



Bullied Alpha Bride (Wolfshade Brides-for-Hire #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I had to endure his bullying and rejection. Now I must endure being his arranged mate...

He taunted me for years, then took my virginity and humiliated me.

Now he's the Alpha and needs a mate for the sake of his pack. And I happen to be on the run.

The Brides-for-hire agency matches us, and to my humiliation...I'm now his arranged, knocked-up mate.

I was forced to leave my pack after his rejection. I ended up in an even more evil pack.

I've given up on the idea of love, but I desperately need a mate for protection.

It's cruel to be matched with the Alpha who broke my fragile heart.

And it's even more cruel that I don't have a choice but to give myself to him.

I'm not the girl he used to taunt. I've grown up.

But he still likes to tease me until my body falls apart.

He still knows how to make me obey his commands.

He makes my belly grow until he owns all of me.

When I give myself to the Alpha this time around...will he claim me for good?

The Wolfshade Brides-for-Hire Agency arranges marriages and temporary partnerships for shifters. The matches are perfect...even if it means that enemies turn into lovers, rejected mates turn out to be fated, and broken hearts are crushed again before they're healed forever

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

The intoxicating, smooth scent of bourbon floods my nostrils as I raise the shot glass to my lips. I toss back the amber liquid in one gulp and wince as I put the glass down on the bar with an emphatic tap.

The bartender looks up at the sound and gives me a little nod, letting me know he'll be over to refill my glass when he swings back this way. I nod back, lowering my eyes to the polished wood of the bar so I don't make eye contact with anyone else.

I tap my fingers lightly on the glossy surface, trying not to show my agitation.

I've been running so hard, and for so long, I thought exhaustion would have brought me down by now.

But my blood is still sizzling with fear, making my muscles jerk involuntarily, as if my whole body is begging me to run.

I have to rest. I will die if I don't.

The bartender taps the bottle against the glass as he fills it, giving me a brief salute before moving on again. He knows I'm not here to talk and has dutifully kept the drinks coming.

Bartenders are so good at recognizing trauma, they should probably be therapists.

I know I've got to stop, and soon. I simply can't afford to keep drinking.

The last of my cash is in my pocket, and it's not much.

When I fled from Grace's Fall, there was nothing to bring with me.

I didn't own a single thing in this world.

Not my clothes, my bed, or my room. Every cent I earned was taken from me.

For as long as I can remember, all I've been able to claim is my own body.

Pain lances through me, an emotional blow so strong, it makes my eyes water. I take a tiny sip of the Jack, trying to numb myself, but it doesn't work. I feel worse, and my lip is trembling as I try to hold back my sorrow.

Even my own body doesn't belong to me anymore.

I slip off the bar stool and head into the shadows, sitting in a dark corner up the back of the bar. I have no idea where I'm going to go or what I'm going to do. I just want to get out of sight for a few minutes and pray that I don't break down.

I have to keep going. A bit further northeast, and I'll hit the border. Then they can't come after me.

Through the slight haze of the alcohol, the truth penetrates. They absolutely will follow me across the border; I know they will. I also know that the rough country I've just crossed is nothing compared to what I'll face if I keep going in this direction.

The run so far has almost killed me... but every moment I stop to rest gives them a chance to catch up.

My fingers tighten on the glass as I take another sip. Instead of calming me down, the alcohol seems to be making my anxiety worse, churning my guts into frothy waves of panic.

Great. Now I'm sick as well as dead tired and sore. As escape plans go, this wasn't exactly smart.

I tilt the glass, swallowing the last of the shot. There was no way I could have planned better or done anything different. When I ran away from home, I did it in complete, utter panic, with no thought at all.

I remember the usual routine at home: Father would walk into the house, very late as usual.

Then came an ordinary evening of verbal abuse and general degradation.

Usually, I'd listen quietly, say "Yes, sir," and wait for him to pass out.

Then I could sleep a little before the routine began again—cleaning the house, working at the factory, making his dinner, and getting yelled at the whole time that none of it was good enough.

On the night I left, Father entered the house with a big smile on his face. It was truly the most terrifying thing I'd ever seen. The twisted snarl and ice-cold eyes were such a permanent fixture on him.

And everyone fears him. The whole pack does. There's only one person in the pack anywhere near as scary as my father.

Vince.

A shudder runs through my body, and my throat burns with the edge of all the alcohol I just drank. I shake my head a little, trying to swallow my disgust.

I can't ever let that fucker touch me! I'll die first!

My mind strays back to fleeing over the border, and suddenly, that looks far more attractive than potentially getting caught. The idea of the pack finding my frozen body begins to have real appeal.

Then neither of those men can have me.

