuckled, low and venomous, letting the sound wrap around her like a noose.

“Careful,” I said, voice dark silk over razors. “You keep talking like that, and I might forget I’m being merciful.”

“I don’t want your mercy,” she hissed. “Creatures like you don’t have any.”

For a moment, just a breath, I didn’t see the ragged stranger standing before me. I saw the flame inside her. The storm. The beautiful, impossible audacity of her. And gods help her... I wanted to break it. I wanted to devour it.

“Chain them,” I ordered, my voice sharp and final. “Now.”

The soldiers moved fast, metal clinking, eyes cautious. They knew better than to take their time when I was in this mood.

She erupted. Snarling, spitting, kicking with wild precision. She moved like a creature who had nothing left to lose. Teeth bared, fists flying. Her elbow cracked against one soldier’s jaw with a sickening snap, sending him stumbling back, blood gushing from his mouth. Another tried to grab her arm—she bit him.

Bit him.

He screamed, and she didn’t stop. Her hands were torn, her lip split, but she fought

with the kind of violence only born of desperation. The kind that came from someone who had survived too much and refused to be caged again.

But when I stepped closer—She froze.

Not out of fear. She didn't flinch from me like she did the others. No wild swings. No snarls.

Instead, she went unnaturally still. Her breathing hitched, just slightly, and she moved as little as possible. As if every inch mattered. As if proximity to me cost her something she couldn't afford to lose.

It was... curious.

The wolf inside me stirred, nostrils flaring, drawn to something wrong. Not weak. Not broken. Bound. Hers was there. I felt it. A wolf. But barely. Like a heartbeat slowed to the edge of death. Faint. Strangled. Chained.

Not by steel or collar. No, this was something older. Something deeper. Magic. Silence. Shadow.

I narrowed my eyes as the soldiers finally subdued her—barely. It took three of them to clamp the irons around her wrists, and she still kicked one in the ribs hard enough to drop him to his knees.

The boy screamed. Fought back. Tiny fists and curses that meant nothing to trained warriors, but gods—he had her fire. Her rage. I let them chain him too.

Together, they knelt in the snow. Bruised. Bleeding. Unbowed. But it was her I couldn't stop watching.

Because something about her was wrong. Wolves don't silence themselves like that. Wolves don't go quiet when an Alpha is near. They growl. They submit. They howl.

But hers didn't. Not even a whisper. Whatever kept her wolf buried so deep—it wasn't natural. And I would find out what it was. No matter how many pieces I had to tear from her to do it.

CHAPTER 6

Lexa

The chains around my wrists burned.

Not with fire—fire I could endure—but with iron chilled by stone and silence. My skin stung where the shackles rubbed raw, but I didn't make a sound. The stone wall at my back was damp, slick with the sweat of centuries, and the darkness here was complete. No windows. No time. Just the drip of unseen water and the soft rustle of rats moving through bones.

We were underground.

I didn't know how long it had been since they dragged us here. Hours. A day. Maybe more.

They hadn't beaten me, not yet—but the humiliation had sunk deeper than bruises ever could. I'd fought them like a beast all the way down the frozen trail, kicking and clawing until they had no choice but to tie my legs too. I hadn't screamed, though. I wouldn't give them that.

They took Dain too. That was the worst part. I'd begged them to leave him, offered myself in exchange, but they'd laughed. Said no stray bitch gets to make demands.

Now, he was curled up beside me on a patch of straw, his tiny frame rising and falling with each breath. His hands were still bound, but one of the guards—one with a softer look—had loosened the rope enough for him to move.

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He looked at me in the dark earlier, blinking through the gloom with those soft brown eyes and whispered, “At least it’s warmer than our house.”

I wanted to cry.

He grinned at me, as if this was just another place, another bad day, like the time the nets broke and we had nothing to eat but dried kelp and bitterroot. As if this—this—wasn’t a dungeon soaked in the screams of the forgotten.

“They even gave us food,” he said. “Bread and meat. Not bad.”

My stomach turned. Not from hunger, but from guilt. From rage. From helplessness. I couldn’t keep him safe. I’d tried. I’d bled for it. Lied for it. Changed everything I was just to disappear into the shadow of the human world. And still—still—they found us.

He found us. The Alpha.

Andros. His name was whispered by terrified mouths and scarred lips in every pack from coast to mountain, but now I had a face for the stories. A voice. A touch.

Gods, his hand on my throat had seared deeper than any flame. And what terrified me most wasn’t that he was cruel, or powerful. I’d known monsters like that before.

It was the way he looked at me. Like he knew. Like he felt the lie etched into my spine. And he wasn’t going to rest until he peeled back every layer to find the truth I’d buried.

I glanced down at Dain. He was sleeping again, mouthparted slightly, one hand curled against his chest.

They left us in the dark for three days. No questions. No threats. No beatings. Just silence.

The only thing that came regularly was food—twice a day, hot, seasoned, decent. The kind of meals I hadn't been able to give Dain in weeks. Maybe months. That, more than anything, broke something inside me.

Because it meant they could. This brutal, blood-soaked pack could afford to feed even its prisoners like they mattered. And I—who scraped together every coin, who bled into the salt and nets and filth of the shore—could barely keep a child warm, let alone fed.

Every time the tray clanked against the stone, Dain lit up like it was some miracle. “They have cheese,” he whispered once, eyes wide. “Real cheese, Lexi.”

I smiled, but it felt like glass in my throat. And now, on the third day, the rhythm changed.

The door opened with a screech, metal against stone, too loud after so much stillness. I sat up fast, heart already pounding. Two guards stepped inside, their boots wet from the halls above. No food this time. No tray.

I rose slowly, stiff from the cold and chains. Dain sat up beside me, rubbing his eyes.

“What is this?” I asked, voice low, cautious. “Where are you taking us?”

“Us? No. Just you.” One of the guards—taller, sharper eyes—snorted.

My chest tightened. “He stays? Why?”

The other stepped closer, smirking. “The Alpha wants a word. Alone.”

Dain climbed to his feet beside me, already frowning. “I’m coming too.”

The taller one shoved him gently back with the flat of his hand. “You stay here, pup. Insurance.”

“Insurance?” I growled, stepping forward until the chains caught at my ankles. “He’s a child.”

“He’s your child,” the guard said, voice tightening. “And if you think about running... well. We’ll need something to keep you honest.”

I felt Dain grab my sleeve, his little fingers twisting in the fabric.

“No,” he whispered. “Don’t go.”

“I have to, cub,” I said softly, kneeling to look him in the eye. My throat burned. “I’ll come back.”

“You promise?” His voice cracked.

I hesitated. Because I didn’t make promises I couldn’t keep. But this time... I nodded.

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“I promise.”

He held onto me for one more second, then let go.

The guards pulled me to my feet, unchained my ankles, and shackled my hands tighter instead. The door closed behind me with the sound of finality. And as they led me down the long stone corridor, I could still feel Dain’s eyes on my back. Watching. Hoping. Waiting.

They dragged me through a winding corridor of stone and steel, and as my boots echoed off the floor, I tried to keep my eyes open.

This wasn’t just a dungeon tucked beneath some den. It was deeper. Bigger. Older. The walls weren’t crumbling. The torches were freshly lit. Everything was maintained, guarded, watched.

We emerged into a vast inner courtyard, and I blinked at the sudden rush of light filtering in from above. Snow fell lightly, but even that looked out of place here—too soft against the towering black stone that surrounded us.

A citadel. That was the only word for it. A fortress meant not for survival, but domination.

The guards didn’t speak, just marched me forward past wolves who paused to look—some curious, some hungry. I didn’t drop my head. I wouldn’t give them that.

At the far side of the courtyard, beneath an arch of carved obsidian, a man waited.

Taller than most. Heavy with muscle. Thick brown beard, flecked with frost. His coat bore the mark of the Blood Night—silver thread stitched into the black leather like veins. His power rippled under the surface, tightly leashed but unmistakable.

Beta.

I reached for the long-buried knowledge scraped from overheard lessons, whispered politics between sisters. Alpha. Beta. Enforcers. The old structures. Wolves pretending to be kings.

He stepped forward as we approached, his smile too pleasant for this place. “You must be the stray.”

I didn’t reply. I was too busy calculating how many steps it would take to get past him, how many seconds before the guards behind me caught up.

He glanced at the guards. “I’ll take her from here.”

One nodded, hesitated, then released my arm. The weight of the man’s eyes never left me as he gestured toward the inner hall.

“Come,” he said. “The Alpha’s waiting.”

I didn’t move. “Why am I being treated like a criminal?” I asked, voice rough with cold and days without rest. “I’ve done nothing wrong.”

He laughed softly, like I’d just told a child’s joke. “Wrong? That’s subjective, darling. Maybe you’re a spy. Maybe you’re bait. Maybe you’re just very bad at hiding.”

I stared at him, my jaw tight. “You think I’m Crescent Moon.”

“I think you’re something,” he said with a grin, “and the Alpha doesn’t like unknowns in his territory.”

He turned, expecting me to follow. I did. Because I didn’t have a choice. The Beta led me through a pair of towering iron doors etched with snarling wolves and bleeding moons. Beyond them, the castle unfolded like something from an old nightmare—grand, cold, and carved from shadow.

The walls were built from dark stone, smoothed and polished to a mirror sheen in places, rough and ancient in others. Torches flickered in silver sconces, casting long, twisting shadows across vaulted ceilings and archways wide enough to drive a cart through. Massive columns lined the halls, each engraved with scenes of conquest—wolves tearing through human armies, packs kneeling before a crowned Alpha.

The air was colder here, but not the kind of cold that came from winter. This cold was something else. Something deeper. It lived in the bones of this place, woven into its stones and silence.

My boots echoed on the marble floors, every step a reminder of my place: prisoner. Stranger. Other. Eyes followed me as we walked. Not many, but enough.

Some guards. A few warriors. But also... humans. Servants. They moved like ghosts, heads bowed, arms full of wood or cloth or trays of food. Silent. Eyes lowered. I smelled fear on them, sharp and acrid. Their lives belonged to the pack, and they knew it.

It wasn’t the humans that made my skin crawl. It was the women.

They gathered like vultures near the grand balcony, draped in silk and furs that shimmered in the winter light. Their skin was flawless, almost too smooth—polished

to perfection like glass dolls—and their hair gleamed in rich, pampered waves. Everything about them was calculated: every tilt of the head, every flutter of lashes, every faint, sugary laugh drifting into the air.

They were beautiful in the way display cases are beautiful. Untouched. Untouchable. Empty. I didn't need to scent the air to know what they were.

Omegas.

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Their eyes turned to me in perfect, choreographed unison. Narrowed. Assessing. Disgusted. As if I was something feral, something unwashed and rabid dragged in from the snow. Their lips curled, but none of them spoke. They didn't need to.

I met their stares without flinching. I had seen those eyes before. On my sisters. On my mother. On the mirror, once.

They were everything I had fled. Everything I had refused to become.

Pretty cages wrapped in perfume and pearls. I could almost hear the voices of my sisters in the lilts of their posture—soft and simpering, trained to purr when spoken to, to preen and bow and smile sweetly when offered a collar. Taught that heat was their worth. That submission was safety. I didn't hate them because they were weak. I hated them because they chose it.

And then there was him.

The man standing among them, just slightly apart—an Alpha, clearly, but lower in the packs rank than Andros. He wore deep crimson with silver accents, his coat lined in dark wolf fur, one gloved hand resting lazily on the hilt of a ceremonial dagger. His hair was dark, swept back and tied with a strip of fine leather, but what caught my eye—what burned it into memory—was the thin, silver ring pierced through his right eyebrow. A strange, deliberate choice. One I wouldn't forget.

He didn't look at me like the Omegas did. He smirked. Amused. Curious. Like he'd just spotted something weak and thought it might be fun to destroy it.

The Beta beside me chuckled, catching the edge of my scowl. “Not one for polite company, are you?”

I didn’t answer. But my fingers itched for a blade.

“I’ve never cared much for pets,” I muttered.

He laughed, deep and genuine. “Oh, he’s going to like you.”

As the great doors at the end of the hall loomed closer—carved with wolves in mid-hunt, jaws open, teeth bared—I felt the pressure in the air change.

The Alpha was near. And whatever waited behind those doors would not be kind. The doors groaned open, and the war room swallowed me whole.

Warmth wrapped around me like a false promise—thick and fragrant, heavy with the scent of firewood, cured leather, and roasted meat. Braziers lined the walls, casting golden light over polished stone and fur-covered floors. A map stretched across the centre table, littered with blood-red markers and metal figurines. A fire roared behind the Alpha’s throne—because that’s what it was, no matter how much he pretended it was just a chair. And there he was.

Andros. The Alpha of the Blood Night Pack. He stood with his back to me at first, one hand resting on the edge of the war table, the other gripping a goblet. When he turned, I felt it. That same pressure.

He was tall—taller than I remembered, though I’d only seen him for a few heartbeats before he’d wrapped his hand around my throat. Broad shoulders wrapped in dark fur, a tunic of deep crimson stretched tight over his chest, the fabric moulded to muscle built for war, not ornament. His belt was black leather, adorned with silver buckles and a sheathed dagger that glinted like it missed blood. Scars peeked from

the edges of his collar. He didn't hide what he was. Heworeit.

And his eyes... dark blue, like storm-lit oceans and midnight skies—depthless, unreadable, watching me like I was something already half-devoured, and he hadn't yet decided if he was done.

“Alpha,” the Beta said, bowing his head slightly. “She's here.”

Andros didn't speak right away. Just stared. Like he was trying to pull the truth from my marrow with sheer will.

“Sit,” he said finally, his voice a low command wrapped in velvet and blade.

A single chair waited for me, positioned directly across from him. It looked almost comfortable—carved wood, wolf pelts draped across the back, warm from the fire. I didn't move.

“You'd rather stand?” the Beta asked, a brow raised.

“I'd rather starve,” I muttered.

Andros smirked and took a slow sip from his goblet. “That can be arranged.”

I sat. But I didn't relax. I didn't care that it was warm, or that food was close enough to smell. I didn't care that the furs were soft or the air didn't bite. Luxury was just another kind of trap. Andros set his goblet down with a quiet clink.

“Who sent you?” he asked, tone deceptively casual. “Crescent Moon? One of the southern packs? Someone playing at politics in my territory?”

“No one sent me.”

He raised a brow, leaned forward slightly. “You expect me to believe you wandered into my land by accident?”

“I didn’t wander. I was surviving.”

He chuckled, dark and low. “You fight like a soldier. Mask your scent like a spy. And yet you expect me to believe you’re just some poor, starving bitch on the run?”

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“Believe what you want,” I said, voice flat. “But no one owns me.”

The Beta, still standing behind me, folded his arms and said nothing—but I felt his eyes, sharp and measuring, like he was waiting for me to slip up. Andros stood fully now, circling the table slowly, predator in no rush.

“No one owns you,” he echoed, his gaze never leaving mine. “So you’re what then? A ghost? A myth? Some little wolf who fell through the cracks?”

“I’m a woman who wants to be left alone.”

“Ah,” he said, and that cruel smile returned. “Then you chose the wrong fucking territory.”

Andros’s gaze sharpened as he circled the table, each step slow and deliberate, like he was stalking prey too weak to run but still too stubborn to kneel.

“I don’t believe you,” he said, his voice still calm, but there was something darker curling beneath it. “You reek of lies. You mask your scent, hide your wolf, bury yourself in a human village with a human child.” He stopped across from me, eyes gleaming like twin blades. “You expect me to believe that’s coincidence?”

I didn’t answer.

“You’re a spy.” He leaned in, hands braced on the table.

I laughed. It was bitter, short, empty. “That’s ridiculous.”

His hand slammed down, palm striking the war table with a crack loud enough to echo. The figurines rattled, a goblet tipped and spilled, red wine bleeding like blood across the map between us.

I flinched—but didn't look away.

“You think I won't break you?” he snarled, voice stripped of civility. “I will string you from the dungeon wall and rip your secrets out strip by strip if I have to. I will know who sent you, and why you're here.”

My pulse pounded, but I held his gaze. “No one sent me.”

A beat of silence. The tension in the room snapped taut like a wire pulled too tight.

“Andros,” the Beta said, stepping forward at last, his voice even. “You're letting your blood boil before the pot's even warm.”

Andros's jaw clenched. The muscles in his neck flexed as he looked away, exhaling like it hurt. Then, he turned back to me—cold again. Calculated.

“Fine,” he said, voice like smoke curling through a battlefield. “Tell me this, then.” He tilted his head slightly, studying me. “You claim that human boy like your own. You fought for him. Protected him like he's your blood. So why didn't you mark him?”

I blinked. The question was quiet, but I felt the weight of it settle like a stone in my chest.

“Isn't that what wolves do?” he pressed. “Mark what's theirs. Especially when it's weak. Especially when it's human.”

“Because he isn’t mine to claim.” I let a slow breath pass through my lips, controlled.

The room fell into silence. Andros studied me. For a moment, I said nothing. Because I knew what it meant—tomarka human. In the wolf world, it was a claim. A brand. A declaration of protection and ownership. It tied the human to the wolf in every way—spirit, scent, status. It made them part of your territory, your bloodline, your will. It meant the pack would defend them, but it also meant the wolf was exposed. Vulnerable. Traced.

That’s why rogues never did it. That’s why I never did. Andros watched me, his dark blue eyes too sharp, too knowing.

“Or maybe,” he said slowly, “you didn’t mark him because you couldn’t. Because doing so would tie you to a name. A scent. A trail. And spies don’t leave trails, do they?”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Struck a nerve?” He stopped right in front of me, towering, cold and quiet.

“I don’t mean harm to anyone,” I said, quieter now, but no less firm. “I’m not a threat to your pack.”

From behind him, the Beta snorted.

“Tell that to the men you sent limping to the infirmary,” he said, arms crossed, leaning against the wall like he was enjoying a play. “They’d argue otherwise.” His grin widened. “One even said you tried to rip his face off.”

A reluctant smile pulled at Andros’s mouth. The first sign of anything human. I hated how much I noticed it. He stepped back, straightened his coat, and nodded once.

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“Fine,” he said, turning from me, his voice sliding back into command. “If you’re just a harmless, packless stray... then you’ll have no issue joiningmine.”

I froze. The room felt smaller. Hotter.

“No,” I said, voice sharp.

He turned back, one brow lifting. “No?”

“You can’t force me into a pack.”

“I can do whatever I want,” he said softly. “You’re in my territory. You breathe my air. You want to stay alive, little stray? You do as I command.”

CHAPTER 7

Andros

“No,” she said. Again.

The word cut through the room like a blade. Sharp. Final. I stared at her. She stood there, bound and bruised, with defiance carved into every line of her body like it was armour. She didn’t tremble. She didn’t flinch. She looked me in the eye and refused me.

“I don’t want your pack,” she said. “Or any pack. Not now. Not ever.”

My jaw locked.

She didn't understand what she was rejecting. She didn't know what it meant to stand in my territory, speak my language, breathe the air I allowed her to breathe—and throw it back in my face.

“Garrick,” I said, my voice low and razor-edged.

He looked at me, wary. “Andros—”

“Out.”

A long pause. Then a quiet nod. “As you wish, Alpha.” The door clicked shut behind him. The fire crackled. She was still watching me—jaw tight, shoulders squared, a wild thing too proud to cower.

“You hide behind lies,” I said, stepping closer. “You wear a mask and bury your scent like you're ashamed of what you are. You pretend to be one of them.” I sneered. “A mother. A peasant. A ghost. A ...human?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Because I don't want to be whatyouare.”

That did it. I was on her in a breath. Not to hurt—yet. Just to know. I grabbed her, slammed her back against the war table. Her hands shot out, bracing against the edge, but she didn't cry out. Just glared, breath ragged, like she'd fight me even with her last shred of strength.

And gods help me—my wolflikedthat.

I leaned in, lips near her throat. I could feel the heat of her pulse. Hear the way her breath faltered, even if she didn't want me to.

But then—something shifted. Not her. Her scent. Rot. Not decay—but something unnatural. Twisted. Muted. My wolf growled, uneasy. The power beneath her skin wasn't just hidden. It was chained.

What the fuck...I leaned closer, inhaling deep. And I felt it. Magic. Old. Foul. Wrong.

“Something's off,” I growled, more to myself than her. Her body tensed beneath my hands. I reached for the collar of her dress.

“No!” she snapped, but I didn't stop.

I ripped it. The sound of tearing fabric echoed through the war room, followed by the sudden stillness that only truth can bring.

And then—I saw them. Dark runes. Carved into her back with cruel, precise hands. Ancient symbols woven into scarred flesh like ink branded in blood. The language wasn't human. It wasn't even entirely wolf. It was older.

My breath caught. I stepped back, stunned by what I saw and the rage that followed it. Not at her. At whoever did this to her.

“Dark magic,” I murmured.

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The words tasted like ash on my tongue. I reached out, slowly, almost against my will, and traced the edge of one of the runes with my fingertip. Her skin flinched under my touch, but she didn't pull away. She just stood there. Breathing. Burning.

"Iknewsomething was wrong with you," I whispered. "But this..."

This was war. This was blood. And now I needed answers more than I needed air. My fingers brushed the runes again, tracing the jagged symbols cut deep into her back. They pulsed with something ancient—foul and silent, like the heartbeat of a corpse that never stopped dying. The power in them wasn't just dark. It was deliberate. Intentional.

A wolf trying to carve herself into something else. Something unrecognizable. Someone had done this to her. Someone powerful. Someone dangerous.

"Who did this to you?" I asked, voice low and taut with restrained fury. "What enemy carves chains into a wolf's flesh and leaves them half-alive?"

I expected a name. A rival. A plot to poison us from within. I expected betrayal—treason—something I could bury my claws into and tear apart.

But when she turned to look at me, eyes aflame, I saw no fear. Only hatred. And then she said it.

"I did."

My breath stopped.

“What?” The word left me like a curse.

She ripped free from my hold—not with strength, but with fury—and spun to face me, bound hands trembling, chest rising fast with ragged breaths.

“I did this to myself,” she spat, voice cracking like dry earth. “Because I’d rather bleed every damn month carving these things into my back than be one of you.”

I stared at her, my wolf rising, snarling, raging.

“You did this willingly?” I growled. “You carved your soul apart just to hide from what you are?”

Her voice was a whip. “Hate what I am. I hate what you are. I don’t want your power. Your pack. Your rules. Your blood-drenched legacy of war and dominance—”

She moved to hit me. I caught her.

Even bound, she fought like fire. Wild. Reckless. Desperate. But desperation burns fast, and I had the patience of a predator that always gets what it wants. She twisted, teeth bared, trying to bring her knee up. I blocked it. She clawed for my face. I let her graze me. I wanted to feel it.

“You think you’re free,” I snarled, gripping her wrists and twisting her body until she was pinned to the edge of the war table again. “But you’re just broken. And you did it with your own hands.”

I should have thrown her. Shoved her back into her cell and locked the door. Instead, I pulled her close. My mouth at her throat. Her pulse thundered beneath her skin, trembling against my lips.

I breathed her in.

And beneath the stench of runes and blood and rage, I found it. Her. Pure. Subtle. Devastating.

Not wolf. Not rogue.

The word formed in my mouth before I could stop it, a curse dragged from instinct and truth.

“Omega.”

Her whole body went rigid.

Like I’d spoken a spell that shattered the last of her control. Her breath hitched. Her knees faltered for a second. I felt the denial ripple through her. Saw it in her eyes. Felt it in the way she swallowed a sob she didn’t want to give me.

“No,” she breathed. “Don’t.”

But it was too late. I knew. She knew I knew.

And now the whole game had changed.

“Omega,” I repeated, quieter this time, like a secret I meant to ruin her with.

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For a moment, I didn't speak. I just held her. Pressed against me, bare-skinned and breathless, the runes carved into her back like a language only pain could write. My hand rested just below her shoulder blades, fingers grazing over jagged curves of ink and scar. They thrummed faintly beneath my touch. And yet, she didn't tremble from my nearness. Didn't flush. Didn't react at all. My wolf, however, was losing its mind.

She was so close. Her scent tangled in my breath, subtle but undeniable—pure Omega, buried beneath rot and ash and that cursed magic. The beast in me clawed, snarling, begging to sink teeth into her neck, to claim what every part of me now recognized as mine.

But still—nothing from her. The runes were too strong. Too deep. And her silence felt... unnatural. Unforgivable. Her body was fire against mine, but she stood there like a ghost, untouched by heat.

I remembered her voice—low, fierce, furious.

Every. Month.

The truth settled in slowly. And then it hit. My grip tightened. No. No, it wasn't possible. She didn't look older than thirty, maybe late twenties. But still... That would be...no, that would be over a decade. Thirteen... fourteen years of this. Of taking a blade to her back, every cycle, every moon. Binding herself in silence. Suffocating her wolf. Destroying what she was just to stay hidden. Just to run. My jaw clenched, the taste in my mouth turning to rust and bile.

“You've been doing this... since you were fifteen?” I asked, voice barely human.

She didn't answer at first. Then she gave the smallest nod. My breath turned to ice. Fifteen. A child. A girl on the run from her own blood. From the truth in her bones. And no one stopped her. No one saved her.

"Why?" I whispered. But it didn't come out gentle. It came out wrong. Rough. Broken. Violent with disbelief. "Why the fuck would you do this to yourself?"

Still, she wouldn't meet my eyes.

"I had to," she said finally, her voice shaking—not with weakness, but with the kind of strength that's earned in hell. "Because if I didn't, I'd end up just like the rest of them."

"The rest of who?" I snapped, grabbing her jaw and forcing her to look at me.

Her lips curled. Not with fear—but hate.

"Your kind," she hissed. "Your alphas. Your packs. I watched them cage my sisters. Watched them train them like animals, mould them into perfect little mates to be bred and broken. That's the life that waited for me. So I ran half way through the world and I carved it out of myself instead."

Her voice cracked. And gods help me— For a second, I couldn't breathe. She had gutted her own nature. Her own birthright. To be free of us.

The room felt too small. My own skin itched with fury I didn't know where to put—at her, at myself, at a world where an Omega had to butcher herself to stay free.

I took a step back. My body screamed to keep her close, to stay wrapped in her scent, in the ragged heat of her pain, but I needed control. Needed distance. Just enough to remind myself I was still the one holding the leash—even if she didn't know it yet.

“Garrick!” I barked. My voice echoed like a blade unsheathed.

The door opened fast. He stepped in, eyes darting from me to her, reading the tension thick enough to drown in.

“Bring men,” I ordered. “Now.”

Garrick nodded once and disappeared. She turned toward me slowly, suspicion already flickering in her eyes. Her lip still bled from where she bit it during the fight. Her dress hung in tatters. Her back—those carved runes—were still visible in the flicker of firelight.

I stared at them. Ather.

“Move her and the boy out of the dungeon,” I said when Garrick returned with two more wolves. “Put them in a guest chamber, north wing. Top floor. Lock the door. Post guards day and night.”

Garrick blinked. “Both of them?”

“The boy can walk the halls if he wants. He’s human. Harmless. But she... She stays in that room. For the next thirty nights.”

She stared at me like I’d just sentenced her to death.

“What?” she breathed. “Why?”

I smiled. It was not kind. It was not merciful.

It was predatory.

“Because I want to see what happens,” I said. “When those runes begin to lose their power. When your little ritual is denied, when your precious carvings don’t return in time to bind your wolf again.”

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I stepped toward her, slow and deliberate. Her breath caught, just once, as I leaned in, my voice a whisper against her skin.

“I want to watch the magic unravel. See if your wolf crawls back to the surface—or if the weight of what you’ve done finally destroys you.”

She stumbled back a half-step, genuine fear flashing in her eyes now. Not for the guards. Not for me. For what she might become.

“It could kill me,” she whispered. “You don’t understand—dark magical way stakes something. If the bindings break all at once, if it comes back too fast—” She swallowed hard. “It could really kill me.”

I studied her. The fragility in her voice. The way her chest heaved. The smallest tremor in her hands. And still, she stood tall. Still, she didn’t beg. So I leaned closer.

“If it does,” I said coldly, “then that will be your punishment.”

“For what?”

I let my eyes slide over her body, then back to the runes, those cruel scars etched in defiance.

“For what you did to yourself.”

CHAPTER 8

Andros

The fire crackled low, spitting embers like sparks of old fury. Shadows moved across the stone walls, long and jagged, like claws raking through the dark. I sat in silence, the weight of her still clinging to me, her scent—faint and buried—like a bruise in the air.

She shouldn't have mattered. And yet I could still feel the shape of her in my arms. My goblet sat untouched. I wasn't thirsty. I was starving—but not for wine.

For answers. For control. For her.

My wolf hadn't stopped pacing, a restless pressure clawing beneath my ribs since I left her locked away. Not because she was beautiful. Not because she was defiant.

Because she was wrong. Broken in a way that was intentional. Carved into silence. Unnatural. The runes weren't just blasphemy. They were a curse—a crime against our kind..

The door creaked open behind me. Garrick entered with his usual lack of ceremony. The scent of frost and stone followed him in. He stayed quiet, waiting for me to break the silence.

“Did she fight?” I asked, voice like a blade left too long in the cold.

He moved to the table, poured himself a drink before answering. “No. Not this time.”

I glanced at him.

“She looked scared,” he added.

I leaned back in the chair, the firelight dancing across my hands.

“She should be.” He smirked, but didn’t comment. He knew better than to mistake my words for mercy. “She say anything?”

Garrick shook his head. “Not a word. But... I asked her where she came from. Was not expecting an answer, but she told me.”

He crossed to the massive map on the wall, the one where every inch of this territory was marked in red and ash. He pointed low, far south—beyond any borders that mattered, beyond where most wolves dared to go.

“She came from here.” The land he tapped wasn’t even named. Dense. Untamed. Old. “She was fifteen when she left. Walked nearly two thousand miles to get here.”

I didn’t move. But the words struck something deep. Two thousand miles. Alone. Carrying those runes. My wolf stopped pacing. It lifted its head.

Listened.

“She was running from something,” I muttered, eyes fixed on the flames.

Garrick grinned, slow and amused. “Or maybe...” he said, sipping his drink, “she was running towards something.”

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I didn't respond. I didn't look at him. But something in me went still. My wolf shifted again—not in rage this time. Not in hunger. But in recognition. I crushed the thought before it formed. Didn't matter where she came from. Didn't matter what she was running from—or to. I would unmake whatever lies she had built around herself.

Even if I had to tear them out one by one. Even if it broke her. Especially if it did.

Garrick lingered longer than usual. He only did that when something unsettled him. But I didn't press—he knew I'd extract the truth when I was ready. We spoke of patrols, of border reports, of Crescent loyalists still hiding in the shadows. I let my mouth move while my thoughts circled back to her like blood circling a drain.

Two thousand miles.

Fifteen.

Dark magic carved in skin.

No one runs that far unless they're being hunted—or unless they carry something worth hiding.

When Garrick finally left, I didn't go to the cells. Didn't pace the halls. I walked to my chamber in silence, steps echoing across stone polished by war and blood.

The door was ajar. I smelled her before I saw her.

Tanya.

She was draped across one of the fur-lined chairs like she belonged there, like she'd never left. The firelight kissed the edges of her skin—honey-gold, smooth, unmarked by battle or consequence. Her dress clung to her body like silk poured over a statue, deep red, chosen for how it complemented her eyes. Eyes that were always too dark, too polished. Too perfect.

She held a goblet in one hand, swirling the wine lazily, her fingers long and delicate. Her hair was braided with silver threads, shining like moonlight in the dark. Every part of her was carefully arranged, every movement calculated. Beautiful. Exactly the kind of Omega packs worshipped.

She looked up at me, smile soft, voice velvet. "You look tired, Alpha."

I didn't answer. I walked past her and poured my own wine.

"Rumours travel fast," she said after a moment, rising slowly, her steps quiet but practised. She moved like a dancer, like a predator dressed in perfume. "There's talk of a stray. A female wolf dragged in from the snow. Violent. Filthy. Unclaimed."

I sipped the wine, not looking at her. "Is that why you are here?"

"Concerned," she said sweetly. "Naturally."

I turned to face her. She stepped closer, close enough for her scent to press against me. Sweet. Subtle. Designed to comfort. To tempt.

"And curious," she added.

"About the stray?" I asked, allowing my mouth to curve in a slow, dangerous smile. "Or about whether she'll take your place in my bed?"

Tanya's smile didn't falter. But her fingers tightened just slightly around her goblet.

"I don't mind a little competition," she purred, voice as smooth as the wine in her goblet. "I just want to know what kind of beast earns a room in your keep rather than a collar in your cells."

Her words dripped with poison-laced sweetness, but there was steel behind them. She stepped in closer, her body a slow, practised sin. Her hand trailed along my chest, fingers light, eyes lifted beneath dark lashes. She played her role flawlessly—an Omega bred for pleasure, trained to please. She knew how to tilt her head just so, how to breathe in a way that made the air thicken.

"I could make you forget her," she whispered, the tip of her finger brushing the edge of my jaw. "Whatever she is... I know what you need."

She pressed against me. Her body soft, supple, every inch a promise. And for a moment—just a fleeting breath of old hunger—I let myself lean in.

I grabbed her. Hard.

My hand tangled in her hair as I pulled her head back, exposing her throat. Her lips parted in anticipation, breath catching. I kissed her—rough, possessive, claiming. Not gentle. Not sweet. I kissed her the way she expected from me. The way I'd done a hundred times before—on restless, blood-soaked nights when I needed to forget the weight of war, of power, of emptiness.

She moaned into my mouth, melting beneath me. I dragged her to the bed. The furs shifted beneath us as I pinned her there, her dress already slipping from her shoulder, skin flushed, scent rising. Her hands moved to undo my belt, desperate and eager.

But then —It hit me.

Her scent. It was too sweet. Too polished. Too perfect. Fake. My wolf recoiled. Not with disgust—but with rejection. This wasn't what I wanted. Not anymore.

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Her scent clashed with the one still burned into me from hours ago—salt and ash and blood and wildness. Her scent made my wolf growl, low and dissatisfied, like biting into meat gone cold and stale.

Tanya arched beneath me, lips brushing my throat. “Let me remind you who you belong to, Alpha...”

My hand caught her wrist. Hard. Her eyes opened wide as I pulled back. My gaze bored into hers, cold and sharp as a blade.

“You don’t get to remind me of anything,” I said, voice dark with finality.

She froze.

I rose slowly from the bed, tightening the belt she’d tried to undo, ignoring the confusion—and wounded pride—in her expression.

She was beautiful. Trained. Obedient. Desired. And she no longer stirred a single thing in me. Because my wolf had already chosen something else.

Something feral. Something forbidden. Something that smelled like rebellion and ruin. And she was locked upstairs, trembling under the weight of the very nature she’d tried to kill.

I kicked Tanya out with nothing more than a look and a word that was barely a growl. She tried to linger, draping herself in the doorway with that desperate smile Omegas wear when they know they’re losing their grip—but I didn’t touch her again. Didn’t

even look twice.

When the door slammed shut behind her, the silence that followed was unbearable. I didn't sleep.

The fire burned down to embers. Shadows stretched across the stone walls like claws. I paced the length of my chamber like a beast in a cage, muscles twitching with need.

My wolf gnawed at me from the inside out. I could still feel the warmth of her skin, those cursed runes like chains burned into my memory. And worse—when I closed my eyes, I imagined her without them.

I left my chamber before dawn, half-wild with thoughts I didn't want to name. Snow had started to fall by the time I reached the training grounds. The courtyard was still, the sky bruised with early light. The air was sharp, biting at the lungs, perfect for war.

Steel clanged in the distance—some of the younger wolves were already sparring. They stopped when they saw me. One look sent them scattering, giving me the ring without a word.

I drew my blade—black steel, forged in fire and violence—and took my place in the centre of the yard.

That's when Garrick stepped in, shirtless, steam rising from his skin like smoke off a fresh kill. He wore that damned grin he always had when he thought he might land a hit.

"I figured you'd still be buried between thighs this morning," he said, circling me slowly.

I said nothing. Let my silence speak for me. Let my rage speak for me. We lunged at

the same time.

The crack of our blades colliding echoed like thunder. Sparks flew as steel screamed against steel. I moved faster. Hit harder. I wasn't sparring—I was purging.

He grunted, staggered, blocked just in time as I drove him backward, each strike more vicious than the last. My blade skimmed his ribs, drawing blood. He laughed.

“Still thinking about her?” he said, breathless. “I would be.”

I snarled and slammed into him, shoulder to chest, knocking him into the snow. He rolled, sprang back up, and came at me harder.

“She's got your wolf twitching, doesn't she?” His blade met mine with a jarring clang. “No surprise. She's wild. Untouched. Broken in all the right places.”

I caught his wrist and twisted—hard. He hissed and dropped his weapon. I swept his legs out and drove him to the ground with my knee at his throat.

“I should kill you for speaking about her like that,” I growled.

But I didn't. Because he wasn't wrong. And that infuriated me more than anything.

He coughed, breath fogging in the morning air, grinning even with blood on his lip. “Three years,” he said hoarsely. “Three fucking years we hunted Crescent Moon. Burned their dens. Crushed their warriors. Slaughtered their heirs.”

I stood, my breath hard and fast. The sword in my grip trembled with how tightly I held it.

“You found the last one yourself,” Garrick said, dragging himself upright. “Didn't

even blink when you cut off his head. But now? You don't even celebrate. You don't drink. You don't fuck. You don't breathe. You just watch her."

"Because she is dangerous." I turned away from him, blood roaring in my ears.

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The fire of victory meant nothing. The taste of revenge, the triumph of blood spilled across old lands—it had dulled to ash the moment I touched her.

I turned back to Garrick with murder in my breath and steel in my hands. Our swords met again with a snarl of metal, and I pressed him hard—faster, more brutal, every strike meant to punish, not train.

He grunted as he blocked, then shouted, “Is that all it is?” Another blow. He barely deflected. “You keep her close because she’s dangerous?”

I lunged, our blades locking, faces inches apart.

“I keep her close,” I hissed, “because I need to know what kind of blasphemy she carries in that cursed body.”

My balance spiled. I shoved him back, my eyes dark with something far deeper than anger.

“That process she’s bound to—those runes, that filthy magic—it silences a wolf. Binds it. Chains it.” I spit on the snow. “Do you understand what that means, Garrick? If it can be done to her, it can be done to any of us. A leash for our kind. A way to kill the wolf without shedding a drop of blood.”

He circled me slowly, blade lowered now, watching with narrowed eyes.

“And the worst part?” I laughed bitterly. “She did it to herself. Not for survival. Not to infiltrate. But out of defiance.” Another swing. He caught it, barely, the impact

shuddering through both our arms.

“Why?” I growled, voice barely human. “Because she hates us? Because she couldn’t stand the fate that was handed to her?” I stepped in, voice dropping to something low and furious. “Or because she looked at the gift of her blood and spat on it, just to say no to what she was born to be?”

Garrick stopped cold. His brows furrowed. He took a slow breath.

“She’s... an Omega?” he asked.

There it was. The silence that followed wasn't just quiet. It was revelation. The kind of quiet that came before a storm levelled a kingdom.

I didn’t respond. I didn’t have to.

He saw the answer in my face, in my clenched jaw, in the pulse of rage flickering just under my skin. And then his expression shifted—slowly, like he was putting all the pieces together.

“That’s why you can’t stop thinking about her.” His voice dropped. “That’s why you’re watching her like she’s already yours. You don’t want to study her. You want her. You want to see what she looks like when she breaks. You want to be the one who undoes her.”

The words cut deep. Too deep.

My fist slammed into his jaw with a sickening crack, sending him spinning, blood arcing through the air. He hit the ground with a grunt, half-stunned, pain flickering across his features.

He looked up at me, breathing hard, the weight of truth between us like a blade to the throat. I turned and walked away, snow crunching under my boots, fury pulsing through every vein like wildfire.

Let the pack whisper. Let them wonder. I owed them no explanations.

CHAPTER 9

Lexa

The dungeon stench still clung to my skin, like rot soaked into the bone, but now there were silks on the bed and a fire in the hearth.

The guards moved us at dusk, silent and grim, as if they were handling something fragile—or dangerous. We were brought through winding halls and up narrow stairs, the cold stone giving way to carved wood and iron sconces that burned clean oil, not soot.

And then they opened the door.

The room wasn't extravagant. But it was...soft.

Thick wool rugs over cold stone. A modest bed with real feather-stuffed pillows and a wool quilt that smelled of cedar. A washbasin. A window—small, barred, but real. To Dain, it was a palace.

His eyes had lit up like lanterns, darting from the fire to the bed to the tiny shelf with a few worn books. He ran his hands over the quilt, grinning as he sank into the mattress with a groan of delight.

“This is the best bed I’ve ever seen, Lexi,” he said, half-laughing as he flopped back,

arms wide. “You think they made this just for kings?”

I smiled for him. I even let my fingers brush the edge of the mattress.

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But my stomach turned. Because I had known better. Once.

Before the sea wind, before the hunger, before the knives and the runes and the long, cold nights praying the next full moon didn't tear me in half.

I'd known luxury—back when I was still a daughter of the South. Before I chose exile over obedience.

Back when I lived in my family's estate, where everything was curated and pristine—where the air always smelled faintly of rose oil and something too sweet, like decay hiding under perfume.

Where the windows had bars not for safety, but for training. The memories came clawing through me in the dark, long after Dain had drifted to sleep. I sat by the fire, staring at the flames, and let the past creep in through the cracks in my silence.

I remembered the heat of summer trapped inside the training house. My sisters and I sitting in a line, draped in pale silks, wrists tied gently with red cord so we wouldn't fidget. So we wouldn't forget.

And the voice of Mistress Halra, sharp and honeyed, circling us like a serpent.

“A good Omega never lifts her gaze unless told.”

“A good Omega does not challenge. She invites.”

“A good Omega's body is not hers. It is a gift to be given when the Alpha is ready.”

I was thirteen the first time I heard her describe—in clinical,disgusting detail—how to breathe, arch, moan on command.

My stomach had roiled. I'd bit my tongue until it bled. And Halra had smiled. "You'll thank me when your Alpha knows your worth. When he chooses you."

I had wanted to scream.

Instead, I waited until nightfall, crept into the washroom, and vomited until my knees gave out. That was the day I decided. I wouldn't be what they wanted.

Not then. Not ever. And now, years later, here I was. In another gilded cage. Another locked room built by wolves who thought obedience was carved, not earned.

I fell asleep as the first rays of sun crawled across the floor like fingers trying to reach me.It wasn't rest. It was collapse. The kind of sleep that drags you under like a tide and leaves your limbs heavy, your chest burning, your mind too fractured to dream.

But it didn't last.I woke to cold air and emptiness. The bed beside me was already cooling. Dain's warmth—gone. His voice wasn't in the room. His footsteps hadn't stirred the rug. He was gone.

I was on my feet before I could think, the blanket falling from my shoulders, the soft cotton shift clinging to my skin as I rushed to the door.

"Open it!" I slammed my fist against the wood. "Where is he?"

Two guards stood on the other side, unmoved, stone-eyed. The same bastards who'd dragged me through these halls like a corpse that refused to die.

"Let me out!" I screamed, pounding harder.

They didn't move. I didn't care. My fists hit harder. I kicked the door. I slammed my shoulder against it again and again until pain bloomed bright and sharp in my bones.

"Where is he? Where's my son?"

The guards exchanged a glance—just a flicker of unease—then stepped back when I launched at them, wild and thrashing. They grabbed my arms, struggling to hold me down, and even tied, I made them work for every second.

"I'll kill you if anything's happened to him," I snarled. "I'll gut you—"

"Enough."

The voice came from the corridor. Calm. Measured. That Beta. Garrick stepped into view, hands raised slightly, as if trying to placate a rabid animal. His eyes swept over me—hair tangled, face flushed, arms bruised from the struggle—and something like amusement flickered at the corner of his mouth.

"Let her go," he told the guards.

They hesitated, then obeyed.

I ripped away from them and faced him, chest heaving, my wrists burning from the iron cuffs.

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“Where is my son?”

“He’s not yourson,” Garrick said simply. “But if you mean theboy, he’s fine. He woke early. Said he was hungry. He’s downstairs having breakfast with some of the others. One of the servants is bringing something up for you too—”

“I don’t want your food!” I roared, voice raw. “I want him! I want to see that he’s safe, not hear it from the mouths of wolves who would rip us apart if your Alpha said the word!”

Garrick’s eyes darkened, but before he could speak—A laugh. Low. Cruel. Silken like oil, and twice as filthy. It drifted down the corridor behind him, sweet as rot. Familiar. I turned toward it just as she stepped into view.

Her. ThatOmega.

The polished one. The one I’d seen that first day. The one with the silk dress and perfect skin and eyes like poisoned glass. She leaned against the stone archway like she was posing for a portrait, smiling like a cat that had already eaten the canary.

“Oh, how the mighty crumble,” she purred, her voice thick with venomous delight. “You’re far louder than you were in the dungeon. Is that what motherhood looks like on a stray?”

“Tanya,” Garrick said, warning in his voice. “Not now.”

But the woman wasn’t done.

She stepped closer, gaze sliding over me with distaste. “I expected something more... threatening. You were quite the little terror when you arrived. I heard you even bit one of our men. How uncivilized.”

I didn't speak. I stared. My silence made her grin.

“I suppose the only thing more pathetic than a feral Omega is one pretending to be human.” She laughed, delicate and cruel. “You should see yourself. Hair like a nest. Clothes wrinkled. Eyes wild. It's almost quaint.”

I didn't move. But gods—I wanted to.

Creatures like her never stopped when they tasted blood. And right now, she thought I was bleeding. She stepped forward, each movement deliberate—hips swaying, chin lifted, voice dripping with courtly sweetness and barely veiled scorn.

“You know,” she said, looking me up and down as though I were something clinging to the bottom of her shoe, “in the courts down south, they would've stripped you bare and paraded you through the halls for what you did. Fighting guards. Snarling like a beast.”

I didn't flinch.

“I suppose you never learned how to be chosen.” She smiled, slow and wicked. “Alphas don't want broken things, little stray. They want silk. Grace. Loyalty.”

I laughed. Quiet, low, humourless.

“Oh, spare me your shitty games,” I said. “I was raised in a house where girls were trained to smile with their mouths closed and bleed with their thighs open.” I took a slow step toward her, savouring the flicker in her eyes. “You don't scare me,

Tanya. You're not dangerous. You're just decorative."

Her eyes narrowed, but she didn't strike back with her hands—no, she wasn't that kind of wolf. Tanya used words like daggers dipped in perfume.

I turned and walked away, back toward the room that had been transformed into my cage. The guards watched every step I took, eyes following me like I might explode again—and maybe I would.

My fingertips trembled. Not with rage. With something worse. It slithered down my spine like smoke curling under locked doors.

I touched the wall as I passed it, steadying myself. Something was wrong. Behind me, Tanya scoffed, voice lifting again—loud enough that she wanted me to hear.

"You should keep her locked down tighter," she said to Garrick. "She looks like a bitch in heat already. Maybe your Alpha should've let me handle her."

I stopped. Dead in my tracks.

Garrick's voice followed, tense and sharp. "You shouldn't be here, Tanya."

Her tone turned syrupy. "And you should be careful how you speak to me, Beta. Considering how many times I've warmed the Alpha's bed, you might be looking at your future Luna."

The word hit me like a fist to the chest. Something in my body snapped. I gasped—sharp and involuntary—as the first rune cracked. Not physically, but inside. The magic it held unravelling in a pulse of pain that stole the air from my lungs. My knees nearly buckled. Heat surged down my spine, real now. Alive.

No. No, not now—

I turned, vision blurring. Tanya was still smirking. Still looking at me like I was less than dirt.

And I lunged.

I don't remember crossing the space between us. One heartbeat I was at the threshold, the next I had my hands tangled in her perfect hair, dragging her down, slamming her back against the stone wall.

She shrieked. I hit her again. And again. Fists like fury. Her lip split. Her head cracked against stone. She tried to claw me, but she wasn't trained for this. She was bred for seduction, not survival.

It wasn't until I heard Garrick shouting—felt his arms around me, dragging me off—that I realized how close I'd come to tearing her throat out.

“Lexa!” he roared, barely holding me back. “Stop!”

I thrashed against him, eyes wild, teeth bared, my entire body burning. He forced me back, step by step, into my room. I fought him, limbs shaking, the taste of blood still on my tongue. He slammed the door shut behind me and locked it, panting.

I collapsed to the floor.

Pain bloomed under my skin, low and deep and hot. My back seared, the broken rune flaring like open flame. I bit down on a scream and curled against the wall, hands fisted in the sheets, breath shuddering.

The pain was a beast inside my bones.

It clawed its way up my spine, hot and sharp, chewing through sinew and scar, dragging my breath ragged through clenched teeth. I curled tighter into the floor, nails scraping the stone, my jaw locked around the scream I wouldn't give them.

I heard Garrick's boots pacing just beyond the door. I felt his hesitation like a pressure in the air—he wanted to summon him.

Andros. The Alpha.

No. No, no, no.

“Don't!” I gasped, forcing myself upright, my body shuddering under the weight of the breaking magic. “Don't bring him. Please—please, Garrick, don't—”

He turned toward me, brows drawn, mouth grim.

“I need to send for the Alpha,” he said, cold and clipped. “He needs to see what's happening.”

I stumbled to my feet, catching the wall for balance. “It'll pass,” I panted. “It'll hurt—for a while—but I've had one break before. I just need time. I can go back. I have coin. I just—just let me go to the witch and have it recarved—”

“No.”

His voice cut like steel. Final. Merciless.

“No more witches. No more runes. No more magic.” His eyes narrowed. “My Alpha gave an order. You'll stay here. You'll let it unravel. And I'll see it done.”

My breath caught. My throat closed.

“You don’t understand,” I whispered. “You don’t know what it feels like. That thing inside me—it’s not me. It’s wild, Garrick. It’s teeth and instinct and heat, and I don’t know how to live with it.”

I pressed my hands to my chest as if I could hold it back, as if I could keep the wolf inside from crawling free now that the first chain had shattered. “It’s never been awake this long before—if the rest of them break—”

“You’ll survive,” he said. “That’s what wolves do.”

I looked up at him. Begged. “Let me go.”

“No.”

“Please—”

His eyes flickered, for a moment, with something like pity. But it wasn’t soft. It was the pity you give a starving dog who bit its own tongue trying not to howl.

“You carved your wolf into silence like it was some disease,” he said. “You butchered what the gods gave you. And now you beg to keep butchering it?”

I turned away, ashamed of the tears stinging my eyes. He stepped closer, voice low with fury.

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“That thing inside you—it’s not a curse. It’s a blessing. And you should be ashamed. Ashamed that you spent your life trying to kill it.”

I wanted to scream at him. Tell him it wasn’t a gift. Not for me. Not for girls born Omega in the courts of the South. But the pain rose again, drowning the words in fire. I sank to my knees, shivering as heat spread across my back, across the remnants of the runes that still held—barely.

He watched me crumble but the pain didn’t last. It never did. That was the cruel part. It came like a firestorm—violent, blinding, enough to make me think it would end me—and then it ebbed, leaving only ash and a hollow echo in my chest where silence used to live.

The rune was gone.

I could feel the emptiness it left behind, like a tooth ripped from the bone. But the rest still held. For now. I stayed on the floor, breath shallow, forehead pressed to the cool stone. The ache had faded to a dull throb beneath my skin, but I didn’t move. I couldn’t trust myself not to fall apart again.

Garrick didn’t speak. He just... watched.

Then, without a word, he stepped out. I heard the soft clink of a pitcher, the scrape of metal against wood, and when he returned, he held out a cup. Water. Cold and clean. He set it beside me on the floor and moved to the door again.

“Food’s coming,” he muttered to the guard stationed outside. “Tell the kitchen to

make it hot.”

He came back in, crouched beside me, silent. Not cruel. Not kind either. Just there. When I finally sat up, my limbs felt heavy, my breath still shaky.

“...Thank you,” I said, voice low. “For not calling him.”

His eyes flicked toward me, unreadable. “Didn’t think he’d help.”

“He wouldn’t.”

We sat in silence for a moment. The fire cracked in the hearth. I pulled the cup into my hands and drank greedily, the water sharp and cold against my throat.

A knock came, and Garrick rose to collect the tray. He brought it over and set it in front of me—bread, stewed meat, a slice of hard cheese. Simple. But warm. And enough.

I didn’t hesitate. I ate like someone who didn’t know if she’d get another chance.

“You’ve been starving,” he muttered.

“Wasn’t exactly feasting on the docks,” I said between bites.

He huffed something close to a laugh, leaned against the edge of the hearth, arms crossed. We didn’t speak for a while. Then his voice broke the quiet, low and casual—too casual.

“What broke it?”

I stopped chewing. Looked up slowly.

“What?”

“The rune.” He nodded toward me. “What cracked it? Was it the word Luna?” A pause. Then, lower: “Or the image of another woman in the Alpha’s bed?”

I didn’t answer. My jaw clenched, and the low sound I made was closer to a growl than a word. He smiled.

“I’ll take that as a mix of both.”

“Don’t push me,” I warned.

He just laughed again, a breath of sound through his nose, dark and knowing. “You think you’re confused? You should’ve seen him yesterday.”

I frowned, but didn’t ask. He told me anyway.

“I brought up your name. Just to test him. Asked if you were worth the trouble.”

He glanced at me, lips twitching into a grin.

“He broke my jaw.”

I blinked.

“Didn’t even say a word. Just punched me. Right there in the sparring ring. Dropped me like a sack of bricks.” He touched his chin as if recalling the sting. “I’ve fought beside that man for fifteen years and I’ve never seen him lose control like that.”

I didn’t know what to say. Because I didn’t know what it meant. And worse—I didn’t know why something deep inside me liked it. A little too much.

I was halfway through tearing into the bread when Garrick started talking again. At first, I thought he was just trying to fill the silence—some men couldn’t stand it, especially wolves—but then I realized he wasn’t just talking.

He was choosing his words.

“There was a battle two winters ago,” he began, his tone light, like he was reminiscing. “Deep in the Black Pines. Crescent Moon had taken one of our outposts, killed everyone inside. We were outnumbered, ambushed. I thought we were done. Andros didn’t hesitate. He took five men, cut through their front lines like they were wheat under a blade.”

I didn’t look up. Just tore off another piece of bread, chewed slowly.

“He dragged one of their Alphas back alive. Threw him at the feet of his own pack and told them to kneel or die. He didn’t have to kill the rest. They broke themselves trying to follow him after that.”

“Don’t try to talk him up in front of me,” I muttered. “I know what he is.”

“That wasn’t the point of the story.” He pushed off the hearth, crossing the room to pour himself a cup of water. “The point was to tell you how well-trained our fighters are. How careful the trainers are with their students. How much we value structure. Control.”

My eyes narrowed. The food sat heavier in my stomach now.

“What’s this really about, Garrick?”

He stilled. Avoided my gaze. That was the first real sign something wasn’t right. A man like him—broad, scarred, always walking like he was half a breath away from battle—avoiding a stray Omega’s eyes?

“Out with it.”

He cleared his throat and glanced at the door.

“After breakfast,” he said finally, “I found the boy.”

That word pierced me sharper than any knife.

“Dain?”

He nodded. “He was outside. Near the training fields. Watching the pups. He asked if he could train.”

I sat frozen. The words didn’t register at first.

“With swords,” Garrick added, almost gently now. “He said he wanted to learn how

to fight. Said he wanted to protect you.”

I swallowed hard. “He’s just a child.”

Garrick nodded. “I know. That’s why I didn’t give him an answer. Not until I spoke to you first.”

The food turned to ash in my mouth. My son—my little boy who still held my hand when the wind howled too loud at night—asking to be turned into one of them.

And all I could think was: This place is already changing him.

Fury was instant. It hit like a spark to dry kindling.

“Was this Andros’s idea? Is that how he means to punish me? Rip the boy from me and train him like one of his wolves? Put a sword in his hands and call it protection?”

My voice cracked, sharp and raw. The image of Dain—my Dain—surrounded by snarling pups and blades dulled for practice, bloodied in the snow while they moulded him into something brutal, something like them, twisted my stomach.

Garrick didn’t flinch. He just lifted his hands slowly, palms out. “It wasn’t Andros’s idea.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Don’t lie to me.”

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“I’m not.” His voice was calm. Steady. “If it was his command, I wouldn’t be here asking you politely. I’d be delivering an order.”

That silenced me. The truth of it sank in cold and deep. If the Alpha had wanted Dain taken... he would be gone. No discussion. No questions. No choice.

That thought alone sent a shiver down my spine.

“Then why ask? Why even pretend to give me a voice?” I crossed my arms over my chest, voice low. “If I say no, will it matter? Will you listen?”

Garrick tilted his head, and for a moment, the grin that broke across his mouth made him look younger, less like a soldier, more like a man who remembered how to laugh.

“In case you’ve been away from wolves too long, Lexa, let me remind you—nothing has changed.” He leaned against the wall, arms folded. “Politics are still politics. Even in a blood-soaked pack like ours.”

I frowned.

“Sure, we all answer to the same Alpha. But it’s nice to have friends in high places. Especially when certain... ambitious bitches want to claw their way to the top. She’d throw me out the first chance she got if she ever managed to get crowned Luna. Which, gods forbid, might actually happen if the Alpha ever starts thinking with the wrong head.”

“And what, you think being friendly with me is going to save you from her claws?”

He chuckled. “No. But I’d rather have astray at my Alphas side than a poisoned rose.”

I stared at him. And despite the fire still simmering in my chest... gods help me—I smiled.

CHAPTER 10

Andros

The scent of blood seeped through the cracks like a warning—thick, metallic, and wrong. Then the door slammed open.

Tanya stormed into my study like a storm in silk, a fury wrapped in gold and bruises. Her lip was torn, bleeding down her chin in a thin crimson line, and her cheek—gods—her cheek was already turning the color of violets crushed underfoot. But she walked tall, chin up, spine straight, the picture of beautiful rage.

My wolf stirred immediately. Not with concern. With indignation. This wasn’t about her pain. This was about mine.

I stood slowly, letting the silence stretch until it became suffocating. Letting the pressure build behind my eyes, behind my chest. Letting the violence settle into my voice before I spoke.

“What. Happened.”

Tanya’s eyes glistened, but no tears fell. She didn’t need them. She knew better than to cry—she knew how to twist suffering into performance.

“That thing,” she hissed, voice sharp with venom, “the stray you dragged into this keep—she attacked me.”

She stepped closer, her movements deliberate, measured, and angry. Not fragile—furious. And beneath the fury, something worse: triumph.

“She lunged at me. No provocation. No reason. Like a beast. She bloodied my mouth and slammed my head against the wall. She meant to disfigure me.”

She raised her hand, fingers stained red, held it out like an offering. “This is what your mercy has brought into our home.”

I moved without thinking. The chair behind me screeched across the stone and crashed to the floor, forgotten. My hands were clenched at my sides, every tendon pulled tight beneath the skin.

She dared. Lexa dared. To strike one of mine. In my house. Under my protection.

It didn’t matter that Tanya made my skin crawl. It didn’t matter that my wolf rejected her scent, her softness, her submission. She was still part of my pack.

And Lexa wasn’t.

“Guards!” I snarled, voice like stone shattering under pressure. “Bring her to me. Now.”

Tanya smiled then. Just a little. The curve of someone who knew they’d played the game and won this round. She stepped closer, bruises shining in the firelight, leaned on the edge of my desk as if it were her throne.

“You promised to protect us,” she murmured. “All of us. Even me. She drew blood, Andros. That can’t go unanswered.”

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Her hand reached toward mine—hesitating, not quite touching. “You swore an oath. To lead. To keep your pack safe.”

And she was right. The oath burned behind my ribs like a brand. I was Alpha. My word wasn’t law—it was goddamn gospel. And a wolf who attacked my own within these walls, without mark or place or bond, was no better than a rogue.

Lexa had stepped over a line. And for that, there would be retribution.

The door groaned open like a grave disturbed. And then they brought her in. Gone was the filth of the docks, the stench of sea rot and desperation. They had scrubbed her clean, but not soft. Dressed her in deep forest green, a colour that clung to her like moss over stone. It didn’t make her look tamed.

It made her look dangerous.

Her hair was damp, hanging in ink-dark strands down her back, framing her pale face like the mourning veil of a goddess long since buried. Her hands were cuffed in black iron, runes etched into the steel—standard for feral rogues.

But she didn’t hang her head. She didn’t tremble or look away. She walked into my study like she owned the space. Like the firelight was hers. Like she’d walked through every circle of hell to get here and hadn’t bowed to a single one.

She didn’t look at Tanya. Not once. She looked at me. Eyes sharp, straw-coloured, glinting like glass right before it shatters. She looked like ruin barely contained by skin. Like defiance stitched together with scars. And still, even now, she was fucking

beautiful.

Tanya's voice slashed through the quiet like a poisoned blade.

"She cleans up decently," she said, smug curling around every syllable. "Finally doesn't smell like she fucked a fishmonger on a pile of rotting nets."

Crack. I didn't think. Didn't breathe.

I crossed the room in a breath, boots hammering the stone, and stood in front of Lexa before the echo of Tanya's cruelty had even faded.

Lexa didn't flinch. Didn't back away. But I could feel it in her. The coil of tension beneath the surface. The hum of barely-restrained instinct. Not fear. Never fear.

"I brought you into my walls," I said, voice like razors dragging across stone. "Fed you. Gave your boy warmth and protection. I let you live under the roof of the pack you were too wild to deserve."

Her jaw clenched, but she didn't speak.

She didn't have to. The fire in her eyes screamed every insult she refused to spit.

"And this is how you repay that?" My voice rose, sharp and vicious. "You maul an Omega. In my halls. In front of my guards. You stain what we protect."

"She provoked me," Lexa said. Her voice didn't shake. If anything, it was colder than mine.

"She is pack," I snarled. "She is an Omega. Sacred. Cherished. Obeyed. And you—" I stepped in, so close our breath collided, "—you are nothing but a stray bitch snapping

at scraps that were never meant for you.”

Behind me, Tanya gave a delicate sigh, dripping with mock sorrow.

“Tell her, Alpha,” she cooed. “Tell her what happens to mutts who forget their place. You can’t polish filth.”

I leaned in, low, just enough to make sure no one else could hear but her.

“You will apologize,” I whispered, my voice sharp as teeth. “You will fall to your knees, not because I want it—but because you owe it. Now.”

She didn’t kneel. She stood there, cuffed, surrounded by guards and rage and blood, and still—she didn’t bend. I could feel every eye in the room locked on her. On me. Waiting.

Lexa raised her chin, her eyes burning—not with fear, but with something colder. Something unholy. And then she smiled. Not sweet. Not soft. A wolf’s smile. All teeth and defiance.

“No,” she said. One word. And it detonated in the center of my chest.

“I’m not apologizing. Not to you. Not to that knot-starved bitch in heat who thinks a little perfume and a warm cunt earns her a crown.”

Tanya choked on a gasp, hand flying to her chest. Her lip was still split, blood painting her teeth red. “She attacked me!” she shrieked. “You heard that—you saw what she did to me!”

But Lexa wasn’t done.

“I don’t owe either of you a godsdamned thing,” she spat, her voice sharp enough to cut flesh. “You fed me? Kept the boy from freezing?” She leaned forward in her chains, the iron biting as they clinked with the motion. “Don’t confuse basic survival with mercy. You didn’t save us. You caged us.”

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My wolf surged beneath my skin, snarling, pacing. I clenched my jaw to keep him down.

Lexa locked eyes with me, cold and unflinching.

“Don’t you dare start preaching to me about traditions, or roles, or whatever sanctified bullshit you Alphas chant to make yourselves feel righteous while you rut through omegas like dogs. You can dress it up in silk and gold, call it sacred, divine, fated—but in the end? It’s still just animals clawing each other in the dirt, pretending their urges are holy so they don’t have to choke on the truth. It’s not mating. It’s masking.”

The room went still. Even the fire dared not crackle.

Tanya stepped forward, her voice trembling with outrage. “You can’t let her speak like that—she’s not even one of us! She’s filth. Rogue-born—feral trash who—”

Lexa didn’t even look at her. Her gaze stayed fixed on mine.

“You said it yourself,” she said, voice quiet now, but deadly. “I’m not pack. So I don’t bow. Not to you—and sure as hell not to your Luna.”

The word sliced the air like a blade, sharp and final.

My voice dropped into a growl. “What did you just say?”

Lexa smiled then. Slow. Venomous. I’d seen wolves bare their teeth in warning with

more restraint.

“Oh. You didn’t know?” she said, almost sweet. “That’s what she calls herself. When you’re not around. In front of your guards. In front of your Beta.”

My eyes slid to Garrick. He didn’t speak. Didn’t shift. Just nodded. Once. That was all it took. Everything inside me cracked. Heat rose in my chest—burning, blinding, lethal. The fury wasn’t just mine—it belonged to every Alpha who ever ruled with law and blood and iron.

“Everyone. Out.” My voice boomed through the stone walls like a hammer.

The guards left without a word. Garrick followed, eyes heavy on me. Only Tanya remained.

She stepped forward again, shaking, voice rising. “You can’t—Andros, she assaulted me—where’s my apology—”

“Get. The fuck. Out.”

“But..”

“You call yourself Luna again,” I hissed, “and I’ll strip your tongue from your skull and mount it on the gates as a reminder of what happens to liars in my court.”

Her face crumbled. Then hardened. She spun and stormed out, the scent of her bleeding pride fouling the air behind her. The door slammed shut behind Tanya like judgment itself. The echo rang down the hall, leaving behind only silence—and Lexa.

She stood there, cuffed in black iron, her chest rising and falling with every breath like she’d just won a battle. And maybe she had. Maybe throwing the truth into the

room like a lit match was her victory. But as I turned back toward her, the space between us tightened like a snare, and I felt the shift. The air thickened. Heated. The flames in the hearth danced higher, reflecting in her eyes like molten glass.

I stepped closer, slow and deliberate, until I could see the tension in her shoulders, the tremble just under her skin. Not fear. Not anticipation. It was restraint.

She was holding herself together by threads, and I was about to pull them all.

“What really happened,” I said, voice low, slow, curling like smoke through the space between us. “Not Tanya’s version. Not the guards’ reports. Yours. Tell me what made you snap.”

Her jaw clenched. She looked away for half a breath, then back again, her eyes colder now, harder.

“The rune,” she said.

I raised a brow.

“It broke. It—it messed with my mind. My control.” She bit the inside of her cheek like she hated even saying it. “I lost my temper. That’s all it was.”

I didn’t believe her. Not for a second. But gods, I liked the sound of her scrambling for composure. Then she tilted her head, and her entire expression changed. Her voice dropped into something silken, warm honey over steel.

“My apologies,” she said sweetly, lips curving into something dangerous. “My Alpha.”

The sound of those words in that voice... It punched straight into my gut. My wolf

reared, clawing at the inside of my chest like it recognized the tone. That purring, submissive lilt was the kind of music he was bred to obey. To take. To own. I smiled slowly. Darkly. Stepped closer until we were breath to breath.

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“Careful,” I murmured. “You use that voice again, and I won’t promise to keep my wolf on a leash.”

She didn’t back down. She leaned in further, eyes gleaming, and gave me a sharp, wicked grin.

“Oh no,” she whispered, mock-innocent. “What will happen, Alpha? You’ll rut me in front of your guards to prove I’m yours? Claim me, knot me, breed me?” Her tone turned to poison wrapped in silk. “Isn’t that what your kind lives for? Find the broken little omega, wrap her in chains, and fuck the fight out of her?”

My smile was slow. Dark. Dangerous.

“That’s exactly what I’d do,” I said, voice like gravel soaked in sin. “To any other omega.”