My father, pack alpha of Grace's Fall, promised me to Vince, the son of his beta. Since my mother died, I've lived with Father in the small town under Logging Peak. We fled from him when I was very young because my mother couldn't stand to see the abuse he rained down on her overflow onto me.

She kept me safe for years, until I almost forgot about him and the horrors we fled from. Eventually, my father hunted us down and reclaimed me, dragging me back to Grace's Fall.

From the moment I arrived, I was a slave. I did try to run a couple of times, but the punishments were so bad, I stopped trying.

It was only the utter terror of being promised to Vince that gave me the strength to finally escape.

It didn't hurt at all that Father was drunker than usual on this particular night.

He'd celebrated a long while with other pack members at the bar, then staggered home to give me the "good" news.

He felt so secure about his hold on me that he passed out on the couch, leaving his bedroom door wide open.

Right after he passed out, I went through his room, finding any cash and valuables I could easily carry.

As I fled the house, the dark trees seemed to reach for me, drawing me into the shadows of the forest. I broke a clear—but false—trail to the south, then swam through the river before changing direction and heading north.

I stopped in Gryphon Eyrie because it's the last town before the border.

If I want to keep going northeast, that is.

I can't go south or southwest—that would take me back towards Grace's Fall. Further up Lycan Pass is Cyan Lock, and beyond that, Quartz Key.

I have friends in both places, but a cold rush of anxiety floods through me at the thought of setting foot in either of those towns.

I can't go there, either.

The fear I feel at the idea of returning to Cyan Lock is almost worse than getting caught by my father.

Trapped on every side. Slavery, degradation... or death. Great choices.

I hang my head, feeling hopelessness taking me over. It's like sinking into a frozen lake, slowly going down into the darkness, the light vanishing over your head as the ice steals your soul.

I'm ready. I'm doing this.

I take a few deep breaths, savoring the warmth of the bar before I take myself out into the cold. I'll race the wind, challenge the snow, and become one with the mountain itself.

And if I can't survive as a wolf out there... I'll die, and it will still be better than going back or getting caught.

Father was never shy about using his fists if he felt his words weren't enough. More than once, I wore bruises as evidence of his fury. Vince is worse—far worse—and I know from the way he looks at my body, the torture he visits upon me will be more creative than a simple beating.

Wow. You know your life is fucked when “creative” and “torture” show up in the same sentence.

I'm just about to stand up and head towards the bar when a bright giggle behind me cuts through my thoughts. I'm sure the sound is familiar, and the last thing I want to do is alert someone connected to the pack where I am.

Everyone is afraid of Father. Giving me to him would ensure his good favor, and deflect his violence and cruelty from them.

I sit frozen, my head down, as the giggles go on.

“You get the next round, you sly bitch! I just paid for two in a row.”

“Uh-uh. I got the last one.”

“You did not!”

“Totally did. You're just too drunk.”

“Krista!” the bright, bubbly voice giggles some more. “I hate when you do this!”

“No, you don't,” Krista laughs. “You fucking love me, Winnie.”

“You’re right, I do,” Winnie answers, and I hear more laughter as they hug.

Winnie!

What the hell is she doing all the way down here?

Shock has sucked all the breath out of my lungs. I waver in my seat, willing myself to breathe, to calm down, and not faint.

If I hit the fucking floor, they’ll notice me. And Winnie’s such a busybody, she’ll be all up in my shit!

My heart twists, a deep ache spreading through my chest. Winnie is a sweetheart—a loving, funny girl who enjoys having a good time and making her brother’s life a living hell. If she saw me and tried to interfere, she’d believe she was doing it to help me.

And all she’d be doing is putting herself on the firing line.

I duck my head a little, turning to face the wall.

I look different than how I did years ago when I left Cyan Lock, and I have to hope that’s enough to hide me.

Wolves can identify each other by smell, of course, but to hunt me down in a room full of shifters, magicians, witches, and half-breeds, Winnie would need to purposefully search for my scent.

And even then, the thick fumes of alcohol would make it pretty difficult.

There is a slight crash behind me as glasses fall against each other, followed by more

laughter.

“Hey! I got the damn drinks. Don’t spill them!”

“Why is everything always my fault?” Krista sighs. “You’re the one who just slammed them into the table. Quit blaming me.”

“I never blame you, Krista. Except when it’s your fault. Which is always.”

They laugh some more, and a horrible sense of loss twists my guts.

I’ll never have this. Friends, fun nights out, just enjoying myself without a care in the world. I spent the last three years trapped by Father... and I forgot this kind of life existed.

Even though it hurts, I shut down my heart. I’m going into the wilderness. It’s the only way to make sure I don’t put anyone else in danger.

But I can’t leave yet. I can’t take the risk they’ll recognize me. I’ll have to wait until they move.