I leaned in, close enough that my breath traced the shell of her ear. “But not to you.”

She stiffened beneath me, still pinned against the stone wall, her wrists bound and her chest rising and falling with each shallow breath.

“With you,” I whispered, “there would be no control. No performance. I’d tear the magic from your skin and defile you with no mercy. No knots. No claiming. Just ruin. Until there’s nothing left but the sound of you breaking.”

Lexa slowly tilted her head, her lip curling into a sneer as she looked down at her chipped nails, as if bored.

“Are we done here?” she asked flatly, unimpressed.

Gods, I wanted to laugh.

Instead, I stepped back, giving her space, just enough to pour myself a drink. The dark red wine glinted in the goblet as I raised it to my mouth, took a long sip, then offered it to her with a nod. She arched a brow.

“I don’t drink with the enemy,” she said coldly.

I took another sip, eyes never leaving hers.

“Just a curiosity,” I murmured. “A personal one.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t move.

“You’re what... almost thirty?” I asked casually, swirling the wine. “In all these years of running, hiding, bleeding... have you ever—”

“Is this your way of asking if I’m a virgin?” she cut in, voice dripping with scorn. Her lips curved into a mocking smile. “Sorry to disappoint you, my Alpha—”

There it was again. That voice. That fucking voice.

My wolf growled inside me, clawing at the inside of my skull, demanding. It didn’t care that she said it with sarcasm. It only heard the submission it was bred to crave.

“I’m not,” she continued, calm as frost. “Whatever fantasy you’ve been building behind that wine and that scowl, kill it.”

I raised a brow, lips twitching into a smirk. “Let me guess. Only humans. Makes

sense—since you hate your own kind so much.”

Her eyes narrowed, green and cutting like broken emeralds.

“What do you care?” she snapped. “Or do you just get off on imagining it?”

I chuckled, low and slow, finishing my drink.

“Now,” she said, voice hard, “are we done here? Or do you want me to mop the floor with another one of your delusional little omegas?”

As she turned her back on me, chin high, chains clinking with every calculated step, something dark uncoiled in my gut—something base and vicious and entirely wolf.

I didn’t let it show. Instead, I set down the empty goblet and called out, calm and clear, “Guards.”

The doors opened immediately.

“Take her back,” I ordered, not looking at her now. I didn’t have to. “Lock the door. No visitors. No distractions. Feed the boy. Watch her.”

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She turned her head just enough to flash me one last smirk—sharp, cruel, satisfied. The kind of look that belonged on a wolf with blood on her teeth.

And then they led her out. The door closed behind them, the silence folding in around me like a tomb.

I sat down heavily, the fire cracking in the hearth the only sound left. The scent of her still clung to the room—not her body, no. That had been scrubbed clean. But the aura of her, the storm she carried in her voice, still stirred the air. I stared at the stack of reports on my desk—border updates, trade supply shortages, Crescent Moon loyalists in hiding—but the words blurred into nothing.

My hand gripped the edge of the desk until the wood groaned. It wasn't her defiance that haunted me. It was the mockery in her voice.

My Alpha.

She'd said it with venom, with a sneer. And still... fuck. My cock twitched.

Not because of her words—because of the way she said them. That silken purr, that bitter surrender laced with scorn, the sound of submission spoken like a challenge.

My Alpha.

I could see it. Clear as the moon at midnight. Lexa on her knees before me. Blood on her lip. Runes half-broken and glowing beneath her skin. Her mouth parted, her eyes wild, and that voice—that voice—whispering those same words with heat instead of

hate.

My Alpha.Gods. I raked a hand through my hair, breath shallow, skin burning with something primal, filthy, and wrong. She hated me. Hated wolves. Hated what she was. And still I wanted her—on her knees, chained or not, ruined or raging—mine.

And the worst part? I didn't want to tame her. I wanted her to stay wild so I could be the one to break her.

CHAPTER 11

Andros

The knock on my door came just after dawn, sharp and urgent. I was already awake. I hadn't slept. Not with her voice still clawing at the edges of my mind like a lullaby gone wrong.

Garrick entered without waiting for permission. He didn't need it. I could tell by the look in his eyes that something was wrong—real wrong.

“Village to the east,” he said grimly. “Attacked in the night. Three dead. Two missing. Smoke spotted at the tree line.”

I didn't ask who. I already knew.

“Crescent Moon?” I asked anyway.

He nodded. “Loyalists. Survivors, most likely. Or the ones too cowardly to die with the rest.”

My jaw clenched. The bastards were supposed to be dead. Broken. Gone. I'd gutted

their Alpha and spilled the blood of his sons on snow-covered soil. The last heir fell by my hand, and still the ghosts of that rotted pack refused to lie down.

I stood, already strapping on my armor.

“Ready five men,” I ordered. “We leave in ten.”

Garrick nodded and vanished, efficient as ever.

The keep stirred behind me as I made my way to the stables. Wolves moved out of my path without a word, sensing the weight of the storm in my steps. The sky outside was a sheet of white, snow falling thick and steady. The wind was cutting, feral. This wasn't a gentle snowfall—it was a blizzard with teeth. The kind that ate bone and buried the weak.

Perfect hunting weather.

By the time we rode out, the sun was nothing more than a smudge behind grey clouds. Visibility was shit. Wind howled through the trees like a mourning chorus, biting through our cloaks and icing our beards. But none of us slowed.

We followed the path east, past the frost-choked rivers and dead fields, until even the horses began to falter. Then we left them behind, moving on foot through knee-deep drifts, senses sharp.

No one complained. This wasn't the kind of pack that needed comfort to kill. We moved like shadows—silent, cold, focused. The blizzard covered most of the tracks, but not all. A footprint here, a snapped branch there. Wolves learned to read the quiet between movements, the broken silences in the snow.

By nightfall, we found blood. Frozen into the snow. Fresh enough to make my wolf

lift its head and snarl. We were close. Close enough to taste vengeance on the wind.

The storm worsened as night swallowed the last traces of trail. Snow came down in thick sheets now, blinding and relentless, coating the world in silence and white death. The wind howled through the cliffs like a cursed thing, threatening to knock us off our feet if we pushed any farther.

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We'd tracked them as far as the lower pass, but in these conditions, we'd lose more than time if we kept going—we'd lose men.

So we made camp.

The fire took time. Wind stole every spark we tried to strike, but we knew the tricks. Dry bark tucked inside cloaks. A hollow carved into the drift. Garrick got it burning while the others pitched the canvas shelter. It wasn't comfort—it was survival. And we knew the difference.

The six of us huddled around the flames, steam rising from our breath, the silence heavy but not unpleasant. We were tired. Hungry. But close. The blood trail wouldn't hold through another snowfall, but the scent lingered. Faint. Stale. But there.

We'd find them come dawn.

As the others dozed, weapons close, I sat beside Garrick, nursing the heat with gloved hands, jaw tight against the cold. He passed me a flask. I took a swig and didn't ask what it was. It burned like hell going down.

After a long silence, I finally spoke.

"You ever... think I'm handling this all wrong?" I didn't look at him, just watched the fire curl around a blackened log. "Lexa, I mean."

Garrick didn't answer right away. I could feel him watching me.

“She’s not like the others,” he said at last.

That made me snort. “No shit.”

“No,” he said, firmer now. “I mean really not. She’s not playacting. She’s not simpering for your attention or grooming herself to become Luna. She’s not afraid of you. She’s not even trying to survive. She’s just... existing. Fierce as she is wounded.”

I turned toward him, narrowing my eyes.

“You almost sound like you admire her.”

He shrugged. “Maybe I do.”

I watched him for a beat. The flames crackled between us.

“You’ve never liked any of them,” I said. “Not the Omegas. Not the Betas. Not even the ones the Elders picked. After all the partners I’ve had, all the women that came and went... you’ve hated them all.” I leaned back. “So why her?”

He didn’t answer right away. Just stared into the fire, jaw tense.

“Because she doesn’t want you.”

That caught me off guard.

“She’s not playing the game. She’s not angling for a title. She’s not climbing some invisible ladder to the Alpha’s bed. She doesn’t care what you are.” He glanced over, expression unreadable. “And for once, I get to see you off balance.”

“That what this is about? You enjoying watching me crawl?”

“No,” he said, and this time his voice was quiet. Honest. “It’s about seeing someone call you out. No fear. No seduction. Just truth.”

I didn’t respond. Because he was right. And that truth was the one thing I didn’t know what the fuck to do with.

Sleep took me like a fist to the chest—sudden, heavy, unwanted. I didn’t remember closing my eyes. One moment I was staring at the flames, the next I was deep in the dark.

But it wasn’t the storm I dreamt of. It was her. Lexa. That first moment, burned into me like a brand. Her standing in that windswept, salt-stained village. Snow tangled in her hair. Her eyes green fire in a world of frost.

She didn’t cower. Not when my wolves circled her. Not when I touched her. Not even when I pressed her against her own wall and demanded to know what pack she served. She lied to my face with her teeth bared like a blade.

And I’d wanted her. Even then.

I woke just before dawn, heart pounding, hands clenched, the scent of smoke and steel heavy around me. The fire had died down, but the storm had passed. The snow had eased into silence, and above us, the sky was a deep bruised grey, clear enough for tracking.

We broke camp fast. None of us were in the mood to speak. The trail was cold, but the air was crisp—still enough wind to carry scent if you knew how to catch it. We picked it up again just past the ridge: blood, smoke, piss.

Human.

“Could be the Crescent cowards,” Garrick muttered beside me, his breath fogging in the morning chill. “Moving light. Hiding like rats.”

We pushed forward, winding through the pass—frost-slicked ledges and jagged rocks where a single misstep could snap bone. I took the lead with Garrick beside me, but just behind us, I could hear the steady steps of him.

Roran.

An Alpha from the Eastern wilds. Sharp-eyed. Sharper tongue. Dressed in that same deep crimson and black, his coat trimmed in dark fur and lined with silver thread—just flashy enough to remind everyone he was born rich and wanted more. Always more. But what set him apart wasn’t his clothes, or the smugness in his smirk—it was the thin silver ring pierced through his right eyebrow. A ridiculous thing to wear in battle, but I’d seen him use it to distract his prey more than once. That glint caught in torchlight always came just before blood hit the snow.

I didn’t like him. Never had. But he was a hell of a tracker—and that’s always the curse with Alphas: they’re useful until they start looking at your throne like it’s owed to them.

Roran hadn’t crossed the line. Yet. But I’d seen the look in his eyes more than once. Challenge.

We followed the scent to a clearing—half-buried in snow, ringed with broken stones

and blackened roots. There were signs of a small camp: dying embers under a half-burnt log, bones stripped of meat, piss frozen in the dirt.

Then we found them. Six of them. Dirty. Starving. Huddled behind makeshift barricades of rotting timber and bent steel. Not wolves. Humans.

They froze when they saw us, wild-eyed and pale. One broke immediately, turned to run. Another—a boy, barely a man—pulled a rusted dagger and lunged like he had something to prove.

Garrick caught him mid-charge.

Dragged him by the throat and slammed him against a rock with a wet crack. The others didn't even resist after that. My wolves bound them in seconds. This wasn't a fight. It was a clean-up.

I stepped toward the boy Garrick had pinned, watching blood run from his nose, down his chin.

“Where are your wolves?” I asked.

He just whimpered. No more than twenty. Skin stretched too tight over cheekbones. Filthy. Bones like twigs under his torn shirt. He smelled like fear and rot and false promises.

“We—we don't...” he gasped. “We were told to wait. We were just doing what they said. And attack on the night of the new moon... we.. did..as they said.”

Garrick slammed a fist into his ribs. Bone gave with a wet crunch. The boy shrieked, legs buckling.

“Who said?” Garrick growled, already cocking his arm for another hit.

“The wolves. They said if we helped them...” the boy sobbed, clutching his side, “if we spied, gave them routes, maps, anything... they’d turn us. Said they’d make us pack.”

Roran snorted behind me. “And you believed them?”

The boy blinked through tears. “They said the Crescent Moon were gods. Said the change was coming. That they’d take the north, and we’d be the first new wolves.”

I stepped forward slowly, crouched just enough to meet his eyes.

“You thought betraying your kind would earn you a place in ours?”

He didn’t answer. I stood, and in the silence that followed, Roran spoke again—amused, lazy.

“Cute,” he said, voice like poison-dipped silk. “They thought they could buy the bond with lies and scraps.”

Garrick turned to me, jaw clenched, waiting for the command.

“Crescent Moon used humans,” I muttered, disgust tightening like a coil in my gut. “To infiltrate. To hide. To bleed us from the inside while they died in the shadows.”

The boy nodded frantically, coughing through blood and panic. “They—they told us to stay out here. Keep quiet. Said more were coming. We didn’t know... they never came back—we didn’t know they were all dead—”

“They’re not coming back,” I said flatly. “You were bait. Fed lies by wolves who

already knew their graves were waiting.”

Garrick stepped back from the boy, his jaw clenched, breath fogging the air.

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“Fucking pathetic.”

“Please,” the boy choked out, collapsing to his knees, hands shaking. “We didn’t know what we were doing. We just—we just wanted to belong.”

“And for that,” Roran cut in, his voice like a blade, “you think mercy is earned?”

He stepped forward, boots crunching over ice and bones, the silver ring on his brow catching the morning light. “This is weakness, Andros. You want justice? Burn the villages that sheltered them. Scorch the memory of them from this land.”

I turned to face him, jaw tight.

He raised an eyebrow, the smirk twitching at the corner of his mouth. “So we let them crawl away? Tuck their tails and disappear like rats?”

“No,” I said again, voice low and dangerous now. “These humans will pay. These ones. But I won’t start purging entire villages because you’re too rabid to tell fear from treason.”

Roran sneered, but didn’t argue. He knew better—for now.

I looked down at the boy, trembling on his knees. I smelled no conviction in him. No strength. Just cowardice, the same as the others—thin, dirty, empty-eyed things, huddled behind false promises and the hope of power they were never worthy of.

“You sold your kind for fangs,” I said coldly. “You’ll die with nothing.”

I turned slightly. “Garrick.”

He didn’t hesitate. One nod, one sharp movement—and his blade flashed. The boy barely had time to scream. The others fell just as quickly. Throats opened in the snow, blood steaming as it soaked into the frozen dirt. Their bodies crumpled where they stood, no struggle. No glory.

Just silence. Cold. Clean. Final.

I stood there for a moment, watching the last of the blood soak into the white.

“They wanted to be wolves,” I muttered. “Let the earth bury them like beasts.”

CHAPTER 12

Lexa

The window was narrow, but it gave me just enough of a view to the courtyard below.

Snow clung to the stone in patches, melting slower in the shadows, and the wind carried that distinct northern chill—sharp and clean, like it had never known the soot and salt of the fishermen’s village I’d once called safety. But down in the yard, the cold didn’t seem to matter.

Dain was laughing. Wooden sword in hand, he moved in tight, awkward swings against another boy his size, both of them bundled in thick tunics, cheeks flushed from the cold and the thrill of pretend battle. The others joined in, a loose circle of pups barely older than toddlers, swinging blunted blades under the careful, calm eyes of two trainers.

Just as Garrick had promised. Not brutality. Not chaos. Not blood. Play. Controlled, practised, watched.

They weren't training killers. Not yet. They were letting them be children. For now. And he looked... good. Healthier. There was colour in his cheeks again—real colour, not the sickly flush of fever or cold, but the warm pink of a boy who had slept in a real bed and eaten every bite of his meals. His skin had lost that pale, papery edge it used to carry, back when every night was a gamble against hunger and frostbite.

And the boots—gods, the boots.

One of the keep's maids had brought them to him last week. Sturdy leather, lined with fur, barely used. He'd lit up like it was his name day, stomping around the room, laughing at the way the snow didn't soak through anymore. He still looked small. Fragile. But less like a ghost.

I let my forehead rest against the stone. My breath fogged the glass. I closed my eyes for a moment. I could still see him—two years old, clinging to his mother's body, lips blue from the cold, shaking with silence. She had been dead for at least a day. He didn't cry when I pulled him away. Didn't scream. Just stared.

I remembered kneeling beside him in the mud, brushing his damp hair out of his eyes, and whispering the words I hadn't dared say out loud before.

I'll take care of you.

Even though he couldn't understand. Even though I didn't know how. And the moment I said it— The runes on my back had burned. Not the steady, simmering ache I was used to. This was a searing flash of agony, like the magic itself was warning me.

Like I was breaking the oath they carved into my spine. The promise of silence. Of

isolation. Of never belonging to anyone. And I made a vow anyway.

I remember gritting my teeth through the pain and telling myself it was nothing. That I could handle it. That he was worth it.

He still is.

I opened my eyes and looked back down. Just in time to see them ride in. Wolves.

Covered in snow and blood and cold. Andros at the front. His horse moved like it sensed its master's fury—quiet, restrained, but ready to strike. His cloak whipped behind him like a banner, boots dark with blood, eyes darker still. His men followed close, Garrick among them, all worn from the hunt but alive.

They dismounted in the yard. A few pups stopped swinging their swords. Andros said something. I couldn't hear the words. But I saw him crouch, eye-level with Dain, say something that made the boy nod eagerly, a grin stretching across his face.

Andros reached out—touched his shoulder. And that sight... That one gesture...Lit a fuse beneath my skin. I gripped the edge of the window ledge so hard my knuckles ached.

He had no right. No right to be near him. No right to look at him like that. To speak to him. To touch him.

And I didn't care how many titles Andros wore. Alpha. Conqueror. Blood-soaked warlord. He would never take that from me.

When Andros turned his head, saying something low to Garrick, I caught it—the flick of the Beta's gaze toward the citadel. Toward me.

They couldn't hear the way my heart thundered in my chest, couldn't feel the tension

pulsing in every inch of me like a scream held just behind my teeth. But I knew they felt something. Wolves always did.

I didn't step back from the window. I didn't blink. I simply stood there, arms crossed, cold air pressing against the glass, watching Dain laugh with the other pups like nothing in the world had shifted. Like he hadn't just been brushed by something venomous. I stayed frozen—stone and silence—as minutes passed, every second coiling tighter inside my lungs.

Then came the knock. Firm. Precise. Without apology. I didn't speak. Didn't move. The door creaked open anyway.

Garrick stepped inside as if the room were his, as if he'd been here a hundred times before and would be again. His eyes moved over me—still barefoot, my hair an unbrushed mess, rage painted across my face like warpaint—and I didn't bother to hide the storm churning inside me.

“Oh, what now?” I snapped, voice brittle, sharp. “Here to serenade me with another heroic tale about your precious Alpha?”

He didn't bite. Didn't smile.

He just closed the door behind him with a soft, deliberate click and said, calm and devoid of theatrics, “Andros wants dinner with you.”

“You're joking.”

“His chambers. Tonight. Just the two of you.”

The laugh that tore out of me was jagged and humorless, cutting through the tension like broken glass. “And if I say no?”

Garrick's face didn't change, but the cold in his voice wrapped around the room like a noose. "Then I carry you there in chains. Those were his exact words. I may like you, Lexa, but don't mistake me for the type who'll hesitate."

He didn't linger. Didn't wait to see if I'd hurl something at his back. He turned, walked out, and the door closed behind him with a soft click—final, echoing. I stood in the center of the room, staring at nothing, my hands clenched into fists at my sides.

Fury curling like smoke under my skin. Then it changed. The smoke didn't fade, it thickened, it became pressure. Heat. Tension. I straightened, instinct prickling down my spine like static. My breath hitched. My body tightened in places I didn't expect—jaw, fingers, stomach—and something inside me tilted, shifted, like a coin flipping in the dark.

No.

A strange, crawling sensation swept across my skin. Weak and powerful. Hollow and sharp. My heartbeat stuttered, then pounded harder, like it was trying to force something back. My head swam—not dizzy, not sick. Awake. And then the first lash of pain struck.

Sharp. High. Intimate. It wasn't like the dull ache of a worn rune. This was new. This was a wire pulled taut and snapping straight through bone. My knees buckled, and I caught myself against the wall with a hiss.

Another. A second rune on the verge of cracking. Breaking. Its power unraveling like smoke pulled from a dying fire.

"No..."

My voice was breathless, strangled. Not here. Not now. I wasn't ready. I needed more

time. I pressed my palm to my spine, as if I could hold the magic there through sheer will—but it was gone. The strength that rune offered, the silence, the armor of nothingness that kept her caged—slipping away, thread by cursed thread.

I could feel her now. Faint. Weak. Defeated—but there. The wolf.

Buried for thirteen years, carved into silence by dark magic and blood, and yet... she stirred. Just a twitch in the back of my soul. A shadow unfurling its claws.

No. I needed the runes. I needed the silence. I needed that goddamned armor before the wolf inside me dragged me back to the thing I swore I'd never be again.

A beast.A slave.An Omega.

This couldn't be happening.Not here. Not in his house.But it was. And I knew I wouldn't survive the next one. The second rune was on the verge of cracking, I had minutes, hours at best. Unless I made it back to her. The witch. The only one who could carve me whole again. My pulse raced as a plan—awful, vile,brilliant—coiled through my mind like smoke turning to poison. I pushed off the wall, legs shaking, face tight with pain. Then I stilled.

Breathed. Slipped back into the part of myself I thought I'd buried—Not the fighter. Not the stray. The daughter. The trained one. I dug deep into the back of my mind, to the lessons I'd sworn never to use. The teachings whispered in candlelight by mothers and matrons with glass smiles and bloody hands.

If you can't outrun the Alpha—make him drop his guard. If you can't win the fight—seduce the war.

I crossed the room to the small armoire I had never once opened. It was filled with dresses—gifts, offerings, bribes. Most of them still wore the scent of perfumed silk and faintly of fear. I hadn't looked at them twice before.

But now... Now I needed a weapon.

My hand moved through them like a surgeon choosing her blade. Velvet. Satin. Lace. Red. Black. Green.And then I found it.The one.Deep crimson, slit high on the thigh, bodice so tight it might as well be skin, the neckline cut low enough to be indecent.

I held it up to the firelight. The wolf in me stirred again. Not howling. Not clawing. Just... watching. And I whispered to her, in the quiet of my mind:

Let me play their game.

Let me win us time.

And then we run. Again.

I pulled the dress from its hanger. If Andros wanted a dinner guest— He'd get far more than he bargained for.

CHAPTER 13

Andros

I expected her to be dragged here. Part of me hoped for it. I'd imagined it more than once—Garrick's hand tight around her arm, her lips curled in defiance, her body stiff and furious, spitting venom the whole way down the hall. It would've made things simple.

Predictable. But when the door opened. When I saw her—Fuck. She didn't walk in. She arrived. Every inch of her poured from that doorway like sin spun into silk.

The dress was red. Not just any red—blood red. The kind that begged to be licked off the floor after the kill. Tight, obscene, the slit up her thigh flashing smooth, lethal skin with every step. The neckline dipped so low it was a goddamn invitation, and the way it clung to her waist, to the subtle curve of her hips...

I forgot the food. The wine. My own fucking name. The wolf in me went utterly silent—then growled. Low. Warning. Something was wrong. She was too perfect. Too

smooth. Too calculated.

Lexa never moved without purpose. And right now, her every step was choreographed seduction. The sway of her hips, the flick of her lashes, the subtle way she touched her hair when she glanced at the firelight like it meant nothing.

I had no idea what the game was. But gods help me—I wanted to play it with her.

She sat across from me, graceful as a queen, not a single glance out of place. She crossed her legs slowly, letting the slit of her dress slide up just enough to be felt more than seen. She didn't look at me right away—no, she let me look at her first.

“Not what you expected?” she asked, voice honey-drenched poison.

My throat was dry. I reached for the wine just to have something to do.

“You clean up well,” I muttered, eyes dragging down her neck, over the delicate curve of her collarbone. “Almost made me forget I told Garrick to bring you here in chains.”

“Almost?” She tilted her head, lashes fluttering as if amused. “Pity. I could've made chains look good.”

She sipped the wine like she wasn't trying to drive me mad. But she was. Everything about her tonight was designed to distract, to tempt, to disarm. And gods, it was working.

I leaned back in my chair, letting her watch me watch her.

“So tell me,” I said, voice low, dark, curling like smoke in a locked room, “what changed?”

She gave a small smile and tapped her fingers along the stem of her glass.

“You said dinner,” she purred, “not a negotiation. I thought I’d dress for the occasion.”

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“I thought you didn’t drink with enemies.”

“I don’t,” she said, sipping again. “But tonight, I’m making an exception.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why?”

She looked up from her glass, eyes like green fire under frost.

“Maybe I’m curious,” she said. “Maybe I’m tired of fighting.” A pause. Then, with that wicked smile: “Or maybe I’m just here to see how long you can keep your hands to yourself.”

She was baiting me. Every word, every glance, every flick of her fingers along the rim of her wine glass was designed to provoke. And gods, she was good at it.

But I had teeth, too.

She leaned forward slightly, the fire casting golden light across her bare shoulders, her voice light and careless—too careless.

“I heard whispers,” she said, swirling the wine lazily. “That your little hunt was a success.”

I didn’t answer.

“So that makes me curious.” She tilted her head. “Why summon me to celebrate? Why not...” a pause, deliberate and full of venom, “that bitch Tanya?”

The word slid from her tongue like a blade laced with sugar. I smiled. Slow. Sharp. And cut into the first piece of meat on my plate, dragging the knife through the flesh like it had wronged me.

“Because the hunt was less than satisfying,” I said. “Boring, even.” I took a bite, chewed, and let the silence stretch. “I needed something more... challenging.” I looked at her, eyes burning into hers. “Something worth my attention.”

Lexa’s lips curled into a smile. Not sweet. Not grateful. A wolf baring her teeth in return.

“How flattering,” she murmured. “To be hand-picked as your post-massacre entertainment.”

“I never said it was a compliment,” I replied, sipping my wine. “Just the truth.”

She laughed then, quiet and dark, leaning back in her chair, the slit in her dress sliding a little higher. My wolf snarled again—hungry, restless, but still cautious. Watching.

We danced like that for a while. Words laced with venom and wine, traded like weapons. But toward the end of the meal, when most of the food had gone cold, I mentioned it.

“I saw your boy in the yard today,” I said, refilling her glass without asking. “Training with the pups.”

She didn’t move.

“Quite brave for a human,” I added. “Took a few hits and got right back up. Reminded me of one of mine when he was that age.”

And that's when it happened. The change. It was like a mask slipped. Just for a second—but long enough.

The muscles in her jaw tightened. Her hand gripped the stem of the glass a little too hard. And across her face—just a flicker—was rage.

There she was. The woman who spat in my face and didn't blink. The one who would rather burn alive than kneel. She set the glass down, slowly.

“You stay away from my son.”

There was no tremble in her voice. No plea, no desperation. Just a still, razor-sharp command that sliced through the air between us and buried itself in my chest.

Now that was her. Not the temptress in red. Not the silken words or the soft, deliberate way she sipped her wine. This was the real Lexa—the wolf beneath the bone. The fury stitched into flesh.

My wolf went still. Silent. Watching. We both understood in that moment—this woman wasn't ours.

I leaned forward, elbows on the table, voice low. “Why the mask, then? The game?” I let my gaze drop, slow and deliberate, over the length of her body. “You dress yourself up like a fantasy and then bare your fangs like a curse. What do you really want, Lexa?”

She didn't answer. Not with words.

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She stood—slow, unhurried, each movement a study in intent—and crossed the space between us like a queen approaching a throne she already owned. The fire behind her made her skin glow like molten gold, casting shadows across her collarbones, her thighs, the dark slit of that dress.

Then she moved toward me, slowly, deliberately, as though every step she took was designed to unravel my control, and carefully settled herself into my lap. My breath hitched sharply when her thighs parted over mine, when her body pressed close enough that I could feel the heat radiating through layers of cloth, her fingers resting lightly against my chest—not hesitant or shy, but calm, assured, possessive.

I didn't move, didn't dare breathe, because I knew this was more than simple seduction—it was dominance, deliberate power wrapped in silk and fire. She leaned closer, her lips hovering just above mine, parted slightly, the soft warmth of her breath ghosting across my skin.

“I know exactly what you want,” she murmured, voice like heated velvet brushing against the edges of my senses. “I can feel it every time you look at me, every time your wolf rises beneath your skin when I speak.”

My hands found her hips instinctively, gripping her carefully—not roughly, but in quiet desperation, as though I feared she might vanish if I didn't anchor her to me. Her lips curled into a faint, victorious smile—a queen satisfied to see a king rendered helpless beneath her touch.

“If you want me,” she whispered softly, dangerously, “I'm yours tonight.”

Her mouth drifted along my jawline, her touch slow, delicate, but impossibly possessive.

“Tonight, you can do everything you’ve dreamt about,” she breathed into my skin. Her fingers slid down my chest, nails scraping lightly through fabric, leaving faint, burning trails in their wake. “You can put me on my knees, or bend me across this very table. Wrap your fist in my hair and see how many times you can make me scream your name until the guards hear it echo down the hall.”

My pulse thundered in my veins, my entire body responding to her challenge, my breath ragged and uneven. She moved slightly, brushing a slow, teasing kiss to the very corner of my mouth, achingly soft and maddeningly sweet.

“I’ll be your ruin,” she whispered, voice a silken promise edged in steel, lips still warm against mine, “if that’s what you truly want. But in the morning, when the sun rises, I walk through that door. Unbound. Free from your chains. Unclaimed. And you’ll let me go.”

Something primal cracked in me. Not a thought, not a decision—just a raw, blind urge that shattered the careful leash I’d kept wrapped around my instincts. Control broke like brittle bone. Every part of me screamed to take, to mark, to own.

I lunged.

One hand tangled in her hair, the other anchoring her hips to mine as I crushed my mouth against hers. There was no patience in the kiss, no hesitation—only hunger, only the savage rhythm of two wolves colliding. Her lips opened under mine with a soft gasp, and that sound undid something in me. I lifted her—rough, hard—and slammed her down onto the table. Plates clattered to the floor, wine spilled like blood, glass shattering around us. The fire in the hearth crackled louder, as if it too was feeding off the violence between us.

Lexa arched her back, dress pulled taut over her thighs, breath catching in a moan so low and sweet I almost lost myself right there. She whispered something, lips grazing my ear—words meant to tempt, to bind. Little lies dressed in silk. Promises she'd never keep. But fuck, I didn't care. Not in that moment. I kissed her again, deeper, harder, letting her hips grind against me. Every inch of her burned, slick with heat, trembling with the same madness clawing through my veins.

I wanted her. Gods, I wanted to tear the rest of that dress off her, to see her spread beneath me on that table like a feast, to taste every wicked sound she could make when she broke for me. My wolf howled behind my ribs, no longer satisfied with the scent of her skin—it needed the scent of submission, of surrender, of ruin.

But then—Something shifted.

In the dark, in the firelight, in the high of lust and fury, I caught it. Her eyes. Green, yes—but wrong. Not like before. Not wild or wounded or sharp.

There was something rotting there. Poison curling behind her gaze like smoke behind stained glass. Her body was pliant in my hands, but her expression—beneath the moans, beneath the pretty purrs—was empty.

Detached. Like she wasn't really here. My wolf recoiled. It didn't understand. It didn't want to stop. But it knew. Something was wrong.

Even as I kissed her throat, even as her nails raked across my shoulders, I could feel it—an unease threading through the hunger. I pulled back, just enough to catch her eyes again. Her pupils were too wide, her skin slick with sweat, her body shaking.

And still she smiled.

“Where would you go?” I asked against her lips, voice hoarse, breathless, trying to

cling to logic while my body begged to sink deeper into hers. “If I say yes—if I let you go in the morning—where would you run?”

She didn’t answer. Just leaned in to kiss me again, slow and drugging. I growled and gripped her chin, hard enough to stop her. Her eyes met mine—glassy. Hollow. Tainted with something that didn’t belong.

Rotting magic.

“You’re going back to that witch,” I snarled, fury building like a storm under my skin. “Aren’t you?” My grip on her jaw tightened. “You were going to let me fuck you and then crawl back to her before the rest of your wolf breaks—just so you could carve her out again.”

I saw the truth flicker in her eyes. Guilt. Shame. Rage. But not denial.

The beast in me—Alpha—rose like fire through my blood, not from lust this time, but from betrayal.

“You were going to let me fuck you,” I growled, dragging her closer, pressing her to the table’s edge, “just to distract me long enough to crawl back to that cursed witch and slice the rest of your soul out, weren’t you?”

Lexa still didn’t speak, but the sharp breath she sucked through her teeth was enough. Her lips parted, her chest heaved, and I could feel the war happening inside her. The fracture lines. The desperation.

She twisted, wild and vicious, all that polished seduction cracking like glass beneath fire. Her nails clawed at my chest, her legs kicked with the strength of something feral clawing its way out, and her body trembled with fevered desperation. It wasn’t lust in her eyes anymore—it was terror.

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“You don’t understand!” she cried, voice warping under the weight of something breaking. “You can’t! You don’t know what it’s like to wake up every day with that thingsnarling beneath your skin—waiting to take over, waiting to consume you! I need the runes—I need her gone!”

Her breath came in short, ragged gasps. Her pupils were huge, devouring the green of her irises, and sweat slicked her skin like oil, soaking through the fine red silk she wore like it weighed a thousand pounds.

She was coming undone. And it wasn’t fear causing it—it was withdrawal. The second rune was failing.

I could see it in the way her limbs shook violently, the way her teeth ground together like her jaw couldn’t remember how to relax, the way she fought my touch one second and collapsed into it the next. She was burning from the inside out. Her body was screaming for the dark magic she’d relied on for too long, and it was punishing her for daring to try and survive without it.

I tried to hold her steady, to keep her from thrashing so hard she’d hurt herself, but her fury exploded like venom spat in my face.

“Let me go!” she screamed. “You sanctimonious bastard—you think you’re better than me? You’re not! You’re just a spoiled, overgrown mutt playing king in a crumbling castle full of slaves who pretend to worship you because they’re terrified to do otherwise!”

Her eyes blazed, fever-bright, wide and wild.

“I’ve seen the way they look at you,” she spat. “Like a god, like a savior, but you're nothing more than a beast with a crown! I’d rather fuck a Crescent Moon loyalist in a ditch than pretend you're worth even a second of my submission!”

That one hit hard.

I growled, jaw tight, fury boiling in my blood, but before I could speak, she kept going, more unhinged now, her words broken glass she kept pushing deeper and deeper into her own flesh.

“And your little Omega princess?” she laughed—high, sharp, mad. “Tanya? That shallow, perfume-soaked sow parading around in silk like she’s already your Luna? She’s pathetic. She couldn’t handle your wolf if you knotted her for a century. She’s too soft, too dumb, too desperate—just another bitch in heat, waiting to be bred!”

The moment the words left her mouth, something inside me snapped. My hand slammed the table beside us, wood splintering beneath my palm.

“You talk like you're better than her—than any of them—but you're worse, Lexa. At least Tanya owns what she is. You? You’re a coward, dressed up in fire and lies, too scared to face your nature, too damn proud to admit what you are. You’ve wrapped yourself in poison and shame and dark magic and you think that makes you untouchable?” I leaned in, lips brushing her ear as I hissed the next words. “You’re not untouchable. You’re just rotting, from the inside out.”

She opened her mouth to strike back, already forming some venom-laced insult, but the words twisted in her throat. Her lips moved—once, twice—but no sound came. Her eyes widened.

And then it began.

Her body jerked, sudden and violent. Her spine arched like someone had driven a blade into it. Her limbs trembled, convulsing in my grip. Her mouth opened in a silent scream, her hands clutching at her chest like she couldn't breathe.

“Lexa—”

But she couldn't hear me. Then came the scream.

Gods.

It ripped from her throat like her soul had been torn free. It wasn't just loud—it was shattering, pure, soul-deep agony. My wolf recoiled, terrified, folding in on itself beneath the weight of her pain.

And suddenly, nothing else mattered. Not the argument. Not the insults. Not the heat or fury or lust.

Only her.

Lexa collapsed in my arms like a lifeless thing, her skin burning, soaked with sweat, breath hitching as her body trembled and went still.

I caught her, my heart pounding—not with anger this time, but with a bone-deep protectiveness that stunned me. I held her tighter, rocking her slightly, whispering curses to whatever force had allowed her to hurt this much without killing her.

Gently, I carried her to the bed, laying her against the dark sheets like she might break beneath the weight of anything heavier than breath. I pulled the covers up to her collarbone, brushing damp strands of hair away from her temple. Her face was still twisted in pain, even unconscious, and I could see the shine of fresh tears on her lashes.

I released a slow, ragged breath, forcing my heart to settle before carefully sinking onto the edge of the bed beside her, close enough to feel her warmth, yet far enough not to disturb the quiet rhythm of her breathing. She lay still, her features softened by sleep, free of the usual fierce defiance she wore like armor.

Quietly, cautiously, I leaned toward her, waiting until I was certain she had slipped far enough into sleep that my words would remain mine alone. My mouth brushed softly against her ear, my breath warm on her skin as I whispered words I'd never dare say while she was awake.

"I'm glad it drives you mad," I murmured gently, my voice low and edged with quiet triumph, "the thought of Tanya wearing a crown that doesn't belong to her."

Slowly, tenderly, I pressed my lips against her cheek, the skin still flushed, still damp with the remnants of anger and exhaustion and pain. I lingered there a moment longer, savoring the rare intimacy, the softness I'd stolen while she slept.

"Don't worry, littlestray," I whispered, quieter now, my voice more promise than threat. "I'll claim a Luna soon enough, I just need to rid her veins of the poison first."

CHAPTER 14

Lexa

I woke drowning in heat—slick with sweat, lungs burning, my heart pounding against my ribs like it was trying to claw its way out. Every breath scraped raw through my throat, and my limbs felt too heavy to move, like I was sinking into a bed of fire. My skin prickled with fever, but I knew—this wasn't sickness.

It was her.

The wolf.

She was there, just beneath the surface, no longer silent, no longer buried in the safe dark where I had locked her away for years. She stirred now, alert, pulsing under my skin like a second heartbeat. I could feel her presence—hot, wild, suffocating. A part of me that had always been other, something I had carved out with blood and magic, something I had rejected with everything I was.

And now she was awake.

A whisper of awareness crept in slowly—details that made my stomach tighten. The bed beneath me was not my own. The sheets were far too soft, the scent in the room too clean, too sharp with smoke and leather and something deeper, darker—him.

I tried to sit up, and every muscle screamed. My body was stiff, wrung dry like I'd fought an entire war inside my own bones. When I managed to push myself onto my

elbows, I finally saw it—this room. Spacious, dimly lit, warm from the fire still flickering in the hearth. Thick drapes drawn. Silver pitcher on a carved table beside the bed. My breath caught.

This wasn't the guest chamber. This was his. Andros's. My heart spiked hard in my chest, a sick twist rising in my throat as panic surged up in waves. I gripped the covers, fingers trembling, trying to piece together the edges of my shattered memory. I remembered the pain, the heat, the second rune tearing itself from my spine. The screaming. The desperation.

But nothing else. I looked around the room, frantic, and that's when I saw him.

He was seated near the fire, body draped in shadow, one arm resting on the chair's arm, the other cradling a goblet that he hadn't touched. He hadn't removed his armour fully—just his coat, now folded across the nearby bench—and his boots were still damp with snow.

His blue eyes were already on me. Watching. He didn't speak. He didn't move. He just stared, dark and still, like a predator waiting to see if the prey would flee or fight.

I sat up further, clutching the blanket to my chest as if it could shield me from the weight of his gaze, from the growing horror clawing through my ribs.

“What...” I swallowed, my voice raw. “What happened? What did I—what did we—?”

He rose from the chair in a single fluid movement, all power and command wrapped in silence, and walked toward the bed with that same relentless calm that made him more dangerous than any roar ever could.

“You didn't sleep with me,” he said, his voice flat, clipped, like the effort it took to

keep it controlled was work. “Not that you didn’t try.”

I flinched as the words hit, sharp and heavy, dragging guilt through the fog of my exhaustion. My mouth opened, then shut again, nothing coherent forming. I didn’t remember trying. I didn’t remember anything past the second rune cracking.

“I don’t—” I started, but he cut me off with a slight shake of his head.

“You were burning up. Ranting. Delirious. Trying to seduce me one second, cursing me the next. You fought like hell until your body couldn’t take it anymore. Then you screamed like the world was ending, and collapsed.” His jaw clenched. “You nearly died.”

The weight of those words stole the breath from my lungs. I turned my face away, shame scraping deep, but he wasn’t finished.

“I should let you rot for what you said. For what you did to yourself. For hiding behind that filth carved into your back and thinking you could walk into my home, insult my pack, insult me, and still expect to be spared.” His voice was rough now, rougher than before. “But instead, I’m feeding you. I’m keeping you warm. I’m making sure you live.”

He sat on the edge of the bed, pulling a cloth from the basin on the table. The moment the coolness touched my forehead, I nearly wept—not because it was kind, but because I didn’t understand how he could still offer that after everything. His fingers brushed damp hair from my face with a gentleness that didn’t belong to a man like him. Not someone who had seen the things he had done. Not someone who had earned every whisper of fear that followed him down the halls of this citadel.

“You can stop cursing her,” he murmured quietly, like the fury in him had burned too hot to sustain and now left only ash. “Your wolf. She didn’t betray you last night.

You didn't fuck me. You didn't lose yourself."

I stared up at him, too weak to reply, throat too dry to form any defence, even if I had one.

He looked down at me—still angry, still dangerous—but something in his gaze had shifted. It wasn't lust. It wasn't power. It was something quieter. He was furious, yes, but he hadn't turned away. He hadn't left.

The warmth of his bed was suffocating. Too soft. Too safe. The blankets trapped me like chains, like velvet bindings I couldn't rip through no matter how hard I tried. My body ached. My skin still burned, though the fever had begun to ease. The wolf inside me was curled and quiet—for now—but I could feel her there, breathing beneath the surface, not broken, not banished.

I was weaker than I'd ever felt before.

But desperation... that was still mine. I turned to him, to the man who sat at my bedside like a silent storm, eyes sharp with judgment, arms crossed, his anger simmering beneath the quiet, calculated control.

"Andros," I whispered, and gods, I hated the way my voice cracked on his name. "Please... just one rune. One more. I'll get the coin. I'll work—I'll kill if I have to. Just enough for her to carve another one. I've survived with three before, I can do it again."

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His expression didn't change. Stone. Ice. Rage simmering behind his gaze like a fire kept barely caged.

"But not two," I added, more breath than voice now. "Not for long. You don't understand... I'm not strong enough for this. I—I'm not."

The words slipped out like blood from a wound. Bitter. Exposed. Andros rose from the edge of the bed, slow and deadly, towering over me like judgment made flesh.

"Don't you fucking make me tie you to this bed," he growled, low and venomous. "Because gods know I will, Lexa."

His voice sent a tremor through my bones.

"You think I'm playing with you? You think I'll watch you drag yourself through another carving? Another spell that eats you from the inside out while you lie to yourself and call it freedom?"

My chest heaved, panic clawing at my throat. "You don't get it. You don't know what it's like—"

"No," His voice cracked like a whip across the room. "Don't you dare throw that at me. You came here like you were better than all of us. Judging this pack. Judging me. Calling this life twisted and violent and wrong. But it's time someone judged you, stray."

That word. That damn word. Stray. He said it like it meant filth. Like it meant truth.

“You want to talk about cruelty?” he said, his blue eyes burning straight into mine. “Let’s fucking talk about it. Yes, I get it. You were raised in some gods-forsaken hellhole. Wherever the fuck you came from, they carved your fate into your bones and told you to smile through it. And on some pathetic, twisted level, I can understand why you ran. Why you wanted to burn it all down.”

He leaned closer, and I flinched—not from fear, but from the weight of what he was about to say.

“But don’t you dare pretend you didn’t spiral so deep down that hole you didn’t just burn your own future—you started setting fire to that boy’s, too.”

“Leave Dain out of this—”

I didn’t want to cry. I swore I wouldn’t. But there was something about the way he spoke—like every word was a verdict—that made the edges of me start to bleed. I clenched my jaw, blinked up at the ceiling, desperate to hold the tears back. I’d survived too much to break in front of him.

But Andros didn’t relent.

“You told me to stay away from the boy,” he said, stepping closer, voice low and thunderous with restrained fury. “Like I was the danger. Like I was the monster lurking in the dark.”

He stood over me now, eyes locked onto mine like they could drag the truth straight out of my spine.

“But you tell me, Lexa... who’s the real fucking monster here?”

My chest heaved. I didn’t answer. I couldn’t.

“Was it me who let him go to bed hungry while you scraped silver together to pay a witch to carve your shame into your back?” His voice dropped further, a quiet thing full of wrath. “Was it me who watched him walk through a blizzard in broken shoes because every coin went to keep your precious wolf gutted and mute?”

“Stop it—” I choked, voice trembling.

“How many times did he suffer,” he pushed on, unforgiving, relentless, “because you chose your fear over his safety? How many times did that dark fucking magic cost him warmth? Food? A future?”

I tried to shove him when he reached for the cold compress again, tried to fight, but my limbs were weak, shaking, uncooperative.

And he caught my wrist with ease. Iron and finality.

“I am done,” he growled, voice barely human, “done playing with you, stray. You are in my territory now. And while you’re under my roof, you obey.”

“You think I’ll bow to you?” I spat, fury bubbling up like bile, rising to cover the truth he’d shoved in my face. “You are not my Alpha. This is not my pack. This shithole is not my home. And I am not—will never be—yours to command.”

His blue eyes darkened like the sky before a storm—silent, deadly, inevitable. And then, softly, like the warning before an execution:

“You are now.”

He moved before I could breathe. In one violent, final motion, Andros surged forward, grabbed me by the throat and shoulder, and bit.

His teeth sank into the hollow of my neck—right over the place I'd sworn no one would ever touch. The pain was instant, vicious, searing through every nerve like fire wrapped in ice. My back arched off the bed with a cry that wasn't human, wasn't mine.

It belonged to her.

My wolf.

She erupted like a scream in my chest, weak but present, clawing her way up through the void the runes had carved. Her pain was mine. Her rage. Her need.

And then came the bond. Dark. Deep. Absolute.

It snapped into place like a chain forged from gods and instinct and blood—something primal and ancient and unchangeable. No magic could undo it. No witch could burn it away.

My wolf knew him now. And she wanted him.

Even as I screamed in denial, even as my soul shattered under the weight of that mark, she reached for him. Not with fear—but longing. With hunger. With submission, forced or not, wired into her bones.

Andros's breath was hot against my skin as he lifted his mouth from my neck, lips stained red from the mark, eyes burning down into mine.

“You don't get to run anymore,” he whispered, deadly and quiet. “You don't get to hide behind spells and scars.”

He cupped my face, and I couldn't move, couldn't speak.

“Your wolf is awake now,” he murmured. “And I’ve claimed her. You belong to me, Lexa. And gods help anyone who tries to take you from me now.”

The moment the bite faded into a dull, burning throb, the shock gave way to something else—something violently alive.

Rage. Not anger. Not frustration. No. This was pure, unfiltered, soul-deep rage.

It exploded out of me like a beast unchained, like every scream I’d ever swallowed finally tore through my throat. My body jolted up, and I lunged at him with everything I had left, teeth bared, nails aiming for his face like I could carve that smug look off his skin and rip his mark from my neck with it.

“You bastard! You fucking animal!” I shrieked, the cords in my neck straining as I fought to claw at him, to bite, to kill. “You think this means anything?! You think this makes you my Alpha?! I’ll gut you! I’ll—I will fucking end you!”

He caught my wrists with infuriating ease, his eyes dark with something unreadable. Not amusement. Not anger. Resolve.

“I warned you,” he said, voice low, like thunder rolling in over blackened skies. “Don’t make me tie you down.”

“You think you can control me?!” I spat, struggling against his grip, hatred pouring out of me like blood from an open wound. “You’re nothing! Just another deluded tyrant who gets off on owning what was never his to begin with!”

But he wasn’t playing anymore.

In one swift motion, he threw me back against the bed, and before I could rise again, the restraints were already in his hands—soft, thick leather cords he’d no doubt used

for darker purposes. I kicked, cursed, but he was relentless. Efficient. He tied my wrists to the iron posts above my head, pulled tight enough to hold but not bruise.

“You son of a bitch!” I screamed, jerking against the bonds with every ounce of fury I had left. “You can’t leave me like this! You can’t—Andros, you fucking coward! Come back and fight me!”

He didn’t even flinch. He stood at the edge of the bed, looking down at me—sweat-slicked, bare-legged, wrists raw from struggling, neck pulsing with the mark he’d left—and there was something behind his gaze now. Not lust. Not even power.

Possession.

“Try to rip my face off again,” he said coldly. “See what happens when I stop being gentle.”

“Go to hell,” I spat, yanking so hard the iron frame groaned.

“You already brought it here, little stray,” he muttered as he turned for the door.

“I will never forgive you!” I screamed after him, voice hoarse and cracking. “You fucking bastard! You and your gods-damned pack! I hope it all burns!”

He paused at the door.

“I’ll be back when you’re ready to speak like something other than a rabid stray,” he said without turning his head. “Or when your wolf decides to talk in your place. Whichever comes first.”

The door shut behind him.

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I was alone. Bound. Still burning with the ghost of his teeth in my neck.

CHAPTER 15

Andros

I left her there for three days. Not out of cruelty, though I knew she'd scream it from the rooftops if she had the strength, but because I had to.

The last rune had broken with such violent force that even my wolf had gone still in its aftermath, ears flattened, tail low. Not in fear of her, but in pain with her. Bonds didn't lie. I felt it deep, even with the fractures. She was unravelling, raw and flayed from the inside, caught between the woman she pretended to be and the wolf she'd spent years trying to kill.

She wasn't safe. So yes. I left her.

But I checked on her. Every night. Every morning. Quiet, unseen, watching from the shadows as the fever burned through her veins, as the flush of her skin deepened, as her breath came shallow, twitching under the blankets.

I had food sent—light meals, fruits and broth, meat only when she stopped trembling. A healer came once, not to touch her, just to look. She told me what I already knew. The magic had taken its toll. Her body was fighting to readjust.

Eventually, she came back to herself. Not fully. But enough. The first time I saw her sit upright again, her wrists still red from the bindings, she glared at the guard like she

wanted to kill him for breathing. That was when I gave the order to untie her.

Dain, of course, had asked about her constantly. He slipped questions into every conversation, tugged on every sleeve he passed in the halls, poked at every cook and servant with big, worried eyes.

“Where’s Lexi?”

“Why can’t I see her?”

“Did she get sick again?”

And I couldn’t let him see her. Not yet. Not like that.

So I made sure he was entertained, looked after, challenged enough to keep his mind busy and his feet too tired to go sneaking where he shouldn’t.

I even joined the pups' training one morning—something I hadn’t done in a long time. They were out in the lower yard, wooden blades and breath puffing like steam in the crisp morning air.

Dain was among them, smaller than the rest but quicker, his steps sharp, eager to learn. I stood with Garrick at the edge of the yard, watching the sparring matches unfold with half a mind while the rest of me drifted—back to her, as always.

During one of the breaks, Dain jogged over, sweat on his brow and excitement lighting his face.

“I’m gonna be the best warrior this pack’s ever seen,” he declared proudly, squaring his little shoulders like they could already carry armour.

I gave him a nod, arms crossed. “If you keep training the way you do, I don’t doubt it.”

He grinned, wide and full of something pure I rarely saw anymore. Then he ran back to his friends, picking up his sword with renewed purpose.

Beside me, Garrick exhaled through his nose. “How do you tell a human boy,” he asked quietly, “that he’ll never really be part of the pack?”

There was no venom in it. Just truth.

“Or do you think Lexa plans to turn him when he’s older?”

“Lexa?” I scoffed. “She doesn’t even want to be a wolf herself. She’d probably let herself rot before she ever turned someone else.”

Garrick looked at me sideways. “So what then? He trains. He bleeds for the crest. But he never belongs.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe that’s all he’ll get.”

But my thoughts had already drifted back to her.

To the quiet pulse of the bond between us—wrong, distorted, bent under the pressure of dark magic still lingering in her blood. It didn’t behave like bonds should. It twisted. Cut in and out. Sometimes I felt her like a whisper in the back of my mind, like warmth on the skin during a storm. Other times, she vanished entirely, as if something was choking the connection at its root.

It wasn’t supposed to be this way. A mark was a vow. A tether. An unshakable thread between souls. But with her, it felt like trying to hold smoke in my hand.

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We walked in silence for a while, boots crunching over frost-hardened ground, the wind whistling low between the stones of the outer yard. The morning sun had barely crested the eastern ridge, bleeding pale gold through the skeletal trees that clawed up along the path to the citadel. Everything smelled of cold iron and pine, smoke curling up from distant chimneys, the scent of training sweat still clinging faintly to our cloaks.

The citadel loomed ahead, a shadow of stone and steelcarved into the mountainside like it had grown from the ice itself. Its towers scraped the sky with jagged defiance, black banners snapping high above the battlements, and the guards flanking the massive front gates stepped aside with bowed heads as we approached.

Garrick fell into stride beside me, his expression unreadable—until it wasn't.

“You alright?” he asked, his voice lower than usual, not the easy banter he usually favoured. “Only...” He hesitated, then looked at me fully. “I couldn't help but wonder if some of that tainted shit in her blood's gonna slip through the bond and infect you now that you've marked her.”

I didn't look at him, but the line of my jaw tightened.

“She's not a curse,” I said.

“Didn't say she was,” Garrick replied, but the concern lingered behind his eyes. “Just... she's got something dark rotting in her spine, and you wrapped a bond around it like it wouldn't bite.”

A beat of silence passed. Then he added, far too casually, “You want me to tie you to a bed next? Maybe knock some sense back into your head?”

Despite myself, a short laugh escaped. It was sharp, dry, and unexpected.

“I didn’t plan to do that,” I muttered, running a hand down my face. “She left me no choice. I warned her, Garrick. She wouldn’t stop. Not until she broke herself in half.”

Garrick glanced at me from the corner of his eye, his brow raised. “You bit her, Andros. You didn’t just make a decision. You made a claim.”

I stopped just before the inner gate, the stones beneath us slick with frost, and looked up at the looming walls of the citadel.

“I know,” I said.

“Do you, though?” Garrick asked, his voice quieting. “Have you thought about what this means for the pack? For us? You didn’t just bring in a rogue—you marked her. Publicly or not, that bond will change things. People talk. And strays don’t just become Luna material because you want them to.”

I turned to him slowly, my gaze cold.

“She’s not a stray anymore.”

Garrick studied me, long and hard, then gave a slow nod, not of agreement—but of acknowledgment.

“Then you’d better figure out what the fuck you’re going to do when the rest of them realize it too.”

He walked ahead, pushing open the door to the citadel with a creak of old wood and iron, his cloak trailing behind him like the end of a conversation I didn't want to finish.

I didn't move at first, just stood in the doorway, eyes narrowed at the rising sun, breath frosting in the cold air. The bond pulsed faintly under my skin—quiet for now, but ever-present.

Then a boy appeared from the shadows of the inner gate, chest heaving like he'd sprinted half the citadel to find me.

“Alpha,” he said, breathless but proud to have been chosen for the task. “The guests have arrived. They await you in the Great Hall.”

“Show them in. Garrick and I will join them shortly.”

He bowed and scurried off, the door slamming behind him.

We took the west corridor, past rows of mounted wolf crests and iron torches that lined the stone like sentries. The path to the Great Hall curved inward, its vaulted ceilings arching overhead like ribs of a giant beast. The air smelled of polished oak and hearth smoke, of steel and old history.

Inside, my men had arranged the space with long tables, heavy with food and wine, plates of roasted boar, fresh bread, thick stews still steaming in iron pots. Banners had been hung bearing both our sigils—ours in deep crimson and silver, theirs in a rich forest green sewn with earthen gold.

The Briarhold Pack.

They were no warriors—not by tradition. No great army. No bloodline soaked in

conquest.

Briarhold was a pack of farmers, smiths, and crafters. Simple wolves. Proud. Tough. Their hands built the walls of their homes and buried their own dead. They'd survived in harsh lands with fewer men and less steel than any other pack I knew.

Now that Crescent Moon had been reduced to ash and whispers, their lands open and lawless, Briarhold wanted to secure trade. Establish routes through the forests and rivers we now controlled.

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It was the smart move. We met at the base of the long table, where their Alpha stood waiting.

Alek Stoneforge—broad-shouldered, bearded, his skin weathered from years in the sun. His Luna, Maera, stood beside him, six months pregnant and radiant with that serene strength only true mated pairs ever possessed. Her hand rested on the curve of her belly as she smiled at me, no hint of fear in her gaze.

“Alpha,” I greeted with a nod and shook his hand. “Welcome to Blood Night.”

“Alpha,” Alek returned, his voice deep and warm. “You honour us.”

Garrick stepped forward, already gesturing to the side room prepared with food and firelight. “Come, the table’s ready. We don’t let allies go hungry in this hall.”

They followed, easy and relaxed, their Beta and two guards behind them. I watched their movements—measured but confident. These weren’t sycophants or soft-bellied diplomats. They might not train for war, but Briarhold could hold their own.

As we sat, I signalled one of my men forward and handed over a polished wooden box wrapped in dark cloth. The Beta placed it on the table before Maera.

“A gift,” I said. “For your son. When he arrives.”

Maera’s eyes lit up. “That’s generous.”

She opened the box slowly, revealing a hand-forged dagger—silversteel, small and

light, but wickedly sharp, the handle carved with runes for protection and strength.

“From our best blacksmith,” I said. “A warrior’s blade, should he need it. Or something to hang above his cradle, to remind him he was born into strength.”

Alek chuckled and nodded in appreciation. “He’ll need that reminder, with his mother watching his every move.”

We laughed, shared a toast, broke bread, and began. Talk turned to roads and patrols, shipping lines through old Crescent Moon territory, security along the rivers. They asked about tax, we discussed border terms, Garrick pointed out winter routes through the pass that wouldn’t freeze over before harvest.

Garrick continued talking. Something about new toll checkpoints. Alek was drawing symbols on the map with a bit of charcoal. Roran sat across from me, swirling his wine, sharp eyes watching with just enough interest to make my jaw clench. Garrick leaned forward, tracing the rough shape of the mountain pass on the worn wooden surface.

“We can move goods through the southern routes before the frost,” Garrick suggested. “Keep the supplies flowing without interruption.”

“And the taxes on human villages?” Alek asked carefully. “What’s your stance?”

I opened my mouth to respond—

And suddenly, she touched my mind.

It was faint at first. Like the soft brushing of fingers against the inside of my skull. A warmth—confused, restless. Distant, but familiar.

Lexa!?

Not hiding. Not avoiding me like she always had. This time, she was searching for me. Reaching down the bond with purpose. And gods, she was angry.

Fury rolled off her like waves crashing against a cliffside—cold and sharp and unrelenting. But beneath the rage, there was control. Intention. She wasn't unravelling. No, she was aiming.

Her presence slid into my mind like the edge of a blade dipped in honey, slick and poisonous and hers.

“You'll pay for this,” she whispered. Not out loud. Not in the room. But through the bond. Her voice slid into my skull, laced with venom and steel. “For what you did. For tying me down like an animal. For humiliating me. For making me yours.”

I sat up straighter, spine stiffening as a sharp jolt of heat surged through me. My jaw clenched tight, the muscle twitching beneath my skin, and for a fleeting second my vision narrowed into a tight tunnel of red and white.

Across the long stretch of polished wood, Maera was still speaking, something about the southern trade routes and the delays caused by snow blocking the mountain pass, but her voice faded, muffled and distant, like I was hearing it from underwater.

Because Lexa was in my head again.

Her voice slid into me through the bond, low and venomous, curling like smoke in my lungs. “I'll make you suffer for that bond,” she hissed. “I'll tear your mind apart if I have to.”

The corner of my mouth lifted into a slow, dangerous smile—just enough to draw

Garrick's attention from where he stood behind me. He didn't speak, but I felt his eyes flick toward me, catching the shift in my expression. Still, he knew better than to interrupt.

"I'd love to see you try, stray," I sent back through the bond, letting every word drip with challenge, with the sharp edge of command I knew she hated and craved in equal measure.

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Under the table, my hand clenched into a fist.

“Andros?” Garrick asked, brow furrowing slightly. "Did you hear me?"

I cleared my throat. Forced a casual nod.

“Yes,” I said evenly. “We'll discuss the tax details once we've evaluated the supply lines.”

Across the table, Roran watched me carefully, leaning back into his chair with narrowed eyes and a faint smirk tugging at his mouth. As though he sensed my distraction but hadn't quite placed its cause.

“Are you with us, Alpha?” he asked lazily, the silver piercing glinting sharply. “Or is something... distracting you?”

I held his gaze steadily, refusing to betray even the slightest reaction to the sweet, torturous pressure Lexa wove slowly through the bond.

“I'm exactly where I need to be,” I replied calmly, raising my goblet in a composed toast. “Let's continue.”

My mind pushed Lexa back, but I should have known better. The moment I did it, she struck like lightning. The air around me blurred, the conversation at the table slipping into meaningless noise as a white-hot flare of sensation burst behind my eyes.

Lexa.

Naked.

In my bed.

Her skin was flushed with heat, gleaming under the memory of candlelight. She stood at the edge of the mattress, then sank onto it slowly, deliberately, her hands gliding over her body in lazy, sensual arcs. Her long black hair fell over her shoulders, strands sticking to her damp skin. Her thighs parted just enough to tease me with a glimpse of the curve between them. Then she moaned—my name—a sound that echoed like thunder through the bond.

“Don’t you fucking dare, Lexa,” I growled through the connection, but it was too late. The image was already seared into my mind, her body spread across my sheets like an offering.

I watched—helpless, furious—as her back arched in a slow, luxurious stretch, her knees bending, legs opening in open invitation. Her fingers ghosted over her stomach, then down between her thighs, movements unhurried and practised, every motion meant to provoke. Her lips parted in a soft, silent moan, and her eyes—dark and heavy-lidded—burned with satisfaction, not for herself but for me. She knew I was watching. She wanted me to watch. To suffer.

I curled my fingers into fists beneath the table until I felt blood rise under my nails. The sting barely registered, not when the bond pulsed again—harder this time, a deep throb that pulled me closer, dragged me further into her heat, her pleasure, her game.

She didn’t speak with words at first. Just sensations, flashes of touch and heat and sound. But then her voice purred low and sultry into the bond.

“You’d love this,” she whispered. “If you were here right now, I’d let you take me from behind—your hands gripping my hips, guiding every thrust, every snap of your

body into mine.”

My jaw locked so hard it ached. I pressed my palms flat against the wood of the table, needing something solid to ground myself before I shattered into a thousand pieces in front of the high council. I could feel my arousal building, thick and heavy, my entire body reacting to her like it was mine to control. Like she was already mine.

Her voice wrapped around me like velvet soaked in heat. “I’d let you knot me,” she breathed, “feel your teeth sink into my neck while you fill me. Over and over. Until I can't say anything but your name.”

I nearly groaned aloud. My muscles were coiled tight, straining with the effort to not react, to not storm out of the room and hunt her down and make good on every single thing she dared to whisper to me. The weight of my position held me in place. Just barely.

She laughed softly in my mind, dark, sultry, victorious. And gods help me, I was going to make her pay for every damn second of it.

Across from me, Alek and Maera were still speaking. Something about winter shipments, the price of salt and steel, but their words became a dull hum, muffled by the blood roaring in my ears. I was only half aware of the tension creeping into my posture, of Garrick’s eyes narrowing slightly beside me, of the slight frown pulling at Maera’s brow as she glanced between the two of us.

Then another wave hit.

Lexa’s mind slipped deeper into mine with all the grace of a dagger sliding through silk. The bond lit up like a live wire, overloaded with sensation that didn’t belong to me but that I felt everywhere. Her pleasure crawled beneath my skin, hers and mine blurred together, stolen, shared, weaponized.

Another image struck like a blade: her fingers pumping, slick with want, her back arching in my sheets, her mind wide open so I could feel every shudder, every gasp, every breathless curse.

I stood abruptly, the chair screeching across the stone. Maera flinched. Alek's brow furrowed.

"Andros?" Garrick asked quietly, already reading the tension in my face.

"Stop this." My voice thundered through the bond.

But she only moaned louder inside my mind, a wicked, silken sound crafted for me, poisoned with vengeance.

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The room dimmed. Blurred. My vision tunnelled, and my wolf—gods, my wolf—was clawing at the inside of my ribs, desperate to run to her, to rip the door from its hinges and claim what was his, to tear down every wall between us until she was beneath me, howling, begging, his.

“You want to leash me? Claim me? Then feel what it’s like to burn for something you’ll never control.”

I shoved back from the table, the wood groaning beneath my hands.

“I need to step out,” I said, voice low and frayed. “Garrick, handle the rest.”

Alek looked concerned. Maera blinked, curious. Garrick nodded, calm as ever, but I saw the fire behind his eyes.

I didn’t wait for pleasantries. I turned on my heel and left, jaw clenched so tight I could taste blood, vision pulsing red as I stalked through the corridor like a predator denied its kill.

The bond snapped again, another wave. Her cry. Her hand tightening. Her breath faltering. She was close.

I slammed a fist into the stone wall as I passed, cracking the mortar. A servant gasped and vanished down another hall.

She was punishing me. Torturing me with what I craved, weaponizing her own body, her own pleasure, knowing damn well that if I touched her now, if I stepped into that

room, I wouldn't stop.

I'd bury myself in her until she screamed my name without fury. Until she begged for the bond. Until she loved the chain.

But she didn't want that. She wanted to destroy me. So I stopped outside her door. Fist raised. Breathing hard.

"Lexa."

I sent her name down the bond like a command, like a growl, like the warning of a storm about to break.

"Open this fucking door."

CHAPTER 16

Lexa

Slowly, I opened the door with the calm of a woman who'd spent the morning doing absolutely nothing wrong.

I was fully dressed—dark green tunic laced at the collar, thick leggings tucked into soft boots, hair pulled into a loose braid. The fire in the hearth crackled behind me. Servants moved about the room quietly, laying out breakfast, folding linens, smoothing out the now-fresh bed I hadn't even touched.

I hadn't sent those images because I did any of it. I sent them because I could. Because I knew what I was to him now. Knew the bond between us was frayed and cursed and real. And if I couldn't cut it—I would choke him with it.

Andros stood in the doorway like a god made of fury, dressed in black from throat to boots, eyes so dark I swore they absorbed the light. His jaw clenched once, twice, and every breath he took looked like it cost him.

“Out,” he said, voice sharp enough to flay bone.

The servants froze.

“Now.”

They didn’t wait for a second command. Plates clinked as they scrambled to leave, skirts swishing, boots echoing against stone. One nearly tripped in her haste to bow. The door clicked shut behind them with the soft finality of a blade slipping into a sheath.

I didn’t move. I crossed my arms. Lifted my chin.

“You look disappointed,” I said, voice calm, almost mocking. “What? Were you hoping to find me on your bed with my fingers between my thighs?”

His dark blue eyes sparked like lightning behind stormclouds, cold fire, charged and lethal.

“You sent those images,” he said slowly, each word vibrating with contained violence, “into my mind. During a diplomatic meeting. While I was discussing trade routes. While I was surrounded by wolves who’d gut each other for a glance at weakness.”

I shrugged. “And?”

“You tried to use the bond to break me.”

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“No.” I smiled, sweet and wicked. “I used it to remind you who started this.”

In the span of a breath, he crossed the room and grabbed me.

One hand around my throat. Not tight, not choking, but enough to feel. To make me aware of just how much power sat beneath that controlled facade.