I tuck myself into the shadows at the corner of the table, staying out of sight. The last thing I want to do is listen in on their conversation, but there’s no way to stop myself from hearing it.

“So, how’s your cutie brother? Is it true he got married?” Krista asks.

“Yeah, he did,” Winnie answered. “To Clara. They have a son. His name’s Nico.”

“Clara? You mean that weirdo that went to high school with you? She had no shifter gene or something.”

“Or something,” Winnie agrees. I hear the telltale gurgle of a straw chasing around the bottom of a glass.

“Definitely your shot now!” Winnie says.

Krista scoffs. “I will. But first, tell me the goss on your brother! He said he’d never get married.”

“Well, I might have forced him into it,” Winnie answers, sounding bemused.

“Get out of town!”

She laughs. “I found this thing online, for Porter’s brides-for-hire service. I signed him up and dared him to go. He couldn’t resist proving his manhood to me, just like I knew he would. I thought it would be a fun joke—maybe lighten him up a bit. I never dreamed it would actually work out.”

“So... wait, wait. There’s a brides-for-hire agency, taking in lost women and matching them with hot, sexy alphas?”

“Hot, sexy alphas who can’t get a date,” Winnie corrects solemnly. “They have to be utterly useless at talking to girls, too, I assume.”

Krista bursts out laughing, and Winnie does, too. My breath is caught in my chest again, but this time I’m not scared—I’m excited.

Keep talking, girls.

“How did you find it?” Krista asks.

“I was browsing through dating apps. Half-heartedly for myself, but ultimately

planning something to hit Galen with. Then this pink pop-up blinked on the screen. I thought it would fold immediately when I put in our details, but the chatbot opened, and it turns out Miss Porter actually knows about the magical world. She's one of us.

”

“Holy fucking wow,” Krista mutters. “Talk about unexpected.”

“I know, right! I was even more determined for Galen to go through with it, then. I just had this feeling, you know?”

“I don't know... but you're going to tell me everything!”

The girls' voices slip away as I pull out my phone. As I stare at the screen, the noises of the bar fade to a low rumble, and I can't see anything except the bright screen. I flick my thumb across the screen to hit the search bar.

Porter's...

Are you looking for Porter's brides-for-hire?

In disbelief, I tap the link, and a pink pop-up appears.

What the fuck am I doing?

I pause for a moment to think. I'm running away because I don't want to be forced into marriage, but Vince is a brute. The slavery I experienced at Father's hands would be twice as bad with Vince. Not to mention, he'd probably keep me pregnant the whole time.

A shudder runs through me as I think about how that would happen. Vince creeps me out—he'd creep anyone out—but I can tell by the way he looks at me that physical

encounters with him come with a heavy dose of pain.

Hello!

The chatbot opens by itself, the way some of them do if the screen is idle for a minute.

Hi , I type back.

Are you looking to be a bride for hire in Lycan Pass? We have many eligible bachelors waiting for a match, and all of them have been approved through our very strict standards. The safety of our brides is our highest priority!

That's good , I reply, still skeptical.

Would you like to fill out an application? If you're approved, we can send a first deposit to your account of choice—even before you've found a match! We want you to be well cared for from the get-go!

I think about the thirty bucks I have left in my pocket and just go straight to the application. I fully expect to be declined, so I go through it without much enthusiasm. Around me, the bar is getting quieter and darker as the hour grows late and people leave to go home.

I don't have a fucking home. I can't even remember what that feels like.

Thanks for giving us your information! I see your location is Gryphon Eyrie. The chat resumes immediately after I submit the form, and I stare at the screen for a moment, slightly creeped out.

Wait... I tapped "accept" to use my current location. Calm down, Lexa, they aren't

psychic.

Yes , I type back.

You're approved for our match-making process! A starting fee will be deposited into your nominated account immediately. We'd like you to stay in Gryphon Eyrie for now, because a potential match is nearby. Does that sound okay to you?

I think about how I don't want to stay still for too long in case my father and Vince catch up to me.

But if I'm married when they get here, they can't fucking do anything! This is way better than slinking off into the snow and dying!

I'll stay , I type back.

Excellent! I'll text you with the next details as soon as I have them. Glad to have you on board, Lexa!

Still wondering what the hell I've done, I signal to the bartender. He should know of a cheap place to stay nearby.

I need to get settled in as quickly as possible, so I can spend the next ten hours agonizing over the decision I've just made.

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Night falls slowly across the mountains, the horizon showing echoes of the sun's light long after it set. Stars come out one by one, shimmering in the sky like chips of crystal. The perfect, deep blue of the sky is reflected by the surface of the lake, along with the glowing points of light.