“You want to play this game?” he growled, pushing me back until my spine hit the stone. “You think you can send me illusions of your soaked cunt and pretty moans and then pretend like none of it mattered?”

“I didn’t touch myself,” I whispered, smiling wider, letting the words twist the knife. “But you thought I did. You saw every moment. Felt every breath. And that was enough to undo you.”

His hand tightened slightly, and I gasped—still not afraid. Not begging. I wanted him to burn. To unravel like I had. I wanted him furious. And gods, was he.

“You think there won’t be consequences for that?” he hissed, voice a promise carved in stone.

I knew I’d gone too far the second he smiled. Not a soft smile. Not a cruel one.

That razor-edged, Alpha smile, the kind that told you you’d just played a game against something older, darker, and far more dangerous than you realized.

“You want to play?” he said, low and sharp, stepping in close. The hand at my throat

slipped down, dragged across my collarbone, slow and deliberate, his fingers brushing the curve of my breast just enough to make me shiver despite myself. “Then let’s play.”

I braced for the grip, the force, the bruising dominance he carried like a weapon. But it didn’t come from his hands. It came from the bond.

One snap, like a whip cracking in my mind and I felt it. A tug, hard and hot, right behind my sternum.

Andros.

I gasped, not from pain but from the rush of it, the way it tore straight through my walls. The bond surged with his will, commanding, absolute. And gods, I felt it like chains wrapping around my ribs, around my wrists, around my will. He was in my head. And he wasn’t being gentle.

“Take off your clothes,” he said, but the words didn’t pass his lips. They sank into my skin like ash and steel, his voice wrapping around the bond like a leash pulling taut.

“No,” I breathed, defiant, but my fingers twitched at my sides. I clenched them tight. Another pull.

“I want you bare, Lexa. Just like in those filthy little fantasies you sent me. But now you’ll do it in front of me. For me.”

My hands moved before I could stop them, traitorous, trembling. I gritted my teeth. “This isn’t fair.”

He stepped back, folding his arms, watching like a king waiting for his sacrifice to finish bleeding.

“This is retribution,” he said coldly. “You gave me images. I want the reality.”

The tunic slipped off my shoulders. I bit the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood. I dropped it.

One piece at a time, boots, leggings, shift, until the cold air kissed every inch of me and my body remembered every lie I’d used to torture him. My skin burned with shame and heat and something far worse: want.

He didn’t touch me. Not yet. He just circled, slow, letting the bond twist tighter, coil deeper inside me. My nipples pebbled, my thighs clenched, but still I stood. Not proud. Not victorious. Exposed.

“You play dirty,” I whispered. “You’re in my head. Get out of there!”

He stepped behind me, close enough to feel his breath brush my shoulder.

“So were you,” he murmured. “Difference is, I play to win.” The bond pulsed. I shuddered. “Now sit on the bed and show me what I felt through that bond.”

I sat.

The mattress dipped beneath my weight, the fire behind me cracking low and steady like it too waited for what came next. My thighs trembled as I pulled them up onto the bed, folding beneath me. Every inch of my skin felt raw, hypersensitive—not from the cold, not from fear—but from the bond snapping tight like reins around my neck.

He didn’t touch me.

He stood there, just a few feet away, his arms folded over that broad chest, his jaw set

in stone. His eyes—gods, those eyes—they didn't just look at me. They held me there, bared and humiliated and exposed under his will.

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“Go on,” Andros said, and though his lips barely moved, his voice thundered down the bond, curling low in my belly, violent and possessive. “Show me what you showed me before. Exactly the way you imagined it. Every moan. Every stroke. Every lie you built to drive me mad. But this time... you’ll mean it.”

I wanted to scream. To snarl and claw and throw something at his face. But my body—my traitorous, starving body—moved.

Hands sliding between my knees, I parted them slowly, my thighs burning under his gaze, my breath coming faster as I laid myself out exactly how I’d made him see me.

“Good,” he said, voice tight. “You remember.”

The bond pulsed—his satisfaction rolling over me like heat—and gods, it made my skin ache. My fingers hovered at my stomach. I hesitated.

“Now.”

The command dropped into me like a brand. I gasped, one hand sliding lower, the other fisting the sheets beside me.

“Fuck you,” I whispered, shame thick in my throat, but the bond pulled again and I moved, slow and shaking.

Andros stepped closer, his voice curling dark and low across the thread between us. “You started this. You sent me every filthy image, every tremble of need. And now you’ll feel what it’s like to be watched. Really watched.”

My breath hitched as my fingers found slick heat between my thighs. The bond lit up like a storm, his hunger crashing into me, his fury, his claim. But worse than all of that, his need. He needed to see this. Needed to own it.

“You want control?” I gasped. “Is that it? You want to dominate every inch of me until I forget I ever belonged to myself?”

He stepped in then, slowly, deliberately, kneeling on the edge of the bed like a beast closing in on prey.

“No,” Andros said. “I want you to understand what you tied yourself to. What you tried to play with. The bond isn’t a toy, Lexa. And I’m not your fucking puppet.”

He leaned over me, hand wrapping around my wrist guiding me. Slower. Deeper.

I should have stopped. Should have ripped the bond apart with whatever strength I had left, clawed through it with sheer rage, with fear, with hate. But I didn’t. I let him guide me.

Wrist wrapped in his palm, his voice like smoke wrapping around my throat, I moved under his command, under his watch. My fingers worked slowly, aching—his rhythm, not mine. Every breath felt like submission. And still—he didn’t touch me. Not really.

Andros knelt at the foot of the bed like a shadow carved from stone, his hand firm over my wrist, forcing me to feel exactly what I had shown him. The image I had sent to rattle him—now made real.

I gasped as the first ripple of pleasure tore through me, shame curling hot in my chest. I wasn’t pretending now. I felt it.

He leaned closer, his mouth at my ear, breath scalding as his other hand slid behind my head, fisting in my hair, holding me there—exposed, raw, breaking.

“You don’t get to play the whore in my thoughts and the saint in my bed,” he growled, lips brushing my skin but not kissing. “You want to make me lose control? Then fucking feel what it’s like when I take it.”

The bond surged, and my body reacted—traitor, betrayer, wolf—my wolf who now whimpered in quiet agony beneath my skin, awakened and bound, no longer silenced by runes or fear.

Shewantedhim.Desperately.

And gods, she wanted me to want him too.

I tried to twist away, to suppress the moan building at the base of my throat, but his hand found its place—fingers wrapped around my neck, firm but not cruel. Just enough. A silent command:stay. There was no magic to shield me this time, no runes humming beneath my skin, no shadows to hide behind. Just the bond. Just him.

“I hate you,” I gasped, barely more than a breath.

His mouth ghosted along my jaw, his voice a low, wrecked growl. “Say it louder. Say it while you finger yourself for me. Say it while you fucking come.”

The bond pulsed—hot, alive, watching—and my body moved without permission, without thought. My hand slipped lower, fingers sliding through slick heat as I arched against the overwhelming pressure between us. I hated him—I did—but the need, the ache, was louder than the hate now.

“Andros—” His name tore from my mouth in a broken moan as my fingers circled

again, deeper, harder.

He didn't stop me. He watched. Every sound I made, every twitch of my hips, every ragged breath—I felthim through the bond, drinking it in.

“Good girl,” he whispered, and that was all it took.

I shattered.

My back arched, a strangled cry escaping as I came hard, convulsing under the weight of everything I had denied myself—pleasure, surrender, the terrifying echo of being seen. His name fell from my lips again and again, a litany of everything I couldn't say.

“Andros... Andros... gods—”

Every nerve felt like it had been dragged across flame. Every breath was broken, shallow. Like I had drowned in him—and only now clawed my way back to the surface, raw and exposed.

The wave crested, crashed, and left me soaked in its aftermath. Humiliated. Exposed. I lay there, limp against the sheets, the air cold on my damp skin, my chest rising and falling like I'd been hunted and caught, even though he hadn't even fucked me.

I opened my eyes.

And he was still there. Still watching me. His chest rose and fell with ragged control, the shadows of the fire flickering across his jaw like war paint, and for a moment, I thought maybe—just maybe—he would come to me. Touch me. Kiss me. Finish what I had started.

But instead, he tilted his head and gave me that slow, cruel smile—the one that meant he had already won.

“Well,” he said, his voice a blade dipped in honey. “Wasn’t that a sweet little performance.”

I didn’t speak. I couldn’t. Shame sank deep beneath my skin, colder than fire, raw and blooming like frostbite. He stepped back—slow, silent, in complete control—his dark blue eyes trailing over me like glacial water, like a tide that had already claimed and reshaped me. The sheets clung low around my hips, my legs still open, body bare and trembling, marked by everything I swore I’d never let him take... and he didn’t just see it—he owned it.

“You remember what you said to me, Lexa?” His voice slid through the bond like silk over a blade, slow, deliberate, cruelly satisfied, as I lay there, trembling and raw, every nerve still echoing with the aftermath of what he’d made me do.

“Animals clawing each other in the dirt, pretending their urges are holy...” He chuckled low, dark. “Funny how sacred it felt when you came whispering my name like it was a gods-damned prayer.”

Yes—I remembered. His study. That fight. The moment I’d spat those words at him, defiant and furious, when he demanded I apologize to that simpering omega.

“And next time...” He paused at the door, hand resting on the frame, his back to me but his voice cutting like a blade drawn across skin. “Think very carefully before you use the bond to bait the beast. You might find out just how much it likes to bite.”

The door shut behind him. And I was alone.

Naked. Exposed.

Every breath scraped against the silence like punishment, and I pulled the sheets over myself—not for warmth, but to cover the sting of what I’d allowed.

No, what I had invited.

CHAPTER 17

Andros

With a bit of luck I made it back to the council chamber with just enough control to pass for composed, but barely. Garrick caught my eye the second I walked in, his stare sharp and unreadable. He didn't speak, thank the gods. He knew better.

I apologized to our guests for the sudden interruption. Told them it was a patrol issue, something urgent on the eastern ridge. Alek didn't question it. Maera smiled politely. I even offered a small reduction on trade tax as a gesture of goodwill. A little generosity went a long way with packs like theirs.

They left content, and politically, things remained intact. But inside, I was unraveling.

Lexa.

She had embedded herself under my skin like a thorn. Every breath still carried her scent. The bond had gone quiet since that night, but it wasn't peace. It was the silence before the break. I could feel it.

So I stayed away. For days, I didn't see her. I buried myself in war planning, in drills with the men, in long hours on the ramparts where the mountain wind bit hard enough to distract me. I told myself it was necessary. I needed clarity, control. I needed to remember who I was. The Alpha of Blood Night. Not some tethered fool craving the touch of a woman who would rather die than belong.

And then she came. Not Lexa. Tanya.

She let herself in without knocking, of course. Her footsteps echoed across the stone as she approached my desk, all soft smiles and calculated grace. She was dressed for court, not conversation. Pale lavender silk clung to her curves, her hair twisted up in a style that took too long to perfect for someone with no real business being here.

“Alpha,” she said sweetly. “I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“You are,” I replied without looking up. She didn’t flinch. She never did.

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“I’ll be brief, then.” She walked closer, stopping just short of the desk. “I heard something this morning. From one of the maids.”

I kept my gaze on the papers in front of me.

“She said you marked her. The stray. Lexa.”

Her voice wrapped around the name like a curse. I looked up. Finally. Tanya’s smile was tight, brittle around the edges.

“Tell me it isn’t true,” she said. Her voice was calm, but I heard the strain beneath it. “Tell me you didn’t give her what you’ve never given anyone else.”

I leaned back in my chair, arms crossing over my chest as I stared at her, unblinking. And I said nothing. Because silence, in that moment, was louder than any answer. Tanya’s eyes narrowed. The smile she wore cracked, just slightly, and something colder glinted behind it.

“You’re not going to say anything?” she asked, voice lower now, more controlled. “After everything I’ve done for you. After all the years I’ve served this pack. Served you.”

The air between us had already shifted, thick and tense, vibrating with the kind of power that came just before violence. She stepped closer, too bold, too sure of her place in a room that no longer belonged to her.

“I honored you. I answered every time you called. I was obedient. Loyal. I’ve bled

for your name, and I laid down for your pleasure. And now I'm replaced by a mutt who carves up her own body just to silence the wolf in her?" She sneered. "That's who you mark?"

I rose from my chair. Slow. Deliberate. And when I looked at her, I let her see it. The Alpha. The fury. The thing she'd never tamed and never truly touched.

"Careful, Tanya."

But she didn't stop. The bitterness was already pouring from her like acid.

"Oh, don't worry, Alpha," she said with a vicious little smile. "I know exactly what Lexa's been doing. This keep has walls, and those walls have ears. And when the rest of your pack finds out that their Alpha marked a wolf who uses dark magic to butcher her own nature—"

My power flared before I could think.

I was across the room in an instant, hand around her throat, not squeezing, but close. Close enough to make the blood drain from her face. Close enough to silence whatever venom she thought she could spit.

"If her name passes your lips again, Tanya," I said, voice low and shaking with barely leashed violence, "I'll drag you into the courtyard and break every bone in your body, one by one, until you scream so loud the gods cover their ears."

Her eyes widened, mouth parting in disbelief. She had pushed too far, and now she saw it.

"I am not a man who forgets loyalty," I continued, softer now. "But don't mistake my patience for mercy. You are not Luna. You never were. And you will not start a war

in my halls with your jealous mouth.”

I let go of her slowly, like I was releasing something rotted. She stumbled back, catching herself against the table. That venomous glint in her eyes dulled for a moment, and she shifted, softened her posture, adjusted her tone like a woman sliding into a new mask.

“I’m only trying to help you see clearly,” she said, her voice quiet now, silk over glass. “You’re not yourself, Andros. Maybe you should consider... that she’s done something to narrow your vision.” Her eyes flicked to the floor, then back to me with false concern. “She’s skilled, isn’t she? With dark magic. Who’s to say the bond wasn’t twisted into something it shouldn’t be?”

I watched her, silent for a beat, then took a slow step closer, not threatening this time, just enough to make sure she didn’t mistake me for a fool.

“She doesn’t wield dark magic,” I said, flatly. “She paid for it. A witch carved those runes into her back. Lexa doesn’t even know how to hold a blade properly, let alone cast a curse.”

Tanya’s lips parted like she might say more, but I raised a hand, and the words died in her throat.

“I’ve entertained enough of your jealousy for one lifetime,” I said, voice cold and final. “Don’t come here again. Not unless it’s a matter of pack urgency.”

I stepped around her, back to my desk, and poured myself a glass of wine, slow and deliberate.

“And one more thing,” I added without looking at her. “The next time you see me, or her, you will bow your head in submission and walk the other fucking way.”

Tanya said nothing. I didn't need her to. The door opened behind her, and this time, she walked through it without another word. I listened to her footsteps fade down the hall, my jaw tight, the taste of fury still bitter in my mouth.

I worked until the late hours of the night, trying to avoid everyone. The fire in my study had long burned to embers. The ink on my fingers was dry, the maps and ledgers I'd pored over nothing but smudged lines and meaningless numbers.

The corridor was quiet, lit only by the soft orange flicker of wall sconces. The hour was late and I was bone-deep tired. The kind of tired that sleep couldn't fix.

I stepped into the hall intending to make my way to the guest room at the far end. My chambers... our chambers... were still occupied by her. And tonight, I couldn't trust myself to go near that door. Not when the memory of her still echoed in my mind with every breath I took.

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But then I saw movement. A shape, small and silent, barely more than a shadow crouched near the stone staircase that led down to the lower halls. He was huddled in the corner, tucked between the high banister and the wall, his little arms wrapped around his knees, curls messy, dressed in soft nightclothes too big for his frame.

I paused. Narrowed my eyes.

“Boy,” I said.

His head jerked up fast. Big brown eyes blinked up at me, wide and unsure, shimmering slightly in the low light.

“What are you doing up?”

Dain shifted, fingers twisting into the hem of his tunic. “The wind is... howling.”

The draft through the old citadel made a mournful sound sometimes, low and long, like wolves in the distance. To most of us, it was background noise. But to a four-year-old?

He looked away, then down at his feet, voice small. “I got scared.”

I said nothing for a moment, just watched him try to tuck his fear away behind pride. The kid had fire in him—I’d seen it in the training yard—but tonight, he was just a child.

“And where were you going?” I asked.

His fingers fidgeted more. “To find Lexi. But the guards don’t let me see her.”

I sighed. Ran a hand through my hair. “Come on.”

He looked up, confused.

“Let’s go,” I said, and held out a hand.

After only a second of hesitation, he stood and shuffled over. His small hand slipped into mine, warm and hesitant. We walked together down the corridor, his bare feet soft against the stone, my steps slow so he could keep up.

I led him to the guest room, the one I’d been using since marking his Lexi. He stopped at the threshold, eyes wide at the heavy bed, the furs, the massive fireplace.

“This your room?” he asked.

“For now.”

He stepped in like it was a sacred space. When I gestured toward the bed, he didn’t wait. He just climbed up and nestled into the blankets like he belonged there.

“Are you staying?” he asked, peeking out from under the thick furs.

I stared for a moment. “Yeah. I’ll stay.”

He smiled. Smiled like I’d handed him the moon. The next twenty minutes were chaos.

“Why is your bed so big?”

“Where do you keep your swords?”

“Do alphas get more meat at dinner?”

“Have you ever killed a bear?”

“Can I have armor when I’m five?”

“Why don’t you have a wife?”

“Are you gonna marry Lexi?”

That one made me choke on air.

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“No,” I said. Too fast. Too sharp. He blinked like I’d scared him, so I softened my tone. “Go to sleep.”

He yawned, finally, and curled closer into the pillows. His voice was already slowing, sleepy.

“I’m glad she found me,” he mumbled. “Lexi. I was cold when my mama died. Cold and hungry. And scared all the time.” His small fingers twisted in the fur blanket.

“She picked me up and said she’d keep me safe. She lied a little. I still get scared. But not when she’s close.”

I stared at the boy, something bitter and quiet swelling in my chest.

“And now?” I asked, softer than I meant to.

Dain yawned again, his voice barely a whisper. “Now she’s gone... but you smell like her. So... I think that means you’re safe too.”

And then, just like that, he was asleep. Peaceful. Trusting. I stayed there, still as stone, watching the rise and fall of his small chest beneath the furs.

The beast inside me—the one that only knew how to take, to conquer, to command—quieted. For the first time in longer than I could remember, it didn’t want to fight.

Because in the middle of this cold, endless war, in the silence of my fortress full of

blood and shadows...She had found something worth protecting. And somehow, without even meaning to, she'd given it to me too.

I'd faced battlefields soaked in blood. Fought Alphas twice my size. Slept through storms that shook the earth.

But none of that compared to trying to sleep in the same bed as a four-year-old who kicked like he was possessed by a pack of rabid boars.

Dain thrashed in his sleep like he was chasing ghosts. I'd wake to a heel digging into my ribs or a tiny fist punching my jaw mid-dream. At one point, I ended up dangling half off the bed while he snored peacefully in the dead center like he owned it.

By morning, I felt like I'd been in a brawl. My muscles ached, my back cracked with every step I took, and there were faint bruises on my side that no warrior should ever have to admit came from a child.

Dain?He was radiant.

Skippping through the halls, hair wild, smile wide, mouth moving a mile a minute about wolves and swords and the dream he had about riding a giant hawk into battle.

The moment we stepped into the great hall for breakfast, I regretted everything. Garrick was already seated at the long table, chewing on a hunk of bread, his eyes lighting up like a wolf who'd scented weakness.

"Well, well," he said, mouth full. "Our mighty Alpha. Tamer of beasts, breaker of Crescent Moon...babysitter of a four-year-old."

I dropped into the chair beside Garrick with a grunt, dragging a hand down my face. "Don't start."

He didn't even try to hide his grin. "Let me guess—little warlord steal your side of the bed? Or were you demoted to floor duty by midnight?"

"He kicks like he's training for war," I muttered.

Garrick snorted. "Like mother, like son."

Before I could throw something at him, Maelin—the kitchen maid who'd been around longer than most of the guards—breezed in with two steaming plates balanced on her arms and that familiar mischievous glint in her eye.

"Well, well," she said, setting the plates down with a practiced flourish, one in front of me, the other in front of Dain, who was already climbing onto the bench across from me like he owned the place. "The mighty Alpha returns from battle... defeated by a pair of tiny feet."

Garrick barked a laugh. "Told you, he's losing his edge."

Maelin winked at him, then looked back at me, feigning innocence. "Sleep well, my lord? I hear humans don't bite their Alphas to claim them. They just stare at them with those big, trusting eyes instead."

I gave her a flat look.

She nodded down the table—toward Dain, who was beaming at me through a mouthful of bread and humming some half-forgotten tune.

And then I felt it. That strange pull again. Not magic. Not a bond. But something just as binding. Maybe more.

Not blood. But permanent.

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Garrick leaned forward, elbow on the table as he tore into a hunk of meat. “Better get the Alpha something stronger to drink,” he said to Maelin with a smirk. “Boy’s got him wrapped tighter than a winter cloak.”

Maelin laughed. “Careful, Garrick. At this rate, we’ll be calling him the next Alpha.”

I said nothing. Just stared at Dain, who was now chewing with exaggerated slowness, clearly enjoying the attention, still humming, eyes shining like dawn.

I’d faced rebellion. Bloodshed. Betrayal. But this?

This was something else entirely. And somehow, it had made itself at home at my table.

CHAPTER 18

Lexa

The room reeks of him.

It clings to the stone walls, seeps into the furs, coils in the pillows. That rich, dark, cedar-and-winter scent that once turned my stomach now just makes it twist in a different way. I hate it. Hate that I know it. Hate that it’s inside me.

Hate that I remember what he made me do while he stood there—silent, watching. Like I was a puppet he could pull apart and rearrange, then put back on the shelf when he was done.

I press the heel of my palm into my eye until I see stars. Maybe if I do it hard enough, I'll forget the feel of his gaze on me. It's been eight days. I counted them on the edge of the hearthstones. One for each miserable sunrise spent in this glorified cage. Guards at the door. Windows barred. And not a single soul who dares look me in the eye—except the child. Except Dain.

I'm not even allowed to see him now unless Andros says so. I pace. Again.

There's a scuff in the floorboards near the window—my boot's been digging into it every time I reach the wall and turn back. A pointless rebellion, but it's all I have. The guards won't let me leave. I asked. Demanded. Shouted.

They didn't flinch.

I could pull on the bond again. Just a flicker, a whisper through that cursed thread between us. Tease his mind the way I did before. Make him snap. Make him come storming in with fire in his eyes and hands on my throat.

But I don't, because I swore I would never be someone's porcelain doll, locked in a castle for an Alpha's pleasure.

And here I am.

I dig my nails into my arm until the skin stings, just to feel something that's mine. Then the voice starts. No, not a voice. Not words. A growl. My eyes snap shut, and my heart claws into my ribs. No. Not this. Not her.

The wolf.

She stirs like a stormcloud shifting in my gut, like wind rolling in off the tundra. I've kept her buried for thirteen years. Shackled with runes, drowned with pain. She never

spoke. Never moved. Just lay there—quiet, broken.

Now she barks. Sharp. Loud. Demanding.

I flinch, grabbing the edge of the writing desk for balance. My knees buckle, but I don't fall. I won't fall.

“What the hell do you want?” I hiss aloud, gripping the back of my neck, where the third rune still burns cold and iron-deep. “You did this. You let him mark us. You wanted it.”

Another bark. Fiercer. Not an answer. A challenge. I squeeze my eyes shut and press my forehead to the wall.

It's like trying to argue with a wildfire. She doesn't speak in thoughts. She speaks in impulse. Images. Feelings. My pulseraces. My mouth dries. My skin feels tight.

I've never experienced anything like this. Never felt her so alive. So real.

And I hate that part of me is her. That her anger feels like my own. That her hunger is rising—raw, primal, and terrifying. I drag my fingernails across the stone wall until they split and bleed.

I went back to bed but I hadn't slept. Not a minute. The fire had died hours ago, and the chill gnawed at my bones, but it wasn't the cold that kept me awake. It was her. That beast pacing just under my skin, snarling, clawing, nudging my thoughts with hers like I was just another limb she hadn't learned to control yet.

By the time the first grey sliver of dawn slipped over the horizon, my hands were shaking and something dark had settled in my chest.

If I couldn't fight her, I could at least use her.

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I moved through Andros's room like a thief, which was fitting. That's what I was now. I pulled two silver candlesticks from the mantle and wrapped them in one of his shirts. Heavy, real silver. They'd sell well. In the bottom drawer of his desk, I found a pouch of old coins—dusty, some with foreign stamps, but they'd trade.

Everything I touched reeked of him, but I forced myself not to care. I stripped quickly and changed into warmer clothes—furs stolen from his closet, a thick wool tunic, a heavy cloak. His boots were too big, but better than bare feet.

I stared at the window. Frost clung to the glass like spiderwebs. I cracked it open and the cold slapped me, sharp and bracing. My breath clouded instantly.

Good.

I slung the pouch over my shoulder, braced my hands on the windowsill, and climbed out.

The wall was slick with ice, but my fingers found their grip. My legs moved like they remembered something I'd never learned. The wolf guided me, stronger, quicker. My breath came in white bursts as I pulled myself up onto the roof and crouched low.

The wind bit through the fabric, but I barely felt it. I moved. One rooftop to another. Slate to timber. My muscles burned, but it was nothing compared to the weight I carried inside.

The stables were just ahead. A leap, no more than six feet. I pushed off. The wolf surged with me, and for a second, I swore I felt hersmirk.

I missed.

The edge of the roof clipped my foot and I went down hard, tumbling through frozen air and landing in a heap in the snow behind the stable. Pain lanced through my side. My ankle screamed. I bit down on a cry and rolled onto my back, staring up at the paling sky.

“You bitch,” I whispered, gasping through the pain.

She growled in my head, unrepentant.

“I swear to the gods, the second I find that witch again, I’m getting ten runes. Ten. I’ll carve them down to my spine if I have to. You’ll never make a sound again.”

The wolf didn’t answer. She didn’t need to, I knew it as her doing.

The pain in my side made every movement sharp, but I gritted my teeth and forced myself to stand. The stables loomed ahead, quiet, the doors slightly ajar. I limped toward them, keeping low, listening for voices or footsteps. Nothing. Just the soft snorts and shifting hooves of sleeping horses.

Inside, it was warmer, the scent of hay and sweat and animals almost comforting. I moved fast, choosing a lean grey mare with long legs and a wary eye. She jerked when I touched her flank, but I whispered soft lies into her ear and stroked her neck until she calmed.

I saddled her clumsily—too loud, too slow—but luck stayed with me. No one came. Before I mounted, I hesitated.

Dain.

A breath caught in my throat. My throat burned, but I forced the thought away. I couldn't take him with me. Not yet.

"I'll come back," I said aloud, voice cracking. "When I have the runes again. When I'm stronger. When he can't touch me."

The mare stamped her hooves. Time was running out. I led her toward the edge of the outer wall, where the gate guards rotated just before sunrise. I knew their rhythm by now. Knew when the inner bell rang for the changing watch. I waited in the shadows and, just as the gate creaked open to let in the new patrol, I threw a rock across the courtyard.

It shattered a window on the opposite side of the keep. Voices shouted. The guards turned. I dug my heels into the mare and kicked her forward.

We flew.

Hooves thundered over the bridge, shouts behind me, horns sounding. Arrows didn't fly—I was lucky. Or Andros had ordered them not to hurt me. Either way, the gates vanished behind us in the snow.

The wind ripped at my cloak. My fingers went numb around the reins. The land beyond the citadel was white and endless, the mountains sharp in the distance like jagged teeth. I didn't know where I was. I'd never been this far north. The air tasted like steel and pine.

If I could cross the mountains, I might find a village. And if I found a village, I could ask for the coast. And when I found the coast, I'd find her. And this time, I'd ask for more than just silence.

By midday, the wind had turned cruel.

The sky hung low and bruised, thick with snow that lashed against my face like glass shards. The mare's sides were lathered with sweat beneath her winter coat, her breaths coming hard and fast. I urged her on until her hooves began to slip on the frozen ground, until I could see the tremble in her legs with every step.

She couldn't go further. And neither could I.

I spotted the cave just as the first flakes thickened into a blizzard. It was a narrow gash in the side of a hill, half-hidden behind a cluster of pine trees already half-buried in white. I dismounted, nearly crumpled from the jolt that shot through my side, and led the mare inside.

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It wasn't much. Barely deep enough to block the wind, but it would have to do.

I stripped the saddle, rubbed down the mare's flanks with a threadbare cloth, whispered another round of soft lies, and then turned to the fire. My fingers barely worked, but I managed it—twigs, dry moss, the edge of a torn shirt soaked in oil. Sparks caught, flared, held. A flickering circle of warmth.

I sank down beside it, teeth chattering, cloak pulled tight around me. My skin was burning.

Too hot.

I shoved back the layers of fur and linen and stared at my arms. No marks. No wounds. But the heat pulsed beneath the skin, deep and steady like a war drum. My whole body was aching, not from the cold but from something else entirely.

Then I felt it.

The third rune.

It had been silent for days—cold and still, like a frozen brand carved between my shoulder blades. Now it flared, sharp and liquid, as if something molten had been poured beneath my skin.

“No,” I whispered. “No, not now.”

The pain twisted suddenly, violently, cutting through my spine. I collapsed forward

onto my hands, breathing ragged, eyes wide and blind with agony. It was worse than the first. Worse than the second. This one didn't just burn—it tore.

I screamed into the snow-packed earth, muffled and shaking. My nails gouged at the dirt. My body bucked once, then again. My jaw locked. It felt like something was clawing its way out of me. Not the wolf. Not entirely.

Just me—fracturing.

Sweat rolled down my temples even as frost gathered at my lashes. My heart was pounding too fast. My limbs convulsed. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I couldn't— And then it cracked.

The sound wasn't real, but I heard it. Like shattering glass deep inside my skull.

And the silence that followed?

It was worse than the pain.

CHAPTER 19

Andros

We searched all morning. From the citadel walls to the edge of the ridge trails, through the pine-choked woods and frostbitten slopes. Half the Blood Night guard was tearing the land apart for her, and it wasn't enough.

I barked orders until my voice was hoarse, threatened the gate commander twice, nearly ripped a stablehand's throat out when he stuttered something about not noticing a missing horse.

By midday, I was losing my mind.

She was gone—a ghost on the wind, faster and bolder than I'd expected. And I should've expected it. I should've known she'd try something like this the second I turned my back.

I kicked over the supply crates at the last outpost we searched, fury chewing through me like acid.

Then it hit me. Like a blade driven through the back of my skull. The bond flared and shattered.

I staggered, grabbing the side of the outpost wall as the pain punched through my spine. My knees buckled. I saw her—no, felt her—screaming. Writhing. Her body convulsing with it, the sound of her voice raw and wild and real in my head. Her pain poured through the bond, white-hot and endless. She couldn't block it this time. Not with the third rune breaking.

“Fuck,” I hissed, gasping.

Garrick was at my side in seconds, eyes wide. “Alpha?”

“She's close.” My voice came out rough, ragged. “She's breaking.”

The pain dulled, but it didn't fade. Not fully. It throbbed beneath my skin like an echo of her scream. I tasted blood in my mouth and didn't remember biting my tongue.

I grabbed a horse, didn't wait for a saddle. Just rode.

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Through snow and shadow and wind that cut like knives, I followed her. I didn't need a trail. Her scent was stronger now—richer, sharper. Not masked by rune magic or the stink of fear. It curled through the forest like smoke, and my wolf knew. He pulled at my insides like a tether, snarling, hungry, ready to run.

By nightfall, I found the cave.

I dismounted, silent.

Snow crunched beneath my boots as I stepped closer. She was curled up by the fire, small and shaking, her cloak thrown half off, skin slick with sweat. Her hair clung to her face, lips pale and parted. Her scent hit me like a hammer—unfiltered, wild. Her wolf was near the surface, I could feel it, breathing in rhythm with mine.

My steps were slow. Deliberate. Controlled.

But inside, everything in me was unraveling.

She was going to run to the witch. Let her carve her skin again. Let her silence the very part of her that had finally clawed its way to life.

“You were running,” I said, voice low. “To the witch. So she could carve your fucking skin again.”

Her head snapped up.

She grabbed a rock—pathetic little thing—and threw it at me with trembling fingers.

It landed at my feet with a dull thud.

I stared down at it. Then looked at her.

“Really?” I asked, voice cold. “That’s all you’ve got?”

She grabbed another rock—larger this time—and hurled it at my head with all the fire she could summon. I caught it mid-air with one hand. The force barely stung. My fingers closed around it, and I crushed it against the cave wall. Stone split, shards falling at my feet.

Her eyes widened.

She tried to mask it, but the firelight betrayed her. I saw the sweat glistening on her brow, the trembling in her shoulders, the too-shallow breaths. Her body was turning against her, and she knew it.

“Don’t you fucking come near me,” she rasped, voice cracking like ice.

“Or what?”

I stepped forward.

She didn’t move. Couldn’t. She was already burning up, and I could smell it now—raw and sweet, thick in the back of my throat. Not the polished scent of a broken omega. No. This was wild, instinctual, real. Her wolf was close, prowling just under the skin, dragging her into the very state she’d spent her whole life trying to erase.

“You tried to kill her,” I said, my voice low but shaking with anger. “Tried to bind her in chains, bury her in pain. And now look—she came out to play.”

I crouched in front of her and she flinched.

“Guess what, stray,” I growled. “My wolf wants to play with her.”

Her breath hitched.

I grabbed her chin—not hard, just enough to make her look at me. Her eyes met mine, wide and furious, and still burning with that same defiance I’d been choking on since the day I dragged her out of that village.

“You can hate me all you want,” I whispered, my mouth close to hers. “Curse me. Fight me. But by the time this night is over, you’ll be on all fours in front of me.”

She spat in my face.

I wiped the spit from my cheek with the back of my hand, slow and deliberate. My jaw clenched. I let the silence stretch, heavy with the crackling of the dying fire and her shallow, angry breaths.

She was shaking. And still—still—she looked at me like she’d rather die than bend.

Good.

I leaned in, voice low, curling around her like smoke. “You think spitting in my face makes you strong?” I said. “You think I’ll let that slide, after everything? After the way you played with the bond. After you tried to run back to that witch.”

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Her lips parted, but she said nothing. Her eyes flicked to the cave mouth—there was nowhere to run. And we both knew it.

“You want to know what happens now?” I whispered against her temple. “First, I’ll take that mouth you love to curse me with and see what else it can do when it’s not busy spitting.”

Her chest rose sharply. Sweat beaded along her collarbone.

“Then I’ll strip you bare,” I went on, voice thickening, darker, “make you crawl across this cave floor and beg for what you swore you’d never want.”

Her pulse pounded at her throat, and I could smell it—fear, fury, and something sweeter rising beneath it. The scent of surrender she hated.

“I’ll make you come on my fingers first,” I said. “Then on my tongue. Then I’ll bend you over, sink my teeth into that prettyneck, and knot you until the fire inside you is nothing but ashes.”

Her breathing broke, sharp and hitched—and still she glared at me through the haze of heat building in her body.

“Go fuck yourself,” she spat, voice raw.

“Too late,” I smiled. “I found something better to fuck.”

She tried to push me away. Weak, sluggish movements that barely brushed my chest.

I caught her wrists with one hand, pinned them above her head, and watched the flicker of panic return—flicker, but not flare. She was burning too hot now. The fear was still there, but it was tangled in something else. Something primal.

Her body trembled beneath me, sweat clinging to her skin despite the cold air pouring in from the cave mouth. Her scent was thick now, feral and rising. She was fighting a war inside herself—and losing.

“I can smell it,” I said against her throat. “The heat. You tried to starve it, kill it, carve it out. But you can’t stop it now, can you?”

She shook her head once. A lie. I tightened my grip.

“Say it.”

“No.”

“You’re burning up, Lexa. And I’m the only one who can put it out.”

“Go to hell.”

I slid my free hand down, pressed my fingers to the curve of her hip, just above where her legs clenched shut.

She gasped. Her whole body arched, the wolf inside her clawing up her spine, howling beneath her skin.

“I’ll make you feel everything you tried to forget,” I said, lips brushing her ear. “I’ll ruin you for every cold, lonely night you spent pretending you weren’t one of us. I’ll drag your wolf out and make her mine, too.”

Her head thrashed against the furs. “I hate you.”

“Good,” I growled, nose brushing her jaw. “Hate me on your knees. Hate me while you’re begging.”

“I won’t beg.”

“You will. You will, Lexa. Before I even knot you, you’ll be soaked and shaking and begging me to finish what your wolf started.”

Her whole body jerked, a helpless sound tearing from her throat.

The bond pulsed—hot, tangled, real. She was falling.

Her hands stopped resisting. Her wrists went slack in my grip. Her legs trembled once, then shifted. Not wide, not yet—but enough.

She turned her face away, teeth clenched, eyes wet from pain and exhaustion and fury.

I watched the way her head lowered, that small, shuddering motion—defeat drawn in breath and bone. She didn’t say the words, but her body had. Every tremble, every twitch, every shallow breath dragged through clenched teeth.

She was done.

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I released her wrists slowly, letting them fall to the furs like something broken. She didn't pull away. Didn't move.

Her eyes stayed shut.

I moved over her with deliberate control, the beast in me prowling just beneath the surface. He had waited long enough. I could feel his claws scraping the edges of my thoughts, urging me to take, to claim, to end this. But I didn't lunge. I didn't rush.

I needed her to feel every moment.

My hand slid down her thigh, slow, careful. She was burning under the layers, her body slick with sweat despite the cold cave air. Her scent hit harder now—wild honey, crushed pine, and something darker beneath it. Her heat was cresting. She wouldn't last much longer.

"You smell like you were made for this," I said, letting my lips trail down her throat, catching the sharp beat of her pulse. "You were never meant to be a stray, Lexa. You were meant to be mine."

Her breath hitched again, but she didn't speak.

"You've fought me for weeks. Lied. Ran. But look at you now." I hovered just above her lips, heat bleeding between us. "Sweating. Shaking. Opening."

"I'm not—" she started, voice cracking.

“Don’t lie. Not now.” My fingers slid up her inner thigh, brushing against soaked fabric. “Not when your body’s screaming for me.”

She whimpered—barely a sound—but it shot straight through me.

“I’ll ruin you slowly,” I whispered, breath against her lips. “I’ll kiss you until you sob. Make you say my name like a prayer. And when I’m inside you, when my knot swells—”

She jerked, gasping.

“—you’ll forget every reason you ever had to run.”

Her hands moved, not to push me away this time, but to grip my tunic, weakly, like she hated herself for it.

“I can’t,” she breathed, eyes fluttering open, glossy with pain and something deeper. “I can’t stop it.”

I pressed my forehead to hers, eyes locked on hers, voice low and final.

“Then let go.”

“No, I hate you.”

Her words burned, but not in the way she wanted them to. Not with the bite they used to carry. They were empty now. Hollow armor.

She was trembling beneath me, not just from the cold—gods, it wasn’t the cold anymore. Her skin was fevered, damp with sweat. Her scent was thick in my throat, coating my tongue, fogging the edges of reason. Sweet. Wild. Ready.

She still held onto that last word like it was a weapon—hate—but it shook in her mouth now, no longer sharpened steel, just a whisper of the fight she was losing. The fight she'd already lost.

I leaned closer, lips grazing hers, not kissing—hovering—until I felt the way her breath hitched when I didn't touch her.

“You can hate me,” I whispered, “while I fuck the fight out of you.”

She gasped, sharp, as my hand slid beneath the last barrier of fabric between us. Her body jolted when my fingers found just how wet she was. But her thighs parted just a little more.

“Say it again,” I murmured, dragging my fingers slowly through the slick heat of her. “Say you hate me while you grind against my hand.”

She shook her head, tears prickling in the corners of her eyes—not from pain. Not from fear. From the collapse of something she'd fought too long to keep standing.

Her hands clutched my tunic like it was the only solid thing left in the world.

I slipped one finger inside her.

She moaned—and this time, she bit it back, biting her own lip until blood welled.

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My name hovered on her tongue. I could feel it. She was close. Closer than she wanted to be. Every part of her was betraying her—her body, her wolf, the way she lifted her hips for more even as she shook her head.

“You want me to stop?” I asked, voice rough now, thick with need, curling my fingers inside her slowly. “Tell me. Just tell me to stop.”

She said nothing. Her breath was ragged. Her whole body trembled. I moved again. Deeper. Curling. Claiming. She broke.

Her back arched, mouth falling open around a silent cry as her heat surged and her body clenched around my fingers.

And still—still—she tried to speak through it.

“I—” she gasped. “I can’t—”

“You don’t have to anymore,” I growled, lowering my mouth to her throat, letting her feel the scrape of my teeth. “I’ve got you now.”

And I did.

Because when I pulled my fingers free and she whimpered at the loss, when she didn’t push me away but gripped my arms instead, dragging me closer, her eyes glassy and wide. That was when I knew. She wasn’t running anymore.

She wasn’t running.

Not with her legs wrapped weakly around my waist, not with her nails digging into my arms like I was the only thing keeping her tethered to the earth. Not when her wolf was purring beneath her skin, pressing forward, aching for mine.

She was done.

And I wasn't gentle.

I kissed her like I wanted to break her open—biting, breathless, deep. Her lips parted with a choked sound, soft and torn between defiance and surrender. I swallowed it. Swallowed all of it.

I pressed her down into the furs, the heat of her skin almost unbearable. The layers between us were too much, and I ripped them away, baring her to the cold cave air. She gasped, but not from the cold. No, the fire inside her burned too hot now for that.

Her thighs trembled as I settled between them.

She looked up at me then, with those fucking green eyes that drove me insane, pupils blown wide, chest heaving. There was still resistance in that gaze, flickering, dying. But there was want too. Raw. Terrified. Irrevocable.

“Andros,” she whispered.

I froze for a breath, chest tightening.

Then I lined myself up and pressed forward, slow and steady until I was seated deep inside her. She cried out, her hands flying up to grip my shoulders, body arching off the furs.

Fuck.

She was tight, hot—her body clutching me like it already knew who I was. Who I would always be to her.

I gave her a moment. One heartbeat. Two.

Then I started to move.

Each thrust was measured, hard, dragging her closer to the edge with every stroke. I watched her unravel. Watched her eyes flutter closed, her mouth fall open. Watched the last threads of denial snap like rope soaked in fire.

“I told you,” I growled against her throat. “By the time this night’s over, you’ll be on all fours.”

“No,” she whimpered—but there was no strength behind it now.

I gripped her hips and flipped her, pressed her chest to the furs, pulled her ass back against me. Her legs barely held. She let out a broken sound, but she didn’t stop me. Didn’t fight. She arched.

“Good girl,” I said roughly, voice laced with pride and something darker. “Now beg.”

She shook her head, even as her hips rolled back against mine. I reached down, stroked between her legs, feeling how wet she was, how close.

“I said beg.”

Her voice came out shattered.

“Please.”

“Please, what?”

“Don’t—” She gasped, back bowing as she pushed against me. “Don’t stop.”

I grinned, savage.

Then I slammed into her, deep and hard, and didn’t stop. Her cries filled the cave, heat pouring from her like wildfire. The bond snapped taut, alive, burning.

Her cry tore from her throat, raw and unguarded, nothing held back. No hatred. No venom. Just the sound of a woman breaking open, giving in to the very thing she’d spent years trying to kill. Her body clenched around me, spasming, trembling so violently I had to grip her hips to keep her grounded.

She was pulsing around me, drowning in it, and I could feel every twitch, every desperate, helpless wave crashing through her.

Lexa’s fingers clawed at the furs beneath her, grasping for something solid as her spine bowed, her cheek pressed to the ground. Her breath came in shattered bursts, gasps that barely found their way past her parted lips.

And then I followed.

The pressure coiled low in my gut snapped, dragging me under with her. I groaned her name against her skin, sinking into that heat, that bond, burying myself so deep I forgot where she ended and I began. My knot swelled, locking us together, and she cried out again—softer this time, as if she felt it too, that final claim sinking into her bones.

I didn't move. Couldn't. The knot held me inside her, tight and claiming. I stayed like that, over her, breath heavy against her back, hands resting on her hips as I tried to force my wolf back under control. He was pacing, howling with satisfaction. Her scent was everywhere now, slick with heat and surrender, with mine and it made every instinct I had want to do it again. Mark her again. Make her beg louder.

The fire crackled beside us, casting soft amber light over her bare back, her torn clothes, the bruise-dark bite mark blooming on her neck. Blood welled there in a slow, steady line.

She was silent. But not distant.

I felt her. Through the bond.

Exhausted. Spent. Still angry. Still afraid. But something in her had quieted. The wolf inside her was no longer growling. No longer fighting. She was stretched out, curled up in the dark of her mind, purring in time with mine.

“I told you,” I said, voice rough in the stillness, low against her ear. “You can't outrun this.”

She didn't answer.

But her body relaxed by inches, little by little, until she was no longer trembling. Until she was breathing. Until she was simply... still.

I eased down beside her, pulling the cloak back over her bare skin, one hand sliding under her to rest against her stomach.

“Sleep,” I murmured, not asking. “You’re going to need it.”

And this time, she didn’t fight me.

CHAPTER 20

Lexa

The last rune holds. Barely. I woke to the weight of him. His arm slung over my waist. His breath slow and warm against the back of my neck. The heat between my legs still slick, sore, and unmistakably his. And I wanted to scream.

The fire had died down to embers, the cave chilled and silent. But I was burning from the inside out—again. Not from heat. From regret.

Gods, what have I done?

I tried to move, to untangle myself from the mess of limbs and furs, but the second I shifted—

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he growled behind me, voice deep with sleep and something darker.

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I froze.

His arm tightened around me, not violently, but enough to remind me of what he'd done. What I'd let him do. What I'd wanted—and hated myself for wanting. I shut my eyes, squeezing them tight as the shame washed through me.

The wolf inside me was purring. Stretching. Pleased. She was louder now, clearer than ever. I didn't need to hear words—just the feeling of her circling, watching, waiting. She was closer to the surface than she'd ever been. Pressed right against it.

And I knew why. The fourth rune. The last.

Its magic was slipping. Thinning. I could feel it fraying like rotten thread, trying to hold back a force too big, too old, too wild.

I could barely breathe with her this close. My skin itched. My senses were sharp enough to hear the snow melt slowly at the mouth of the cave. I could smell everything—his skin, my sweat, the blood dried on my neck.

I was losing the war I'd fought my whole life. I hated him for helping break me. I hated myself for letting it happen. But most of all—I hated that part of me liked it.

“Get your hands off me,” I rasped.

He didn't move. “You're not going anywhere,” he said, voice calm but final.

“I need to leave. I need to—”

“You need to stay put,” he snapped, his voice sharp now, jaw tight against my shoulder. “You’re holding on by a thread. One more rune. You think you can ride through a fucking blizzard with that thing inside you clawing to get out?”

He shifted behind me, and I felt it—that smug, infuriating grin in his voice before he even spoke.

“Where the fuck were you going, Lexa?” he asked, his mouth brushing against my ear. “No food. No map. You don’t know this land. You had nothing but that ragged cloak and the fur in the saddlebag—which, by the way, was already strapped to the horse. You got lucky. That’s all.”

I tried to push up on my elbows, to peel myself away from him, but he moved fast. He pinned me again. His hand on my shoulder, his weight against my back. Not cruel. Just enough.

“Answer me,” he growled.

“As far away from you as possible,” I snapped.

“Right,” he scoffed, voice cold now. “So desperate to run, you were willing to freeze to death in a fucking blizzard? That’s not survival, Lexa. That’s suicide.”

“I didn’t ask for your concern.”

“No,” he said, pressing me harder into the furs, “but you left Dain behind.”

That hit harder than his body ever could. My breath caught.

“You were so hellbent on getting to that witch, you didn’t even look back. Was the craving that strong? Is your addiction to dark magic so fucking deep you’d leave the

one person who actually loves you behind?”

“It’s not—” I bit out, anger flaring. “It’s not an addiction. I just want to—”

“Shut up,” he snarled, flipping me onto my back, face inches from mine, eyes burning. “Shut up about the damn wolf already. You keep blaming her for everything. Like she’s some disease you caught. Like you’re notherand she’s notyou. Stop running from her. Just face it.”

My jaw clenched.

“You’re not broken, Lexa. You’re bound. And I’m the only one who’s ever seen what you could be if you stopped trying to kill yourself from the inside out.”

I looked away. He grabbed my chin and made me meet his dark blue eyes. “So tell me,” he whispered. “What exactly were you planning to do once the witch carved the last piece of your soul away?”

I glared up at him, eyes burning, throat aching with the words I didn’t want to admit. But the silence between us stretched taut and brittle, and eventually it snapped.

“Carve another,” I whispered bitterly. “And another. Keep carving until the magic either silences her forever or kills us both.”

His jaw tightened. Eyes narrowed. Anger flared, bright and hot. But I didn’t give him time to interrupt—I kept going, the words falling raw from my lips.

“Because I don’t know how to live anymore.”

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He stared down at me, his expression faltering for just a moment. Eyes softening as those words hit him—until his rage flared again, fiercer this time, drowning out any hint of sympathy.

“Great fucking plan,” he growled. “But wouldn’t it have been simpler to just jump off a damned cliff since you were headed into the mountains anyway? Why bother stealing from me—silver candlesticks, coins—to pay the witch if your end goal was oblivion?”

I flinched but didn’t look away. He leaned closer, anger making the lines of his face harsh in the faint morning light.

“And what about Dain?” he demanded. “You took that boy in, promised him a future. You became a mother to him, Lexa. What kind of mother abandons her child for the sweet comfort of dark magic eating her from the inside out? You gave him hope that he wasn’t alone, and then tore it away without so much as a backward glance.”

I swallowed hard, shame coiling in my chest.

“He’s just a child,” Andros continued, voice dropping lower, thick with barely-contained fury. “You chose to keep him, raise him, protect him. Was that a lie too? Or did you simply not care what your disappearance would do to him? That boy trusts you. He loves you. He needs you. And yet you’d willingly leave him alone, abandoned, again?”

“Stop it,” I hissed weakly, tears stinging my eyes.

“No,” he snapped, pinning me with his gaze, relentless. “I won’t stop. Because you don’t get to pretend you’re the victim here. You don’t get to play martyr when your actions drag everyone else down with you. Do you even know what it was like, those nights you were locked away in my room?”

I froze, barely breathing.

His voice changed then—softer, quieter. And somehow that terrified me even more.

“The boy couldn’t sleep without you,” Andros said softly, his voice rough. “He cried. For hours. Nothing soothed him. Not Garrick, not the maids. Not stories, not songs. Nothing. Eventually, I had to step in. I took him to my own bed, let him curl up next to me because he was so terrified you’d vanished for good. Every damned night he asked me when you’d come back. And every damned night, I lied and said soon.”

My throat tightened painfully. I had no idea. Dain had never mentioned it, never spoken of those nights. But the image of Andros—dark, ruthless Andros—letting a child burrow against his side, whispering comfort, keeping away the monsters that haunted Dain’s dreams... it cut deep.

“When I found you gone yesterday, you know the first thing he asked?” Andros’s eyes burned into mine, furious but wounded. “He asked me what he did wrong to make you leave again.”

A sob choked out of me, ragged and broken.

“So run all you like,” Andros said bitterly. “Hate me as much as you want. But I will never let you fall into that darkness again. I’ll chain you to my bed, carve my name into your fucking bones if I have to—but you will not drag that child down with you. Do you understand me?”

His words burned, seared into my very marrow. And for the first time, when I looked up at Andros, I saw something more than just a monster. I saw the man who'd held Dain close in the darkness. A man capable of tenderness, of care.

"I didn't know," I whispered, my voice shaking.

"No," Andros said quietly, his anger softening to something raw and aching. "Because you never cared enough to ask."

His words struck something buried deep inside me, something hidden beneath years of denial and pain. The image of him—this cold, ruthless Alpha—holding Dain close, guarding him through the night, murmuring reassurances to a frightened child...it shifted something in my chest, unlocked a door I'd kept sealed shut for far too long.

Warmth spread through me, deep and primal, overriding logic, overriding sense. My wolf stirred fiercely beneath the surface—not angry, but possessive, protective. Her emotions bled into mine, tangling together until I couldn't tell them apart.

Before I realized what I was doing, I reached for him. It wasn't gentle—it was desperate, instinctual. I pulled him closer, burying my face in his neck, breathing in the scent of cedar and snow that had haunted me for weeks.

And then, I bit down.

Hard.

My teeth broke his skin, copper-rich blood flooding my tongue. Andros jerked, a sharp hiss of pain vibrating through him. But he didn't push me away. He held perfectly still, his muscles tense beneath my fingers.

Slowly, I pulled back, breathing hard. My mind raced, panic setting in—what had I just done?

But Andros's eyes weren't angry. They burned bright with triumph and possessiveness as he reached up, gently wiping a drop of his blood from my lower lip.

“You marked me,” he murmured softly, eyes locked onto mine, voice thick with emotion and triumph. “Do you even understand what that means, Lexa?”

I shook my head numbly, heart racing. “I—I don't—”

“It means you chose me back,” he said quietly, his gaze softening with something deeper, more raw. “You just claimed me as your mate, Lexa. That bite isn't just a wound—it's a bond, sealed by blood. It means you accept me as yours, just as I accepted you.”

A strange sort of relief, mixed with terror and confusion, flooded me. “I—I didn't—”

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“You did,” he whispered, gently cupping my face in his palms. “Your instincts took over. Your wolf knew exactly what she wanted.”

His thumb brushed my cheek, softly, carefully, as if I might break. Then he groaned softly, eyes falling shut as his head dipped closer to mine.

“Fucking finally,” he growled, voice raw and broken, thick with pain and relief and need. Before I could answer, his mouth crashed onto mine.

This kiss wasn’t violent—it wasn’t angry. It was desperate, claiming, possessive in a way that reached down into my bones. For the first time, I didn’t protest, didn’t pull away.

I gave in.

My lips parted under his, inviting him deeper. My hands tangled in his hair, holding him close. For once, I didn’t fight him.

He kissed me again, slow this time. Tender. As if I was something precious that might break beneath his touch. It frightened me how much more terrifying this softness was than his rage had ever been. He pulled back just enough to rest his forehead against mine.

His thumb traced gentle circles along my cheek, wiping away tears I hadn’t even realized had fallen.

“Please, Lexa,” he whispered, his voice shaking slightly, vulnerable, in a way I never

imagined an Alpha like him could sound. “Don't erase this beautiful part of yourself again. Don't go to the witch. Don't run. Stay with me.”

My chest tightened painfully, breath catching. I forced myself to hold his gaze.

“Why?” I whispered, voice trembling with confusion. “Why do you even care?”

“Because,” Andros murmured, brushing his lips against mine again, softly, carefully.

“Deep down, I always knew we were meant to find each other. To be together.”

I tried to shake my head, but he gently cupped my chin, stopping me.

“And somewhere even deeper, beneath all your fear and anger and pain,” he continued softly, eyes warm and fierce with sincerity, “you knew it too. You didn't travel two thousand miles across the continent just to escape, Lexa. You felt a pull. A call. Something you couldn't name. And if you hadn't silenced your wolf with runes and dark magic, maybe we would have met sooner.”

I swallowed hard, my heart racing wildly in my chest. “You don't know if that's true.”

His mouth curled into a small, gentle smile. “Maybe not. But I choose to believe it is. Now the question is, what will you choose? You—not the bond, not your wolf. You, Lexa.”

Slowly, I looked toward the cave entrance. Snow still fell steadily outside, thick and relentless, blanketing the world in white. Cold and harsh.

“It's still horrible out there,” I murmured, my voice quiet. “I'm not going anywhere right now.”

His gaze brightened slightly with cautious hope.

I leaned in closer, pressing my mouth gently against his, tasting his warmth, his breath mingling with mine. Pulling back just enough to whisper against his lips, I smiled softly, finally letting the truth reach my eyes.

“Lucky for you, I have enough heat to keep us both warm.”

He smiled back at me then—real, beautiful, and utterly devastating. And as I kissed him again, surrendering myself entirely, something inside me loosened.

This time, when we made love, it wasn’t about dominance, or power, or submission. It was about finally letting go. About giving into something I’d denied far too long. It was about choosing him.

Choosing myself.

Choosing us.

CHAPTER 21

Lexa

The morning was grey and merciless, the snow relentless as ever. My body ached with a hundred things—pleasure, exhaustion, the fading sting of the bond pulsing through every nerve—but for once, the ache wasn’t hollow. It wasn’t a void.

Andros rode close behind me as we followed the narrow trail down from the cave, our horses slow in the thickening drifts. We didn’t speak much. We didn’t need to. The silence between us felt full, settled. Not peace exactly, but... something like it.

The heat still simmered under my skin, but the worst of it had passed. I could sit upright, I could think clearly, though my limbs still felt heavy with sleep and fire and the weight of him.

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The citadel was too far for me to make the ride without falling off a horse. Andros knew it. I didn't bother pretending otherwise. So we went to the nearest outpost instead—a small, walled station nestled between the base of two cliffs.

Wooden palisades, smoke curling from chimneys, the stink of sweat and horses and boiled meat. The moment we rode in, Garrick was already walking toward us, grinning like the bastard he was.

“Well, well,” he said, raising a brow. “If it isn't our fearless Alpha and his runawaystray—”

Andros didn't even glance at him. He dismounted, came to my horse, and scooped me into his arms like I weighed nothing. I didn't argue. My legs were done pretending.

“Fuck off,” Andros growled. “And get someone to bring up hot food. Real food.”

Garrick snorted but turned on his heel without another word, still chuckling as he walked off.

Andros carried me through the outpost like a man on a mission. The cold didn't touch me, not with his body around mine, not with the scent of him curled so close to my skin. He kicked open a door near the back of the main hall and stepped inside a chamber I hadn't seen before.

It wasn't large. Not like his rooms in the citadel. No fire-lit stone walls or silk-draped bedframes. Just a sturdy bed, a chest, a fur-lined bench near the fire, and clean linens.

But it was warm. And it was quiet. And it was safe.

He shut the door with his boot and set me down, eyes dark and hungry even through the exhaustion written all over his face.

I started to untie my boots, fingers slow and clumsy. My cloak slipped from my shoulders and landed on the floor in a heap.

Andros leaned against the door, watching me.

“You think,” he said, voice low and hoarse, “we have time for one more round before your heat wears off?”

I glanced up, a smirk tugging at the edge of my mouth. I reached for the hem of my tunic, dragging it slowly over my head as I stepped out of my boots.

“Maybe more than one,” I said, letting it drop to the floor, “if I get something to eat immediately after.”

Andros’s grin was sharp, wicked.

“Oh, I wouldn’t count on it.”

Before I could respond, he crossed the room in two strides, grabbed me by the waist, and threw me onto the bed. I hit the mattress with a breathless laugh, bouncing once, furs tangling around my legs.

He was on me a second later, moving like a storm rolling in slow, deliberate, unstoppable. His body covering mine inch by inch, claiming space with every breath, every shift of muscle, his dark blue eyes locked on mine like they were anchoring me in place, like looking away would be a sin neither of us could afford.

The bed creaked beneath his weight, and the warmth of his body settled over mine like a second skin. His hands slid up my thighs, parting them with practised ease, and I shivered—not from cold, but from the anticipation that coiled low and tight in my belly.

Andros kissed me—once, deeply, claiming my mouth like it belonged to him, like it always had. And then he pulled back, trailing his lips down my jaw, across my throat, nipping at the tender spot just above my collarbone.

My breath caught. My legs shifted restlessly, already aching for him.

He smiled against my skin, sensing it, then moved lower. His mouth followed the path of his hands, his lips brushing my ribs, my stomach, until he knelt at the edge of the bed, strong hands gripping my thighs.

“Lie back,” he murmured, voice thick with hunger. “Let me show you what it feels like to be worshipped.”

I didn’t argue. I leaned into the furs, legs falling open for him. And when he buried his head between my thighs, his mouth hot and hungry against my slick heat, I cried out, loud, shameless, raw. My fingers tangled in his hair, and my hips rose to meet him as he devoured me like a starving man who finally had permission to feast.

“Gods—Andros,” I gasped, my back arching off the bed.

He didn’t answer with words—only pressed in harder, devouring me like I was the only thing that could satisfy him, like I was the answer to every question he’d ever had. The wet sounds of his mouth on me filled the room, mingling with my breathing, ragged and desperate.

He found that perfect spot with his tongue and stayed there, relentless, ruthless, until I

was writhing beneath him, my voice rising without control.

“Don’t stop—don’t—”

Andros kept going, licking deeper, faster, until the world broke apart behind my eyes and I shattered with a cry, my body locking up, thighs shaking around his head. The orgasm tore through me, sharp and overwhelming, the bond between us pulsing in time with the pleasure.

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And still, he didn't stop. Not right away. He licked me through the aftershocks, slower now, more tender, until my legs trembled and I had to push weakly at his shoulders.

"Okay," I breathed, panting. "Okay—enough."

He kissed the inside of my thigh, his lips wet and warm against my skin. Then he looked up at me, eyes dark and burning, mouth slick with me.

"I'm not even close to done with you," he growled, voice low and rough as he rose over me, the weight of him returning to press me down into the furs. "Hope you weren't bluffing about that second round."

I smiled up at him, flushed and breathless, reaching for his tunic.

"Feed me later," I whispered, pulling him down to kiss me, tasting myself on his tongue. "Fuck me now."

He groaned into my mouth the second I said it, deep and guttural, like I'd cracked something inside him wide open. His hands were already on me, rough and impatient, shoving his tunic over his head and tossing it to the floor.

Heat poured off his body. Solid muscle, scarred and familiar now. Mine. I reached for his belt, fumbling in my eagerness, and he caught my wrists, holding them down against the bed.

"Slow down," he said, voice rough with control he was barely hanging onto. "You'll

get everything you want.”

I arched into him, defiant even now. “I’m not interested in slow.”

He growled again, something between amusement and hunger, and let go of my wrists. The belt came undone in seconds, pants shoved down and kicked away, his body pressing back over mine, hot and heavy and ready.

Our mouths crashed together again—no tenderness this time. Just heat and hunger and that maddening bond pulling us tighter and tighter. His hands slid down my waist, dragging my hips to meet his.

When he pushed inside me, we both moaned—loud, unfiltered, honest.

I clung to him, legs wrapping around his back, nails digging into his shoulders as he filled me in one hard thrust. There was no space between us now, nothing left to hide. No walls. No masks.

Justus.

“Lexa,” he groaned against my throat, “fuck—you feel...”

“I know,” I breathed, rocking my hips up to meet him. “Just move—Andros, please—”

He did.

Every thrust sent fire licking up my spine, every grind of his hips pulled another moan from my mouth. I met him, again and again, matching his rhythm, his intensity, the bed creaking beneath us, the room thick with heat and breath and the scent of us.

I was close again—gods, how was I already so close? But I didn't care. I chased it, my body already clenching around him, pulling him deeper, harder.

“Look at me,” he said, voice hoarse. His eyes burned into mine. Wild. Fierce. “When you come, I want you to know who's inside you.”

I shattered again.

He caught my cry with his mouth, swallowing it, holding me through the fall as I convulsed around him, gasping his name.

Andros cursed against my neck, his rhythm faltering, his body tensing as he buried himself to the hilt and groaned my name like a promise.

He came hard, the bond pulsing like a heartbeat between us, knot swelling, locking us together once more.

We stayed like that, tangled, breathless, clinging. No words. Just the sound of our hearts slowing. And the storm, finally starting to fade outside.

I didn't remember falling asleep.

One moment, Andros was still inside me, heavy and warm and pulsing, and the next—blackness. No dreams. Just a quiet, bone-deep exhaustion that swallowed everything.

I didn't feel him untangle from me. Didn't feel the fur he pulled up over my naked body. Didn't even feel the cold air from the door when it opened.

What woke me wasn't the knock. It was the scent.

Gods.Food.

My eyes blinked open slowly, lashes heavy. The room was warm, the fire still crackling low, and the first thing I saw was a tray placed on the chest near the bed. Steam curled up from it—roasted meat, thick broth, baked bread glazed with butter. An apple, perfectly red. Cheese. A small glass of dark berry wine. And next to it all, a vase of fresh flowers—roses, pale yellow with soft orange curling around the edges of the petals, delicate and open.

My chest ached looking at them. They didn't belong in a cold northern outpost. They didn't belong in my world. But they were beautiful.

"You're awake," Andros said from near the hearth, already dressed, sleeves rolled up, hair slightly damp like he'd washed. His dark blue eyes burned like frozen flame, cold, brilliant, and impossible to look away from.

I pulled the fur tighter around me, sitting up slowly. My body ached in places I didn't want to think about too hard. "How long was I out?"

"Long enough," he said. "I was about to pour that broth over your head."

I ignored him and lunged for the food. The second I took the first bite—thick, hot bread smeared with soft cheese—I groaned. Loudly.

He raised a brow. "That good?"

"Shut up."

I didn't stop. I tore through the meal like I hadn't eaten in days—which, thinking back on it, was nearly true. The meat vanished in minutes. I drank the broth straight from the bowl, ignoring the spoon entirely. I had half the apple in my mouth before I even looked up.

"You need to chew," Andros said, amusement creeping into his voice. "Slow down, you're going to choke."

I narrowed my eyes.

Then I tossed the rest of the apple at his head.

He caught it, laughing under his breath. "You're welcome, by the way."

I didn't respond at first, just took another bite of bread and glanced again at the roses.

"Who brought the flowers?" I asked quietly.

Andros shrugged. "One of the servants. Garrick probably made someone go out and cut them from the greenhouse back at the ridge. Figured you'd like something soft in the room."

After I finished eating, I collapsed back into the pillows with a sigh that came from somewhere deep in my soul. The furs tangled around my legs again, and I didn't bother fixing them. I was exhausted. Every muscle felt wrung out, my skin too sensitive, my thoughts still half-floating in a haze of afterglow and fatigue.

Andros came to sit on the edge of the bed, arms crossed, watching me like a wolf who'd finally cornered something wild—and didn't know what to do now that it had stopped fighting.

“You good?” he asked, lips twitching.

“I’m sore,” I muttered.

He smirked. “From the riding or the riding?”

I threw a pillow at his head. He dodged it easily, chuckling to himself. Then he leaned forward, brushing hair from my face with fingers that, for once, weren’t rough or demanding. Just gentle.

“I’ll get a bath drawn. You’re not moving anywhere without soaking those legs first.”

“You’re bossy when you’re smug,” I mumbled, eyes half-closing.

“And you’re clingy when you’re tired,” he shot back.

“Am not.”

He smiled, then stood, grabbing the tray and setting it aside. As he moved to the door to bark orders about the bath, I finally asked the question that had been sitting in my chest like a stone.

“Where’s Dain?”

Andros paused. His back was to me for a moment, then he turned, his expression softer than I’d expected.

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“He’s safe,” he said. “Back at the citadel. I left him with two of the best maids in the keep. Ones who’ve raised noble brats before—they know what they’re doing. I gave clear orders: no one touches the human boy. No threats, no punishment, no manipulation. Anyone so much as looks at him wrong answers to me.”

Relief flooded my chest, cold and sharp, followed by something warmer.

“Garrick wanted to bring him,” he admitted. “So did I. But I didn’t know what state I’d find you in. If your runes were gone. If you were feral. If you even recognized me. I couldn’t risk him being in the middle of that.”

I swallowed hard. I hadn’t even thought about it from that angle. I was too used to thinking of Andros as dangerous—to me, to others—but not... careful.

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

Andros shrugged like it was nothing, but the way he looked at me then...it wasn’t nothing.

CHAPTER 22

Andros

I left Lexa soaking in the bath, the steam filling the small room behind me as I stepped outside into the chill morning air. The snow had finally settled into something manageable, softening the world instead of burying it. Sunlight broke weakly through thin clouds, promising warmth that hadn’t quite reached us yet.

The outpost had come alive again after the storm. Men moved between the wooden buildings, checking supplies, repairing fences. This was the last outpost before the Citadel, our northernmost line of defense and observation. It felt good to have something tangible, routine. A quiet anchor after everything that had happened in that cave.

Garrick stood near the central hearth, barking orders and gesturing toward damaged crates. When he saw me, his face broke into a crooked grin.

“So,” he said, stepping close and shoving a goblet of wine into my hand, “the storm clears, and our fearless Alpha emerges at last. Good to see you alive. We were placing bets on whether the little omega had finally torn out your throat.”

I rolled my eyes, taking a long drink. It was rougher wine than the Citadel cellars held, but it warmed me all the same. Garrick stared at me, his gaze shifting with sudden, keen interest to the fresh bite mark on my neck. His grin sharpened.

“Well, fuck me sideways,” he chuckled. “She didn’t kill you, but she certainly left her mark.”

I growled softly, but there was no bite behind it. “Careful, Garrick.”

He raised an eyebrow, entirely unrepentant. “So, what exactly are your intentions with the stray now that she’s sunk her teeth into you? Planning to chain her to your throne?”

“Actually,” I said casually, swirling the wine in my goblet, “I was thinking of writing a new law. Anyone who calls Lexa a stray gets twenty lashes in the market square.”

Garrick barked out a laugh, shaking his head, amused. “Gods, the things that girl has done to you, Andros.”

He sobered after a moment, glancing toward the distant horizon. “Speaking of storms, got word earlier, a small avalanche hit Elm’s Ridge last night. They reported damage to some buildings, but no lives lost, luckily.”

I nodded thoughtfully. Elm’s Ridge was a small settlement, resilient but isolated enough that even minor disasters could turn serious quickly. “Send extra supplies and a few men,” I ordered. “Make sure they’re secure until repairs are finished.”

“Already done,” Garrick said smoothly. Then he cast me a sidelong look, expression turning serious. “So, this thing with Lexa, is it...settled?”

I took another slow sip, considering. Settled wasn’t the word. Nothing with Lexa was settled. It was wild, uncertain, dangerous. But it was also undeniably right. A bond that had grown into something deeper than instinct or obligation.

“As settled as things ever get around her,” I finally replied.

He smiled slightly, something knowing and warm in the way he looked at me. “You know, the men here were whispering about it already—the Alpha and his mysterious omega from the south. Some of them think you’re losing your mind. Others think you might finally have found it.”

“Maybe both,” I admitted quietly.

Garrick clapped a hand on my shoulder, the familiar heavy strength of a loyal friend. “Well, whatever it is, it suits you. Just do us a favor—warn us next time before you drag us all through hell searching for her again.”

“Deal,” I murmured, smiling faintly.

He chuckled, glancing back toward the outpost buildings. “You should probably get

back. Before your omega decides to carve another hole in the wall and escape again.”

I rolled my eyes again, hiding my smile behind the goblet. “Not this time,” I said quietly. “This time, she stays.”

I returned to the room quietly, expecting to find Lexa awake and restless. Instead, she was stretched out on her stomach, sleeping deeply, her breathing slow and steady. Her damp hair spilled like ink across the pillows, the soft rise and fall of her back strangely peaceful. The exhaustion of her heat cycle had finally caught up to her, leaving her utterly drained.

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Careful not to disturb her, I changed quietly and slid into bed beside her. My body felt heavy, my thoughts slowing as soon as my head touched the pillow. Sleep came fast, dragging me down into darkness—

And that's when the dream hit.

Not a dream, a memory. Hers. Cold and sharp and vivid, like claws dragged across my mind.

I stood in a room I didn't recognize, ornate and oppressive, with dark walls and stifling heat. Lexa was young, barely ten, thin and pale, with wide eyes that looked too big for her face. She stood stiffly, hands trembling at her sides. A woman loomed over her, expression twisted in cold disdain.

"Again," the woman snapped harshly. "You curtsy. You keep your eyes lowered. You smile. An omega pleases, Lexa, she doesn't glare."

"I don't want to," Lexa whispered. Her voice shook. "I don't want—"

The blow came fast, sharp enough that my own head jerked back in shock. Lexa staggered but didn't fall. Behind her, one of her sisters giggled cruelly.

"Stupid little thing," the sister sneered softly. "You'd better learn, or they'll just keep hitting you."

The image tore away violently, replaced by another. Lexa again, barely older, curled in a dark corner of a cold room. Bruises darkened her arms, her cheek. She stared at

her hands, whispering silent apologies—to herself, to no one, to everyone.

The scene shifted again.

A night filled with terror and snow—Lexa running barefoot through the woods, cloak torn, chest heaving. Tears streaked her face as branches tore at her skin. Panic pulsed like venom through the bond, raw and unfiltered.

Again, the image tore itself apart and reformed.

A port town filled with noise and chaos. Lexa, small and alone, holding tightly to a bag containing everything she had left. A sharp shove, laughter from thieves as they ran off with everything she'd saved. She collapsed to the ground, eyes hollow with shock and disbelief.

My heart twisted painfully. It was agony, the helpless rage burning deep inside me at watching her suffer and being unable to stop it.

The scenes came faster now, disjointed and jagged:

Lexa laboring at the docks, small hands cracked and raw from rope and salt. Her stomach empty. Her eyes hollowed by hunger and exhaustion, yet still determined to keep going.

Lexa standing on the deck of a ship, staring at the endless ocean, gripping her ticket with trembling fingers as land disappeared behind her.

Lexa arriving in a foreign land—my land—alone, frightened, hunted. Searching desperately for safety, hiding from the Crescent Moon pack's reach.

And finally—

The witch's hut, deep in the woods, smelling of blood and herbs and dark, bitter magic. Lexa, her skin pale and shivering, lying face down on a rough wooden table as the witch raised a blade. The first carving of the rune, her scream echoing loud and raw and filled with a pain too deep, too brutal for words.

It ripped through me, her pain, her fear, her loneliness. I felt every second, every heartbeat, every scar.

The visions tore through me harder now, deeper, pulling me back into their vortex of agony, the dark tide of Lexa's past impossible to escape—

She was twenty-four, burning with fever, curled and shivering on a filthy straw mattress. Her breaths came shallow, choking, rattling with each inhale. Her body weak, frail—too frail—skin slick with sweat as the sickness gnawed at her from the inside out. She couldn't heal, not like wolves should. Her wolf was bound and silenced, leaving her mortal, defenseless. She stared blankly at the stained ceiling above, whispering quiet prayers to gods she no longer believed in, fully prepared to meet her death alone and forgotten.

Another shift, wrenching and brutal—

She was a child again, her small hands trembling as she held them out, palms open, red and raw. A thin stick cracked down viciously, cutting across the tender skin. She bit her lip hard enough to draw blood, eyes filling with tears she refused to let fall.

The voice above her hissed, cold and merciless. "Omegas don't climb trees, Lexa. They don't run wild. Learn your place." She whimpered, choking on her shame and pain, her tiny shoulders shaking violently.

The world spun again, faster, darker—

She stood before the witch, thin and pale, desperation etched into her face. “I need more runes,” Lexa whispered, voice cracked and hoarse, holding out her trembling hands. The witch raised a brow, impassive, her expression calculating.

“More coin, then. The runes aren’t charity.”

Lexa’s lip quivered, her voice broke into a soft sob. “Please. It’s all I have.” The woman stared coldly, eyes blank with indifference, shrugging as if Lexa’s pleas meant nothing. Lexa sank to her knees on the cold floor of the hut, tears streaming silently down her cheeks, shoulders shaking in defeat.

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Another twist, sickening and painful—

Lexa stood frozen, soaked by the cold rain that poured relentlessly, her gaze hollow, empty, fixed on a small muddy hut. She stepped slowly inside, trembling, heart breaking with every step. The air was thick with sickness and decay. And there, lying pale and lifeless on a filthy mattress, was a woman. Beside her, a small child, shaking, terrified, wide-eyed, clutching his mother's stiff hand. Lexa's voice cracked as she whispered softly,

“It's okay, little one. I've got you now.” But inside, her heart splintered apart, grief and terror gripping her as she lifted the child gently into her arms, feeling his tiny, cold fingers cling desperately to her, trusting her despite everything. Then came the image of days later, when the rain stopped and she returned to the hut to give Dains mother a decent grave.

The images crashed violently together, blending, swirling, folding into each other—a vortex of pain and suffering that overwhelmed me, dragged me beneath its dark waters, drowning me in Lexa's agony.

I tried to scream, but I had no voice. I tried to escape, but there was no way out. And then, mercifully, everything shattered to blackness.

I reached for her blindly in the dark, fingers seeking the familiar warmth of her skin. I wanted—needed—to feel her heartbeat, steady beneath my palm. Needed the reassurance that she was safe, breathing, here beside me.

But the instant my fingertips brushed her shoulder, something felt wrong.

Cold.

She shouldn't be cold.

“Lexa?” I whispered softly, nudging her gently. She didn't move. Didn't even stir. A hollow dread coiled deep in my gut, stealing my breath.

“Lexa,” I said again, voice sharper now, panic rising swiftly in my chest. She still didn't answer. Her breathing was barely there—shallow, uneven. Wrong.

I sat up fast, heart hammering wildly in my chest. I pulled back the furs, desperate hands searching her skin, touching her cheek, her throat—too cold. The bond was quiet, frighteningly still. Where her wolf had once been warm and alive, there was nothing. Silence.

I turned her over carefully, hands shaking, heart sinking lower. In the dim glow of fading firelight, the last rune across her back glowed faintly, flickering with sickly, pulsing magic, the dark lines trembling dangerously. She'd warned me, told me what would happen if they all broke too fast, if she wasn't ready. I'd dismissed it then as the delirious threats of someone drowning in dark magic and fear.

I was wrong.

Gods, I was so fucking wrong.

Panic surged, violent and immediate. All those memories—her suffering, her pain—they hadn't come randomly through the bond. They weren't dreams. They were her fucking life, flashing before my eyes because she was slipping away.

Because she was dying.

“No,” I growled, voice ragged with terror and fury. “No, you don't get to fucking leave me. Lexa, wake up. Open your eyes!”

She didn't.

My wolf roared awake within me, clawing violently at my chest, howling with rage. I stumbled from the bed, barely aware of pulling on clothes, hands trembling so badly I could hardly manage it.

I tore open the door, voice thundering through the outpost like the wrath of every god ever worshipped. “Wake the fuck up! All of you! Now!”

Doors slammed open, startled voices rising from sleep. Garrick appeared, half-dressed, face pale with confusion and sudden fear.

“Andros, what—?”

“Lexa's... she,” I snarled, barely holding back the flood of panic burning my throat. “The runes—she warned me. Gods fucking damn it, she warned me. We have to get her back to the citadel now. Get a carriage, blankets, horses. I want every fucking healer awake by the time we arrive. Go!”

No one dared hesitate. Garrick shouted orders, men scrambled in panic-driven obedience. Chaos erupted around me, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except the fading heartbeat of the woman lying motionless in my bed, fighting for her life.

I returned to her side, lifted her gently into my arms. She was limp, cold, heavy with silence. My heart hammered in sheer terror as I carried her toward the door.

“You're not leaving,” I whispered fiercely against her skin. “Not like this. Not now. I won't fucking allow it.”

I stepped out into the cold dawn, holding Lexa's silent, failing body tight against my chest, feeling like the world was cracking beneath my feet.

And for the first time in years, I prayed to whatever gods would listen. Please, don't take her now—not when I've just found her.

The storm had finally died, dawn breaking over the snow-dusted peaks like a breath held too long finally exhaled. The sun rose slow and golden, casting long beams of light across the quiet landscape. It should have felt peaceful. But my soul was anything but.

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I cradled Lexa in my arms, her body limp and cold against my chest, wrapped in every blanket we had left. Her breathing was shallow, her skin like ice, the last rune on her back pulsing with sick, fragile light.

I barked the order before the outpost gates were even behind us. “Ride ahead. The fastest horse. Tell them she’s coming. Every healer, every fire lit—I want the room ready when we arrive.”

One of the soldiers rode hard into the rising sun, vanishing down the ridge trail toward the citadel.

Inside the carriage, it was too quiet. Garrick sat across from me, watching with barely concealed worry, but said nothing at first. He didn’t need to. Everything was written in the way he looked at her.

“She’ll fight,” he finally murmured, trying to offer something like comfort. “She’s stronger than—”

“She told me this would happen.” My voice was low, frayed. “She warned me. And I brushed it off.”

“You didn’t know.”

“I should have.” My fingers curled tighter around her. “I should’ve listened.”

The journey back was a blur of snow and fire and the frantic beat of my own heart. When we reached the citadel, the gates opened in seconds. The healers were already

waiting, the guards parting like water as I leapt from the carriage with Lexa still in my arms.

“To my chambers,” I shouted, voice booming. “Now. Stoke the fires. Boil water. I want her warm before another minute passes. If she dies—” My voice cracked. “—I will hold every one of you responsible.”

The healers scattered, moving quickly, lifting her from my arms with reverence, as if afraid she might shatter. I turned to follow them when something caught my eye—movement in the shadows just beyond the entryway. A small figure, barely more than a blur.

I stopped cold.

Dain.

He stood tucked between two pillars, eyes wide and glistening, face pale and streaked with tears. His little fists were clenched, his bottom lip trembling.

He’d heard everything. He’d seen.

I crossed to him in three strides and crouched down, my voice raw. “Dain.”

He looked up, lip quivering. “Is she... is Lexa going to die?”

The words felt like a blade through the ribs. I reached out slowly, pulling him against me, his tiny arms latching around my neck like he was afraid I’d vanish too. I held him tight.

“You’re not leaving,” I whispered into that broken bond, to the unconscious woman being rushed down the hall. The words were broken, furious, begging. “You hear me,

Lexa? You're not fucking leaving me. Not now."

Dain's head pressed against my shoulder, silent and trembling, and I clutched him tighter.

CHAPTER 23

Andros

Hours passed.

The sun had long vanished behind the mountains again, and the warmth it promised that morning was nothing but a fading ghost. The citadel had quieted, the frantic rush of commands and preparations giving way to a tense, waiting silence. Lexa still hadn't woken.

I stayed by her side for as long as I could bear, until Dain's soft voice tugged at my arm, heavy with sleep, whispering that he didn't want to be alone.

I carried him back to my chambers, helped him curl up in the center of my bed, and pulled the furs over his small body. He was asleep within minutes, face peaceful despite the dried salt from tears still crusted beneath his eyes.

I sat beside him for a while, watching his chest rise and fall, listening to the crackle of the fire. But sleep wouldn't come. Not to me.

Not while she was still locked somewhere between life and whatever waited beyond it.

So I left Dain in the quiet warmth of the room and walked the long corridor back to the healing wing. The halls felt colder now. Empty.

When I stepped into her chamber, one of the elder healers rose from a nearby chair, bowing his head respectfully. He was an older man, one of the few in the citadel I actually trusted.

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“She’s stable,” he said before I could ask. “The fever’s holding. Her breathing is stronger than it was this morning.”

I let out a slow breath, though the knot in my chest didn’t ease. “But?” I asked.

The healer hesitated before answering. “Still no response. No movement. The bond is there, but... faint. Like her wolf is buried too deep to hear us.” He paused, then added carefully, “I took the liberty of sending a rider to the southern villages to find a human healer. Just in case. If those runes carved out more of her wolf than we estimated, it may be human medicine that helps her now, not ours.”

That idea unsettled me. That she might no longer fully be what she was born to be.

But I nodded. “Thank you. For thinking of it.”

He bowed again. “Of course, Alpha.”

He turned back to his post by the door, and I moved to her side. She lay still, her body pale against the fresh linens, long hair spread out over the pillows like ink across parchment. The last rune, now faded to a faint scar, no longer pulsed. But it had taken something from her. I could feel it.

I sat beside her, reached for her hand—cool, delicate, but steady in mine.

I ran my thumb across her knuckles, breathing in deeply. “You’ll be alright,” I murmured. “You’ve made it through worse.”

The healer spoke gently behind me. “You need rest, Alpha. We’ll stay with her. We’ll keep watch.”

I didn’t argue. I just nodded without looking at him, kissed Lexa’s hand once, and stood. But I didn’t go back to the bed. I went to my study.

The fire was out, but I didn’t bother relighting it. I poured myself a heavy goblet of wine—richer, darker than what we’d had at the outpost. I didn’t sit. I stood at the edge of the room, staring out the narrow window at the snowy expanse of mountains beyond, untouched by fire or grief.

The wine burned going down. But not enough.

I felt her before I saw her—like a sour note in an otherwise silent room. The bond with Lexa was faint, distant... but this? This was sharp, deliberate. Wrong.

The door creaked open and in stepped Tanya.

Chestnut hair, polished into perfect curls that fell artfully over one shoulder. Her eyes were warm caramel at first glance—soft, sweet—but they held nothing but calculation. Her dress clung to her in all the ways it was meant to, silk clinging to her curves, boots clicking over the stone floor with confidence far too smug for the hour.

She tilted her head slightly. “I heard what happened.” Her voice was honey-coated concern, but her smile was too smooth. “Is she... alive?”

I didn’t answer. She stepped deeper into the room, her gaze sliding past the wine in my hand, past the shadows under my eyes, like she already knew why I was here. Why I couldn’t rest.

“I thought I told you to stay away,” I said, my voice sharp, low, dangerous.

But she just smiled. Viciously.

She came closer, far too close, and reached up with deliberate ease to trace her perfectly manicured fingers over the mark on my neck—Lexa’s mark. Her nails barely grazed the skin.

“And I thought I’d made my plans to be Luna clear,” she purred.

My hand snapped up, closing brutally around her wrist. She gasped, but not from pain. There was no fear in her eyes. Just hatred. Pure and undiluted. That surprised me more than her arrogance.

Her voice darkened, low and sharp as a knife. “Gods, I hope whatever dark filth is crawling through her veins doesn’t slip down the bond and come for you next, once it’s finished with the mutt.”

She smiled, slow and cruel. “We wouldn’t want the leader of our proud pack showing any... signs of weakness.”

My blood roared in my ears. I let go of her hand with disgust and turned toward the hall. “Garrick!” I barked, loud enough to wake the stones.

Tanya stepped back, but her chin stayed high.

When my Beta appeared moments later, still buttoning his coat, he looked between the two of us with a sharp, silent understanding.

“Take her,” I ordered coldly. “She has two days to gather her things. Find her a nice little town. Comfortable. Warm. Full of silk and mirrors and idiots who’ll praise her every word. But make sure it’s as far from this citadel as possible.”

Tanya's mouth parted slightly, the first crack in her perfect composure.

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“You’re exiling me?” she hissed.

“No,” I said, turning my back on her. “I’m finally giving you exactly what you always wanted. A world where no one challenges you. Now get out.”

Garrick stepped forward, his hand already resting lightly on the hilt of his blade—not threatening, but a reminder. Tanya's glare could have curdled blood, but she didn't speak again.

She just walked out. And I didn't look back.

But as Garrick led Tanya away, a faint scent lingered in her wake—something sour, vile, rotten. Something dark. Something I'd smelled before, though I couldn't yet place it.

Unease coiled cold and heavy in my gut, Tanya's words echoing in my ears, sharp and poisonous.

What if the filth crawling through Lexa's veins slips down the bond? What if it comes for me next?

My pulse quickened, panic rising.

What if the pack sensed my weakness—my fear, my grief—and decided to act? There were always challengers lurking, waiting for a sign of vulnerability. And right now, I was bleeding it. My thoughts spiraled, dark and uncontrollable, fear climbing rapidly through my chest.

What if Lexa actually died, and the bond snapped, dragging me into madness along with her?

“No.” The word left my mouth sharp, broken. “No.”

I would not let this happen. I wouldn’t lose control—not like this. I couldn’t wait passively and watch darkness take her. I had to act.

I had to find the root of this twisted evil and rip it out by force. I had to end it before it could spread, before it could consume her entirely.

I have to find the witch.

The thought settled hard in my chest, heavy and absolute. But there was only one person here who might know where the witch was. One person who might have seen her face, might remember her scent or location. One small, fragile human who had no place in pack wars or dark magic but who could hold the key to saving the woman we both loved.

Dain.

I set the goblet down sharply, not caring that the wine spilled across my desk. Whatever it took, I would save her. Even if I had to drag the witch here by force. Even if I had to rip the answers from her bones.

Lexa wasn’t going to die. Not as long as I still drew breath. I moved swiftly through the dark halls, tension coiling tighter with each step closer to Dain’s small room. Regret churned deep in my chest. I hated waking him, especially now.

The boy had seen enough pain—endured enough uncertainty to last a lifetime. But right now, I had no other choice. I knocked gently at first, then carefully pushed the

door open. The room was dim, lit only by the pale flicker of a dying candle. Dain lay curled beneath heavy furs, his tiny form small and fragile, breath slow and steady in sleep.

“Dain,” I murmured softly, kneeling beside the bed. “Wake up, little one. I need your help.”

He stirred slowly, eyelids fluttering open, dark eyes blinking up at me. For one brief heartbeat, there was confusion—and then terror flashed across his young face, sharp and brutal.

“Lexi,” he whispered, voice shaking, “is she dead?”

My chest tightened painfully, and I gently squeezed his shoulder. “No, Dain. She’s not dead. She’s safe for now—resting. But I need your help to keep her safe.”

His small body relaxed only slightly, gaze still wide, alert, uncertain.

“Do you remember the witch Lexa used to visit?” I asked carefully. “The woman who carved the runes. Did she ever take you with her when she went to see her?”

He shook his head, eyes wide in the flickering candlelight. “No,” he whispered. “Lexa said it wasn’t safe for me there.”

I took a slow breath. “Alright, that’s good, that’s okay. Think carefully. Did Lexa ever come home with anything from the witch? Something she carried, something she kept—anything we could use to trace this woman by scent?”

Dain’s brow furrowed deeply, thinking hard. Then his eyes brightened, his expression hopeful. “Yes! Sometimes Lexa brought back small bottles. They smelled strange. She drank from them when she was hurting a lot.” He paused. “She said they helped with

the pain. I think there's some left in our old house."

Relief surged through me like cold water. "Good. That's good. Now, go back to sleep, Dain. You've helped enough."

But the boy had already thrown back the furs, climbing determinedly out of bed, sleep forgotten entirely. He reached for the shirt neatly folded by the edge of his mattress.

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“No,” I said firmly, putting a gentle hand on his small shoulder. “You’re staying here. It’s too dangerous for you out there.”

Dain stared defiantly up at me, chin lifted stubbornly, his eyes fierce in a way that reminded me painfully of Lexa. “She’s my Lexi. I’m coming, too.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but he was already pulling the shirt over his head, tugging at the sleeves with small, impatient fingers. Watching his determination, the thought flickered wryly through my mind: “Do humans ever listen?” But I didn’t voice the question aloud. Instead, I sighed softly and rose, offering him my hand.

“Alright,” I muttered reluctantly. “But you have to stay close. Understand?”

He nodded fiercely, slipping his tiny hand into mine without hesitation.

“Good,” I said softly, squeezing his fingers gently. “Then let’s go find that witch.”

CHAPTER 24

Andros

We rode swiftly, silence broken only by the steady rhythm of horseshoes against the frozen earth and Dain’s occasional chatter. As we crested the final ridge and descended toward the small fishing village, an unease settled over my chest like ice.

This was the village I’d stormed through weeks ago, hunting down the last pathetic heir of the Crescent Moon pack. But now, in daylight, without rage colouring my

vision, it felt different. It was no longer just some rundown human settlement; it was where Lexa had built a life. Where she'd hidden herself, carved out something of her own, away from packs and pain.

I saw the thin lines of smoke rising from scattered chimneys, heard the distant call of fishermen hauling in nets along the shore. The scent of salt and fish hung heavy, mingling with the sharp cold air.

Beside me, Dain brightened instantly, waving excitedly at a young woman standing by her small home, three children clinging shyly to her skirt.

“That’s Jena!” he said brightly, almost bouncing in the saddle. “Lexi was friends with her. I played with her kids sometimes!”

The woman began to wave back, offering the child a gentle, weary smile. But her expression froze, smile vanishing swiftly into careful neutrality when she realized exactly whose company Dain was in. Her gaze dropped quickly to the ground, fingers tightening protectively around her children’s shoulders as she ushered them inside.

But Dain was oblivious. Joy bubbled from him, unrestrained, nostalgic as he rambled, pointing eagerly.

“That’s the bakery, right there! Sometimes Lexa got fresh bread from them, and it was so warm, especially in winter—” He paused, breathing quickly, flushed with excitement. “Oh, and there’s a bench we sat on sometimes! And over there—” he gestured to a small, barren field just outside the village “—that’s where daffodils grow in spring. Lexi loved them.”

His voice faded slightly as we moved further, his enthusiasm softening as his small body stiffened subtly.

Because we had reached their house.

It was little more than a shack, run-down and shabby, clearly neglected even before my men had stormed through its doors. But now the signs of theft were obvious—broken hinges, splintered wood, belongings tossed carelessly across the frozen ground. My men had left the door hanging open when they'd taken Lexa and the boy, and clearly scavengers had done the rest.

I dismounted slowly, walking closer, boots crunching on frost and splinters. Inside was worse.

Poverty lingered in every corner, the air stale with old ash and dampness. Blankets threadbare and worn, wooden bowls cracked. In the corner, a broken toy carved roughly from driftwood lay abandoned.

This was Lexa's life—her chosen exile, a refuge from the horrors she'd fled. A prison of her own making, held together by sheer stubborn willpower.

Suddenly, the bond surged again, sharp and clear—her memories, her life flashing before my eyes. The cold, endless struggle. Hunger gnawing her bones, long nights spent awake and frightened, curled protectively around Dain for warmth.

I stumbled slightly, gripping the doorframe as waves of emotion crashed through me.

Dain tugged anxiously at my sleeve, concern in his large, innocent eyes. "Andros? Are you alright?"

I swallowed hard, forcing my expression neutral as I steadied myself. "I'm fine," I murmured, voice tight. "Show me where Lexa kept the bottles from the witch."

He nodded, stepping carefully into the shadowed room, guiding me toward the

remnants of a small cabinet.

But even as I followed him, images lingered in my mind—Lexa, young and afraid, fighting daily to survive. And I felt it then, sharp and clear as a blade in my chest.

I owed her more than just saving her life.

I owed her a better one.

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I carefully pulled the wax seal free and brought the vial cautiously toward my nose, inhaling. And nearly choked. Rot.

Pure rot and mould and decay, so strong it felt like acid in my throat. My stomach churned violently, disgust crawling over my skin as memories surfaced—Lexa, on that first day I'd found her, masked in this same vile stench. Back then I'd thought it was simply the scent of a frightened omega, of poverty, desperation, neglect.

But now—now I knew better.

My fingers shook, the realization hitting me so hard I nearly staggered. I knew exactly where I'd smelled this before.

Tanya.

The last time she'd approached me, touched me with those sharp, cunning fingers—she'd carried this exact same foul scent beneath her expensive perfume and polished silks. The witch Lexa sought out was the same witch Tanya had recently visited. It couldn't be coincidence. Something dark, twisted and deliberate was happening. Something that connected these two women in ways I hadn't seen before.

I cursed violently, dropping the vial. It shattered on the wooden floor, glass shards glinting dangerously in the dim light.

“Andros?” Dain whispered fearfully, eyes wide with confusion.

“Take him,” I roared to the men waiting outside the door. “Get the boy safely to the

citadel—now! Guard him with your fucking lives.”

Without waiting for their response, I stormed into the street, lungs filled with freezing air, searching desperately for the faintest trace of that horrible scent, the witch’s signature of mould and rotted earth and tainted herbs. And beneath it, Tanya’s perfume—dark, cloying, toxic—confirming my suspicion, igniting rage in my veins like wildfire.

I growled low in my throat, vision darkening at the edges, the wolf inside me rising to the surface. The scent was faint, hidden deep beneath layers of other smells—but I had it now. I locked onto it, letting my instincts guide me, feeling the wolf claw its way forward.

I shifted without breaking stride, the air ripping from my lungs as bones realigned, fur replacing skin, teeth elongating, senses sharpening in an instant. Then I was running, paws pounding against the frozen ground, heart roaring in my chest like war drums, teeth bared in silent fury.

This ended now.

I tore through the forest like something unhinged—feral, maddened, unstoppable. Branches snapped against my flanks, snow churned to mud beneath my claws. The wind howled around me, but I didn’t hear it. All I heard was the blood pounding in my ears. All I smelled was her—that sick rot of dark magic soaked in flesh and time.

The witch’s scent twisted deeper through the trees, clinging to the soil, growing stronger. She was close.

And then—I saw it.

A crooked hut tucked between dead trees and blackened roots. The ground around it

was littered with bone fragments and broken glass, the air so thick with magic it made my fur stand on end.

But what froze me wasn't the place. It was the two wolves standing outside, armed, alert, blades already drawn. They weren't locals. They were trained. Guarding.

They turned at the sound of my approach—too late.

I launched at the first before he could speak, claws sinking into his throat, bone cracking beneath the weight of my fury. The second barely had time to blink before I tore into him, teeth sinking into the soft place between shoulder and neck, hot blood spurting over my muzzle as I drove him into the snow.

Two bodies. Two heartbeats. Gone. I didn't hesitate. Didn't breathe. I smashed the door inward with a furious snarl, eyes burning, ready to rip apart whatever was inside.

A wolf lunged at me from the shadows—this one faster, sharper. His blade grazed my shoulder, slicing into fur and skin. Pain flared—but it didn't matter. I was stronger. Faster.

I slammed him into the wall, his spine cracking beneath the blow, then ripped the blade from his hand and sank my teeth into his throat. He didn't scream. None of them did.

The room went still, heavy with blood and magic and rot. Then I saw her. The witch.

She lay crumpled on the wooden floor, bound and gagged, arms twisted behind her back, blood smeared across her face. One eye was swollen shut. She trembled violently, eyes wide as she stared at me, her mouth working around the gag like she wanted to scream but couldn't.

I shifted partially, just enough to grab her and rip the gag from her face. But before I could speak—before I could demand answers—the smell hit me.

Blood. Sweat. Steel. And underneath it, something familiar. I turned slowly, heart pounding. I sniffed the air again.

The scent of the wolves I'd just slaughtered—it wasn't foreign. It was mine.

Faint traces of the Blood Night citadel clung to them. Leather treated with oils only we used. The mark of the northern steel on their blades. Even the scent woven into their clothes—Roran's men.

A cold wave of dread spread through me, choking off the fury just long enough for horror to slip in.

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Why would Roran send men to silence the witch?

Why gag her? Beat her?

Why guard her?

I stared at the bodies littered across the floor. This wasn't a rescue. This was a cover-up. My breath hissed between clenched teeth. Something inside me shifted—not rage this time. Something darker.

Roran.

He was hiding something. And he'd just sent wolves to kill the one creature who might save Lexa's life. I turned back to the witch, my voice low, trembling with wrath.

“Start talking. Now.”

The witch coughed, blood flecking her lips, and winced as she tried to sit upright. I knelt beside her and caught her by the arm—not gently, but not cruelly either.

“Talk,” I growled, voice shaking from the restraint it took not to destroy the walls around us. “Tell me what happened. Everything.”

She looked up at me, her one good eye wide and sunken with fear, her body still trembling.

“About half a week ago,” she rasped, “they came, unannounced. Four armed wolves. Big. Trained. Led by a woman. An Omega, but not like the others.” Her jaw clenched. “Brown hair. Honey eyes. Beautiful, in that perfect, polished way.”

My blood ran cold. “Tanya.”

She nodded slowly. “They didn’t speak. Not much. Just dragged me out, beat me until I couldn’t stand. The wolves held me down. She watched. Told them where to hit.” Her voice cracked, raw with fury and shame. “I had no quarrel with the wolf girl—”

“Lexa,” I snapped. “Her name is Lexa.”

The witch flinched but gave a shaky nod. “Lexa. I liked her. One of my best customers. Regular. Polite. I didn’t agree with what she was doing to herself, but a paying customer is a paying customer. I never forced her into the runes. She came of her own will.”

She glanced down, swallowing hard.

“But these wolves... they made me do a spell. One I didn’t want to cast. Something dark. Subtle. It wouldn’t show. They wanted it to kill her. Not all at once, no, it had to look natural. Like the runes breaking was what did it.”

My breath caught.

“The runes?” I whispered.

“They were only meant to bind her wolf. Suppress it. Breaking them would hurt, yes, violently, but they wouldn’t kill her.” She looked up at me, her face now hardening, the fear beginning to burn into anger. “The spell they forced me to do... it tainted the

release. Corrupted it. Made it look like the transformation was killing her when it was really this. That Omega's spell. Their plan."

The room tilted. My vision blurred red. Tanya's scent on the last visit. Her words. Her poison.

She was going to be Luna. She thought she was destined for it. But she never cared who the Alpha was—only the power that came with the title. And Roran... that swine, that scheming fuck, had always lingered just behind me. Always smiling, always waiting for weakness.

If Lexa died... if the bond shattered and took me with it... I'd lose my claim. I'd lose my mind. He could rise.

They didn't just want her dead. They wanted me destroyed. I rose slowly, eyes burning with a fury I didn't bother to hide. The witch flinched again.

"Can you undo it?" I asked, voice low, deadly calm.

She hesitated, then gave a slow nod. "Yes. But I'll need ingredients. Time. Strength. And I want retribution for what your wolves did to me. My hut. My body."

I knelt before her again, meeting her gaze with something colder than rage.

"I'll build you a new fucking house with my own hands if I have to. Just save her."

The witch looked into my eyes, and whatever she saw there—it made her believe me.

She reached for my hand. "Yes."

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I shifted back once the blood cooled and the rage dulled enough for my mind to return. My muscles ached, fur gave way to skin, claws to fingers. I staggered slightly, and the witch, still bruised and limping, tossed a bundle of clothes in my direction without a word.

They smelled faintly of old herbs and ash, but they fit well enough. I dressed quickly and helped her move through the wreckage of her shattered home. Together, we sifted through the mess, broken shelves, shattered jars, singed books.

“Careful with those,” she muttered, pointing to a scattered collection of dried leaves. “Silverroot. Rare. I’ll need it.”

I gathered what I could while she worked, then broke off to collect firewood from the forest’s edge. My hands moved quickly, stacking it in her old firepit the way I’d seen it done in her memories. I’d seen this place through her eyes before: the cracked stone hearth, the cluttered table, the wooden beam where she once rested her head after the first rune was carved.

It felt surreal, standing here now.

As I struck flint and coaxed the flames to life, I glanced up at the witch. She was slicing herbs with precise, practiced movements.

“Did you ever feel sorry?” I asked. “For hurting her?”

The blade paused for a second.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “Always. But she was stubborn. Never listened.”

I smiled faintly as the fire caught and began to crackle. “Yeah. Stubborn. That’s Lexa, alright.”

The witch continued working, tossing the herbs into a cracked iron pot with dried root and old bone dust. She stirred slowly, then looked at me.

“You may not believe it, but I cared about her. More than most. Maybe more than I should have.” She hesitated, then added, “That’s why I told her about the boy.”

I turned sharply, my body going still. “Dain?”

She nodded. “You think she just wandered into that wreck of a house and found a child? No. I told her he was there. I had a vision of him. She was already cracked in the heart, and I knew if anything could keep her tethered to the world, it’d be him.”

My jaw clenched as pieces began to shift, aligning in ways I hadn’t seen before.

“She never told me that,” I murmured.

“She wouldn’t,” the witch said. “She didn’t want it to mean something. But it did. She didn’t just take him in out of pity. Even if she fought her wolf instincts, she felt the bond. That child was always meant to find her.”

I stared into the fire, that aching bond between Lexa and Dain glowing sharper in my memory. “I never understood it,” I muttered. “Why she bonded with a human child and didn’t claim him. Change him. Make him hers.”

The witch stirred the pot, her voice low. “Because he’s not hers to claim.”

I turned to her, brows furrowed. “Lexa said the same thing once.”

She smiled, a slow, knowing thing.

“That’s something her daughter will decide.”

The breath caught in my throat. I turned fully to face her, the fire casting flickering light between us. She looked me up and down, eyes dark, but gleaming with something new—certainty.

“Your daughter,” she said softly.

The words slammed into me. I stared at her, my voice suddenly trapped deep in my throat. I tried to speak, managed only a choked stutter.

“I—what did you just—”

She shook her head lightly, half-smiling, something almost gentle in her bruised expression. “Relax. It won’t happen yet. Not for another two years at least.” She returned her attention to the pot, stirring calmly as though she hadn’t just shattered my understanding of the world. “But tell me, Alpha, am I wrong to think you’ve felt the pull too?”

My heart pounded violently, memories flooding back unbidden: Dain’s tiny hand clutching mine, his dark eyes wide and trusting, that first night he’d cried quietly in the darkness, looking for Lexa. How quickly the boy had slipped past all my walls, how easily he’d settled into the spaces I’d forgotten I had inside me.

How I’d guarded him, protected him—not simply out of duty or pity, but because something deep within me had demanded it. Something primal. Something stronger than instinct.

Not for him alone, but for something greater—for a future that had quietly nestled itself into my very bones without my even realizing it.

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“Yes,” I finally whispered, barely audible. “I felt it.”

The witch smiled knowingly, her eyes warm in the firelight. “Then trust in what’s coming. It’s a path you’re already walking, even if you can’t yet see its end.”

I stared into the flames, my chest tightening.

Two years. Lexa. Me. A daughter. And a future that had somehow, against all odds, found its way to us through a human boy with too-wide eyes and a heart that refused to let go.

I exhaled slowly, the weight of it sinking in. I glanced at the witch again, my voice steady. “Then we save Lexa. No matter the cost.”

And as I watched her stir, as the firelight danced across her lined face, something new took root within me: Hope.

The potion bubbled, steam rising in thick, pungent curls. Just as the witch began carefully pouring it into a vial, my vision lurched suddenly, violently. The room tilted, blurred. The world narrowed, darkening around the edges.

I stumbled, gasping.

Then, her voice—Lexa.

Weak, shaking, desperate, but alive. She was awake, reaching through the bond with the strength she had left, pulling me toward her, forcing her visions into my mind.

Blurry lines, muffled, distorted images. Voices harsh, distant, yet painfully clear—

“The fucking kid is gone too!” a familiar voice snarled in fury.

My heart seized violently. Roran.

“I told you to keep a fucking eye on him!” he roared.

Then another voice, cold and familiar. Tanya. “Andros put his stupid Beta on my tail. Trying to exile me. I couldn’t move freely in the citadel—not until your men showed up and gutted him. Left him to bleed out behind the stables.”

My breath stopped.

Garrick. Gutted. Left for dead.

Lexa's panic rippled sharply through the bond, a wave of terror, rage, desperation. Everything she'd shown me, every blurred vision, real. They were trapped in the citadel, surrounded by traitors, hunted.

My blood roared in my ears. Rage ignited again, fierce and savage. Lexa, Garrick, everyone loyal to me, they were all in grave danger.

I turned sharply to the witch, eyes wild, frantic. “The citadel. Now. We have to go back.”

She looked at me, mouth thin, eyes blazing with dark determination. “A day's ride won't cut it, Alpha.”

“Then do something. Anything.”

Her lips curled into a bitter, exhausted smile. “That fucking house you build me better have one hell of an herb garden.”

Before I could question her, she reached out, fingers slicing through the air with the last dregs of her strength. Energy crackled, splitting the room open, tearing reality itself apart. A shimmering portal spiralled before us, wild and volatile, filled with dark energy and raw magic.

The witch held out her hand, shaking but fierce, eyes locked on mine.

“After you, my Lord,” she rasped.

CHAPTER 25

Andros

We plunged through the portal, magic slicing violently through my bones. Reality spun and twisted like molten metal around us. My vision blurred, narrowed, then shattered.

Madness surged through my skull, raw and savage. Images poured across my mind, visions no mortal should see, things beyond my understanding.

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I saw a world burning, torn apart by chaos. Strange metal birds roaring through skies thick with ash, casting dark shadows over lands ravaged by war. Two souls, immortal, their hearts finding each other even there, as the dead rose in endless hordes, marching mindlessly to devour the living. Love surviving the army of the dead, defiant, eternal, amidst hopelessness.

Another flash—

A bleak, dark city, cold metal gleaming harshly beneath endless rain. People walking mechanically, their minds shackled by some dark magic embedded like runes of steel into their very skulls. Chips of iron controlling their every thought, their every breath—but still, two souls fought through, reaching desperately toward each other, defying the oppressive darkness that sought to consume them. Choosing death on their own terms, together.

My head spun violently.

The images came faster now.

A world on the brink, shadow and corruption sinking deep beneath the earth, spreading dark roots like the tendrils of a poisoned tree, draining life itself from every living creature. Above, a fierce, fiery bird, feathers burning like flame, clenched her claws, ready to dive, lightning tearing the sky apart as she prepared for battle.

Then—so fast I barely caught it—

A man standing in strange, gleaming armour marked by scars of countless battles, his

eyes deep with an ache I recognized all too clearly. Tenderly, he tucked a lock of golden hair behind the ear of a woman whose eyes shone with trust and longing. He pressed a soft yellow rose gently into her hair, lips murmuring a promise so powerful it echoed across eternity: “I will find you, over and over again. No matter how many worlds stand between us.”

Pain shattered my skull—

And suddenly, violently, reality snapped back.

I hit the floor hard, stone cracking beneath me, the portal tearing closed behind us with a deafening snap. The witch landed heavily beside me, coughing, drained to the very last drop of her power.

We were back at the citadel. But the air wasn't silent. It was filled with screaming. Screams of terror, battle, chaos.

Smoke curled thick in the air, sharp and acrid, stinging my nose and throat as I staggered to my feet. The magic still buzzed in my veins, my body aching from the violent return.

We were behind the stables—at the far edge of the citadel. And that's when I saw them. Three bodies lay sprawled in the mud-soaked snow, blood pooling beneath them.

Garrick.

I ran.

He was gasping, barely conscious, soaked in crimson from a deep wound that cleaved through his side. The two others—my men—were already gone, their eyes wide and

empty, throats slashed with clean, practised cruelty.

But Garrick, he still breathed.

His lips curled weakly as I dropped beside him, pressing my hands over the wound, trying to stop the bleeding. His eyes fluttered open.

“Took you long enough,” he wheezed, a ghost of a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth.

“Shut up,” I muttered, jaw clenched. “You’re going to be fine.”

“Don’t lie to me,” he murmured, coughing blood. “You’ve always been shit at it.”

The witch limped beside me, face pale, her hands shaking. “I’ve got this,” she said quietly. “Might be able to pull him back. Not a promise.”

I looked at her, really looked, and saw how wrecked she was. Her skin grey, breath shallow, eyes sunken. The portal had drained her, and the spell she’d brewed for Lexa had taken the rest.

She was running on fumes.

“This is it,” she said, kneeling down with effort. “This is the last thing I can do for you, Alpha. After this... you’re on your own.”

I didn’t argue. I didn’t thank her. I just nodded, then stood slowly, scanning the ground.

One of the wolves that had fallen lay face down in the mud, sword still clutched in his hand. I ripped it from his grip and turned toward the gates.

The smoke was thicker now. Screams echoed through the halls. I could hear the clash of steel, the shouts of men fighting for—or against—something they didn't understand.

Lexa.

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I gripped the sword tighter, heart pounding, rage climbing. And in the chaos, the one small flame of relief that Dain was not there. I had taken him to the village. He was still on the road, guarded by my men. Still safe.

He didn't see this.

With one last look at Garrick—still breathing, barely, under the witch's trembling hands—I turned toward the citadel's gates and ran.

The citadel was a battlefield.

Smoke choked the air, heavy and dark, weaving between the walls like a living thing. Men clashed wildly—wolves loyal to me locked against Roran's traitors, blades ringing and claws tearing through flesh, fur matted with blood and dirt.

Chaos everywhere. Screams echoed off stone, the scent of death and iron choking my senses. Shattered furniture and overturned tables littered the halls, torches ripped from sconces, flames climbing curtains and tapestries. My home, my sanctuary, torn apart by betrayal.

Some wolves fought in human form, swords in hand, armour glistening with blood and soot. Others had shifted, fur bristling, teeth bared in primal fury, claws ripping mercilessly into enemies once called brothers.

My grip tightened on the sword I'd taken from the fallen wolf outside. Without hesitation, I charged into the madness, cutting down the first traitor who lunged toward me—a clean strike through the ribs. He collapsed instantly, eyes wide

in shock.

I didn't slow down.

A loyal wolf, cornered by two traitors, fought fiercely but was losing ground, wounds already staining his fur. I surged forward, blade slicing clean through one attacker's spine before he could finish the strike. The other turned, snarling, lunging—my blade caught him squarely through the chest, puncturing armour and bone. He fell, gasping, blood filling his throat.

“Alpha,” the wolf gasped, staggering to his feet, eyes wide with gratitude.

“Fight,” I growled fiercely. “Push them back.”

He nodded grimly, picking up his fallen sword and rushing back into the fray.

Another clash up ahead—two of Roran's men cornering an injured female from my personal guard. I didn't hesitate. I moved like fire. One blade cleaved a neck. The other pierced a heart.

The halls were worse, tight quarters, blood smeared on the walls, boots slipping in gore. The bodies of wolves littered the corridors, some still twitching, others long gone. I recognized faces. Men and women I'd trained with. Trusted. All of it torn apart by Roran's greed.

More traitors closed in. My sword moved swiftly, an extension of my rage, fuelled by the bond and the raw terror still echoing from Lexa's vision. Bodies fell at my feet as I carved a path forward, my muscles burning, heartbeat roaring wildly.

My vision sharpened, pinpointing the room at the end of the corridor. Lexa's room.

Three wolves blocked my path, eyes glittering with madness, weapons ready. With a furious roar, I lunged forward. Blades clashed violently, sparks flying as I cut them down one by one, their bodies falling heavy and lifeless onto the blood-soaked stone.

The door was in sight. My heart pounded violently, driven by desperate fear and love.

I surged forward, blade dripping crimson, and kicked open the door, bracing for whatever awaited me inside.

The room was empty.

My heart sank, panic flaring violently in my chest. Lexa's scent still lingered fresh in the air, heavy and sweet and faintly tinged with fear. They couldn't have gotten far.

But before I could move, a snarl sounded behind me. I spun sharply, only just managing to dodge as a traitor lunged, knocking my blade from my hand and sending it clattering across the stone floor. We collided violently, rolling together in a fury of fists and claws. His strength matched mine, rage lending him a ferocity almost equal to my own.

I shifted partially, letting the wolf rise in me just enough to meet him with sharpened teeth and lengthened claws. Blow after blow fell between us, savage, relentless. He was strong, but desperation fuelled me—I had too much to lose. With a feral snarl, I pinned him beneath me, claws sinking deep into his chest. My fists landed again and again, bone shattering beneath my knuckles, blood spraying across my skin, until his body finally went limp beneath me.

I rose slowly, breathing heavily, blood dripping from my fingers, my eyes wild. My muscles shook with exhaustion and fury, but I didn't pause. Lexa was still missing.

Then a voice echoed from outside—the courtyard—piercing through the sounds of

chaos and death.

“Andros!”

The voice was mocking, arrogant. Familiar.

Roran.

I stormed to the window, looking down into the smoke-filled courtyard. My blood froze, heart hammering violently in my chest.

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Roran stood there, blade drawn, smiling coldly as he faced upward toward me. Beside him stood Tanya, eyes glittering with cruel triumph, one arm wrapped around Lexa's weakened, barely conscious form, a dagger pressed cruelly against her pale throat.

My entire world stopped. My vision tunnelled until all I could see was Lexa's face, bruised, exhausted, barely clinging to consciousness. Her body sagged against Tanya, too weak to stand alone. The final rune flickered faintly against her skin, struggling desperately to hold her wolf inside.

Roran lifted his chin, smug and taunting, his voice rising clearly through the smoke and fire. "You've lost, Andros! Surrender—or watch your precious Omega bleed out before your eyes."

Tanya tightened her grip, the blade pressing harder, drawing a thin line of crimson from Lexa's skin. She smirked, her voice cold, full of venomous satisfaction. "What'll it be, Alpha? Her life—or yours?"

I snarled low, teeth clenched, hands trembling with pure, blinding rage. Blood surged through me, hot and violent, but I froze.

The woman I loved was moments from death and every decision I made now would determine the fate of us all.

CHAPTER 26

Lexa

Smoke and ash. I could barely see, barely breathe, consciousness fading in and out as the smoke burned my eyes and throat. Pain pulsed through me in rhythm with my heartbeat slow, weak, desperate. My body sagged against Tanya's grasp, her arm tight around my chest, the dagger cold and sharp against my neck.

The last rune on my back burned like molten iron, flickering, cracking, ready to shatter at any second. And when it did, I didn't know if I'd survive it.

Through the chaos, the pain, the fog, I could hear his voice in my head, raw with fury and desperation:

“Hold on, Lexa. I'm coming. I will save you.”

His words pulsed through the bond, faint but fierce, an anchor holding me from falling entirely into darkness.

Tanya pressed the blade harder, leaning closer, her breath hot and hateful against my ear.

“You should never have raised your filthy head from that garbage village,” she whispered viciously. “You were nothing. You're still nothing. You should've stayed buried in the mud with the rest of those human rats.”

I struggled weakly in her grasp, rage flickering inside me, dulled by exhaustion and agony. But I couldn't fight. I could barely stand. Tanya laughed softly, mockingly, fingers twisting cruelly in my hair.

“Pathetic,” she sneered. “You never should've interfered with me. I will be Luna, and you'll be nothing but a sad memory.”

In front of me stood Roran, tall and broad-shouldered, his arrogant face twisted with

cruel satisfaction. Dark hair slicked back, eyes cold as steel, jaw set in a vicious smile. His leather armour gleamed dully beneath streaks of blood, blade drawn confidently, ready to challenge the Alpha he'd betrayed.

He looked over his shoulder at Tanya, eyes narrowing.

“If something goes wrong,” he growled, voice low and hard, “kill her.”

Tanya nodded coldly, her grip tightening brutally, the dagger slicing deeper until a small trickle of blood slipped down my throat. My heart seized.

Dirty cheaters.

Their plan was clear: challenge Andros, fight him for control of the pack. And if Andros won, they would kill me. The moment I died, Andros would feel it through our bond, his mind shattering, his soul breaking. Vulnerable. Destroyed. Ripe for the taking.

They didn't just want Andros's title. They wanted his soul. I closed my eyes, tears burning behind my lids, helplessness choking me.

But Andros's voice surged again, louder now, fierce and unrelenting: “Stay with me, Lexa. I'm coming.”

The heat in my back turned to fire.

It wasn't pain anymore—it was a warning. A promise. The last rune, carved into me with shaking hands and blood money, was burning alive. I could feel it bubbling beneath my skin like molten iron, my bones trembling under the pressure.

And she was there. My wolf.

Not just pacing now but thrashing. Snarling. Scratching and biting at the cage I'd forced her into for thirteen long years.

LET ME OUT.

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LET ME OUT.

LET ME OUT.

Tanya's voice slithered against my ear, oblivious, still wrapped in her pathetic delusion of control.

“Stop struggling you fucking stray. You don't have the power to brake free. After we kill you and Andros, that human brat's next. Roran said so himself.”

Everything stopped.

Everything snapped.

That word—brat.

That smirk.

Dain.

The last fragile thread of restraint unravelled.

And my wolf screamed.

LET ME OUT, YOU FUCKING COWARD!

LET ME OUT.

The rune ignited, exploding through my spine like a violent lightning strike. I arched in her grip with a ragged, inhuman scream as the magic shattered inside me. No gentle break. No fading glow. It was violent—a death scream of the seal I had begged for over and over, finally torn to pieces.

Andros's voice tore through the bond like a howl. "Lexa?! Talk to me—what's happening?!"

I couldn't answer.

I could see him—bloodied, feral, cutting down traitors through the smoke-choked halls of the citadel like a god of war—but I couldn't answer. Because there was nothing human left in me to speak.

My skin split.

My bones broke and reformed.

Fur erupted. Fangs tore through my gums. My limbs stretched, my throat howled.

I didn't break free from Tanya. I obliterated her.

My jaws clamped around her arm as I shifted, dragging her down like prey, her scream twisting into a wet gurgle as I ripped through her shoulder. Blood sprayed the ground. She tried to run, to scream again, but I was already slashing, already tearing. Her dagger clattered from her hand as I tore into her gut, her side, her face.

She wasn't a threat.

She wasn't anything anymore.

She was meat.

Savage, brutal, primal—I didn't just kill her. I unmade her. For every bruise. For every mockery. For every threat against my boy. For every sick word she spat about Andros.

The courtyard was painted in her blood before her body hit the stone.

And when I lifted my head—dripping, heaving, free—I turned toward Roran with murder in my eyes cause I was done running.

Roran stepped forward through the smoke, boots splashing carelessly in the blood pooling from Tanya's shredded remains. His eyes flicked to her corpse with nothing more than mild annoyance, as if she'd been nothing more than a pawn, a discarded tool whose use had run out.

A cold, mocking smile twisted his lips as he fixed his gaze on me, slowly shaking his head.

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“Well, well,” he drawled lazily. “Looks like thestrayfound her fangs after all.”

No grief. No rage. Just cold, bitter amusement, a cruel indifference that ignited something feral and violent inside me. The same way he'd casually slaughtered his own pack, the same way he'd threatened Andros and Dain and everything I held sacred. Roran had never loved anything beyond himself.

He wouldn't mourn Tanya like Andros would mourn me, wouldn't burn worlds or tear down mountains. Andros would bleed rivers if he lost me. Roran barely blinked at her death.

My hackles rose sharply, muscles trembling as I snarled deeply, ears flattened against my skull. And beneath Roran's confident mask, beneath his carefully maintained arrogance, I scented it clearly: the bitter stench of fear.

It leaked from his pores, sour and acrid. He feared me. Feared what I'd become. But he was still an Alpha, too proud and arrogant to bow before an Omega, even one that just ripped his companion to shreds. He would never surrender—not willingly.

He unsheathed his sword with a smooth hiss of steel, stepping forward with deadly calm.

“You really think you're something special now,” he growled, voice low and venomous. “You're nothing. A feral bitch playing at being wolf. No one will mourn your corpse, especially not that broken Alpha you think you love.”

His words stabbed deeper than any blade, rage roaring white-hot inside me.

I lunged forward, claws out, teeth snapping—

But he was fast, brutally skilled. His sword arced swiftly through the air, slicing deep into my chest. White-hot agony tore through my body, pain nearly blinding as blood splattered hot and thick across the stone. I stumbled, gasping, the wound pulsing, vision swimming dangerously.

Roran smiled cruelly, victorious, twisting the blade.

“Did you really think I'd let you walk away?” he mocked. “I'll end you here and now, mutt. And when your pathetic bond shatters, Andros will feel every moment of your death—right before I kill him too.”

He tossed his blade aside and shifted. Bones cracked, skin ripped open violently as he surged upward into a hulking, savage wolf—black as midnight, eyes blazing with arrogant bloodlust, teeth bared in a vicious snarl.

I staggered back, breath coming harsh and painful. Blood dripped from my wound, staining my fur dark crimson. But I didn't surrender. I would burn the fucking world to ashes before I let him touch my family again, or I would die trying to protect them.

Roran lunged.

His massive form collided with mine in an eruption of muscle and bone. Teeth tore across my shoulder, claws raked through my side. Blood sprayed the courtyard, hot and thick, painting the stone beneath us red.

I screamed and struck back, ripping into his flank with my jaws. The taste of his blood flooded my mouth. He howled and slammed me down, his weight crushing my ribcage. My vision dimmed, pain pulsing like a war drum in my skull.

We rolled across the stones, slashing, biting, tearing—two monsters locked in a frenzy of gore and hatred. My fur was soaked, my chest a torn, burning mess. My claws sank into his neck, but he wrenched free and sank his teeth into my leg, shaking hard until I felt something snap.

My body hit the ground with a sickening crack. I couldn't move. Blood pooled beneath me. My lungs wheezed, broken. My limbs twitched uselessly, the final ounce of strength draining fast.

Roran loomed over me, eyes blazing, jaws wide, ready to finish it.

And then—I felt him.

A black wolf, larger than any I'd ever seen, tore through the smoke like death itself. Andros collided with Roran mid-leap, the impact a thunderclap of flesh and fury. They rolled across the courtyard in a brutal storm of snapping jaws and raking claws. Andros sank his fangs into Roran's throat, ripping flesh free as blood exploded across the stones.

Roran struck back, carving deep into Andros's side, but he didn't stop. He drove him backward, blow after blow, a shadow of pure violence. Fur flew. Blood ran in rivers. The sound of bone shattering echoed through the courtyard.

I forced my body upright, broken bones grinding together, blood soaking the stone beneath me as I fought desperately for balance. My vision blurred, black and red swimming together, fury driving me forward—But Andros's voice slammed through the bond, powerful, savage, undeniable.

“No.”

It was not a request. It was a command. Not mean. Not violent. Just absolute and

unyielding. My muscles froze, heart hammering wildly as his voice ripped through me again, fiercer this time, a wave of raw dominance and rage I'd never felt from him before.

“This fight is mine.”

He stood tall, drenched in blood and shadow, every inch the Alpha I'd once hated—now the Alpha I'd die for.

“This traitor raised his blade against me, betrayed my pack, dared to take what is mine—what I love.”

His words shook me, the possessive fury scorching through every nerve.

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“I will end him. He will fall by my hand, and mine alone.”

And for the first time since Andros had stormed into my world—since he’d bound us, broken me open, rebuilt me from ashes—I didn’t snarl.

I didn’t protest. I didn’t fight him. I looked at him—the Alpha whose heart had bled through mine—and I finally saw him for what he was: raw power, savage grace, unwavering strength. I lowered my head in silent acceptance. This was his moment.

His kill.

CHAPTER 27

Andros

Noise. That’s what woke me.

Hammering, shouting—movement. Not the chaos of war, not the bloodthirsty roar of wolves clashing steel, but something... softer. Livelier.

Rebuilding.

I blinked, sunlight cutting across the sheets, warm and golden. For a few seconds, I didn’t know where the fuck I was. My limbs were too heavy, the mattress too soft, the room too quiet. Then I turned my head and saw the curve of the bedpost. The fur thrown carelessly across the foot of the mattress.

My bed. No—our bed.

And that's when the ache in my muscles kicked in. Not the kind that came from battle. The other kind.

Gods. Last night.

Flashes hit me in short, hard bursts—Lexa, on her knees, lips parted, eyes locked on mine like a challenge. Then above me, moving like a storm, like something born from the wild—hair falling, hips rolling, green eyes gleaming like fire through forest shadows. She didn't ride me, she ruled me. Every moan, every scratch down my back, a fucking claim.

I let out a low growl.

Great. I was hard again just thinking about it. But the bed was empty now.

Where the hell did she go?

I sat up, scrubbed a hand down my face, and forced myself out of bed. Pulled on black pants, a linen shirt, boots. Still sore. Still satisfied. Still not over the way her name sounded in my throat when she made me—Focus.

I walked to the window, pushing it open. The breeze hit me first—sharp and cold, but laced with the scent of freshly carved wood, damp stone, morning fire.

And beneath it all... peace. Not silence. Not stillness. But the weight of survival lifting. The scent of life returning.

The courtyard was full, my pack moving like a living tide. Hauling beams. Resetting stone. Repairing what Roran tried to ruin. Their voices rang out across the stone

walls, laughter mixed with curses, sweat mixed with pride.

And in the middle of it—Her. Lexa.

She stood with Dain at her side, a woven basket looped over her arm, offering water and fresh-baked bread to the workers, her smile quick and sarcastic, her presence—undeniable. The boy was grinning, practically bouncing as he handed out cups.

Lexa wore a black dress stitched with silver thread, the fabric hugging her waist, corset drawn tight, her shoulders bare to the sun. Her hair was braided over one shoulder, a single wild strand curling loose against her cheek. The wind tugged at it like it belonged to no one but the air.

My eyes dropped lower, to the scar that still traced across her chest. The mark Roran left when he tried to kill her. Healed. Closed. But it would never fully fade.

Neither would the ones on her back. The old ones. The runes she'd carved into herself to silence the wolf. To erase the part of her that was always meant to live.

But now, here she was. Whole. Scarred. And so fucking alive. I rested my hands on the windowsill and just looked at her for a long moment.

Gods, she'd burned my world down. And I'd let her do it again.

“Well, well” her voice slid through the bond, rich with that familiar bite of sarcasm. “Look who finally decided to grace us with his mighty presence.”

I smirked, sitting on the edge of the bed as I pulled on my boots. “You’re lucky I got out of bed at all. You fucking wore me out last night.”

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“Please,” she shot back instantly, “I let you keep up.”

“Let me?” I laughed under my breath, shaking my head. “You were practically begging—”

“—for you to stop talking so much? Yeah.” A pause. “Besides, if I remember right, you were the one making all the noise.”

I stood, rolling my shoulders, grin spreading wide across my face. “I’d say let’s go for round two, but it looks like you’re busy being domestic and gorgeous.”

“Flattery won’t get you out of helping out today.”

“Wasn’t trying to get out of it. I just want to watch you bend over the table again.”

I felt her exhale through the bond—half exasperated, half amused.

“Can’t, table is occupied cause lunch is almost ready,” she said, and her tone softened just enough to make something warm flicker in my chest. “Since you skipped breakfast, you better show up before Dain eats everything.”

“So demanding,” I teased.

“So slow,” she returned. “We’ll meet you in the dining hall in a few. Don’t be late, Alpha.”

“Wouldn’t dare.”

I walked toward the door, still smiling, already counting the seconds until I could kiss her again.

I made my way down the stairs, greeting wolves as I passed—some still bruised from the last fight, others already laughing like the blood hadn't even dried on the stones two weeks ago. I clapped a younger one on the shoulder, the kid's arm still in a sling.

“Feeling better?”

“Like shit, Alpha,” he grinned.

“Good. Builds character,” I said, and kept walking.

The scent of roasted meat hit me before I even stepped into the dining hall. Inside, Garrick was already halfway through a lamb chop, shirt dusted in limestone like he'd rolled around in the quarry. He looked up with a full mouth and narrowed eyes.

“Finally. I've been up since sunrise, digging holes and pretending to know what I'm doing. Where the fuck have you been?”

I dropped into my chair, smirking. “Recovering. You wouldn't understand—takes stamina to survive a night with a wild woman.”

He groaned dramatically. “Ugh. You two. Gods. There's no escaping it.”

Before I could reply, the door opened again, and Lexa walked in with Dain bounding ahead of her like a pup on sugar. She was radiant—black and silver dress, her hair braided over her shoulder, that wild strand loose against her face. My chest clenched like it always did when I saw her.

I met her halfway, pulled her in, kissed her slow and deep, like I hadn't just seen her

an hour ago. She rolled her eyes when we pulled apart but smiled. I grabbed her chair and pulled it out with a small bow.

“My lady,” I said dryly.

“Charming,” she muttered, sitting down.

Garrick wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Anika’ll be down in a second.”

“Who?” Lexa’s voice slid through the bond, amused and confused.

“I have no idea,” I answered.

“Is she one of ours? Or... human?”

Before I could guess, the doors creaked again, and she walked in.

The witch.

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Not the half-dead, soot-covered, hunched creature who dragged us through death and back. No. She was radiant. In a green dress that hugged her sharp curves, dark hair brushed smooth with silver streaks glinting like starlight, lips painted red, smoky eyes like dusk and mischief. She plucked an apple from the tray with a perfectly manicured hand and looked straight at Lexa.

“I find it funny,” she said dryly, “that you came to me for years, spilled blood on my floor, and never once asked for my name.”

Lexa tilted her head and smiled sweetly. “You called mewolf girl for years. I thought we agreed we weren’t on a first-name basis.”

Garrick’s face lit up like the first fire of winter. “I saved you a seat next to me,” he said to Anika, patting the bench like a proud wolf.

Lexa turned slowly to look at me.

I turned slowly to look at her.

She groaned in the bond, long and dramatic. “Noooooooo. Now she’s never going to leave.”

I swallowed my laugh, keeping a straight face. “She might. But... I fear she may take my beta with her.”

Lexa dropped her head against the back of her chair with a whine. “Gods, help us.”

Across the table, Garrick was already offering Anika half his lamb chop. And the witch? She winked at him.

After lunch, the hours drifted by with a strange, peaceful rhythm. We walked the grounds together, checking on the rebuilding, speaking with wolves, listening to plans and ideas like leaders should. Lexa gave her usual sharp-tongued feedback, and they loved her for it. Dain trailed behind us most of the day, climbing everything he could and nearly giving Garrick a heart attack when he tried to jump from a half-built terrace.

By nightfall, the sky was deep with stars, the scent of woodsmoke soft in the air. I returned to our room first, and she followed a little while later.

“He went down like a rock,” she said, closing the door gently behind her. “Didn’t even finish his story.”

I turned from the balcony, the cold night wind brushing over my bare arms. “You opened the windows?” she asked, eyeing me like I’d finally lost it. “Why? It’s cold outside.”

“Come here,” I said instead.

She padded toward me, barefoot, hair upbraided now, loose and wild, her black dress whispering over her scarred skin. I took her hand and led her out onto the balcony, the wind tugging gently at her hair.

“All of this,” I said, sweeping my arm across the moonlit courtyard, the forest that stretched beyond it, and the lights flickering in the hills—“this is my pack. My land. Some of it inherited. Some of it taken by sheer force.”

She stayed quiet, fingers resting against mine.

“I’ve bled for it. Killed for it. Buried people I loved here. And for most of my life, I thought I’d die alone protecting it. That no one would ever see it the way I did. That no one could understand what it means to be bound to something this deeply, to carry the weight of so many lives on your back and still walk like you’re not breaking.”

I looked at her then. Really looked at her.

“But you do. You understand. You feel it. And somehow, without ever asking, you became part of it. You fought for it. For me. For them. You didn’t ask for this, and gods know you never begged to belong, but... here you are.”

She smiled. I stepped away for a moment and returned with the box. Dark wood. Silver vines carved into its surface. When I opened it, moonlight caught the necklace within—elegant silver, shaped like flowing branches, with two opal stones set in the middle that shimmered green like her eyes when she was furious.

“I never thought I’d ask anyone this question,” I said, my voice rough, “least of all astray.”

Her brows rose. I smiled.

“But Lexa... will you be my Luna? And lead this pack with me?”

Her eyes widened, stunned for the first time in a long while. I felt it through the bond—her wolf howling with joy, tail high, pacing circles in the space between our souls.

But of course—Lexa being Lexa—she smirked a slow curl of her lips that dared me to push further.

“I’ve known you for only two months, Alpha,” she said, crossing her arms. “Asking a

girl a question like that... What does it say about you?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Hmm, yes, and you claimed me and fucked me after three weeks. What does that say about you?"

She narrowed her eyes.

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“Four,” she corrected. But she was laughing, cheeks flushed, eyes alive.

I was already reaching for her. I pulled her in, caught that laugh between us and kissed her, slow but hungry.

“Is that a yes?” I murmured against her lips.

She kissed me back, slow and firm. “Yes.”

And right then, under the stars, with her warmth pressed against me and the future open at our feet, I realized something:

She was the one thing I’d never conquered—the only thing I never wanted to. Because she didn’t need to be claimed. She needed to be chosen.

And gods help me, I would choose her. Again. And again. And again. In this life time and the next.

The End