I reach down and grab a small stone, skimming it along the flat surface with a twist of my wrist. The water is often clear and peaceful, a perfect mirror of the heavens. But tonight, it looks especially beautiful.

I really do love it out here.

It's just the house I'm not crazy about.

Putting my hands in my pockets, I look across the lake to the manor on the other side.

Three stories of carefully carved stone spread out in generous wings that sweep around a large, circular garden.

A few of the windows have lights behind them.

Still, the place doesn't look especially welcoming or cozy.

It never has, because my grandparents lived here.

I shuffle a little, still watching the house. I came out here to relax, but now I just feel more agitated. I'm thinking about going for a run, but really, I know I'm just trying to avoid an uncomfortable subject.

The council will not let up until I have a mate.

I've avoided the topic for far too long. There really are no excuses left, and the council keeps hammering one specific point. Even if I don't immediately take a mate, I should be actively looking for one.

I can't.

There's only one woman for me... and she's gone.

Pain twists in my chest, churning my guts. I refuse to think about that horrible situation. The cruelty I dealt out simply because I feared my grandfather's power.

Not just him—the entire top council. Loretta, Jones, and Derrik. They've run the pack by strict laws for as long as anyone can remember.

I glare at the manor again, shifting my feet as I clench my fists in my pocket. Even though it does no good to stand here and get mad at Grandfather, yelling at him in my head, saying all the things I always wanted to say—I just can't stop doing it.

Now that he's gone, I'll never get the chance to tell him what I really think of him and his rules.

Some people think the dead can hear our thoughts. I seriously fucking hope so.

Kicking at the dirt, I turn away from the manor and keep walking along the edge of the lake. Even though I hated Grandfather and probably always will, I'm self-aware enough to know that I hate myself more.

I followed his orders. I did everything he told me to do—without question. Until he gave me a command I could not follow...

My training for the alpha position started early, when I was only nine. Grandfather wanted the pack kept within strict guidelines and harsh laws. Anyone who disobeyed him was swiftly dealt with.

In my early teenage years, I hunted for him. I drew blood for him.

I even killed for him.

I have to stop and put my head in my hands. My temples throb as I cling to my skull, trying to shut out the screams of the people I hurt in his name.

I couldn't care about anyone or anything because he would immediately take it from me. "Love is weakness," he said. "Connections are just vulnerabilities for your enemies to exploit. Be a pillar of untouchable strength—it's the only way to keep the pack safe!"

The one and only time I took something for myself, he punished me terribly. Then, when I thought his tyranny couldn't get any worse, he ordered me to kill to redeem myself to him and to the pack, and to claim my position as alpha through blood.

And I couldn't do it.

By then, I'd killed so many at his command, but I finally understood how wrong it was and what it was doing to me—and to the pack. I broke the rules, I defied him, and then I tried to cover my betrayal and find some way to repair the damage I'd done.

I was still terrified of Grandfather, just like everyone else in the pack. I didn't know how long I could keep my secrets, or if it would even be possible to overthrow him.

But before I could even get a chance to plan my next move, he and Grandmother took

a holiday to the far end of Lycan Pass, in the human world, and never returned.

Search parties were sent after them. I was not allowed to search because it was decided that I would immediately become alpha, overtaking my own father for the position. Grandfather had pushed me far harder than him, and the top council members agreed this was the best way forward.

The day I was sworn in by ancient rite was the most terrifying yet exhilarating day of my life. Even if Grandfather was found and brought back, he couldn't speak against me now. If he even tried, he'd be bound by his own law to accept the same punishment he'd brutally inflicted upon others.

But he was never found. Traces of magic were detected, and all our scouts reported that both of them had to be dead.

Their hotel room had been ransacked, personal items stolen, and blood all over the walls.

Our investigators said no one could have survived it, and the body parts of very old and powerful alpha wolves are exceptionally valuable.

One of the reasons we never leave Lycan Pass—the human world has more dangers in it than just ignorant mortals.

Even though it wasn't spoken aloud, it was well-known that Grandfather had a lot of enemies.

The pack accepted his death and my ascension without much protest. But it's been a few years now, and I still feel like very little has changed in the pack, even though I'm exhausted from trying to change it.

As I round the edge of the lake and turn towards the circle of light in the drive, I look up into the windows again.

So many of them are dark. The manor is empty except for a couple of caretakers, and as much as I want to change that, it still feels like Grandfather is stalking the halls, yelling about pack politics, insubordination, and enemies at our gate.

Charity was a foreign language to him. The idea of opening up the manor to use as a community center or shelter would have made him gag.

All the more reason to do it. Wherever he is, I hope he's turning over in his grave.

With one last look at the towering mansion, I turn towards the back doors and slip in through the service entrance.

The front of the house is purposefully imposing, but the kitchen is always warm and cozy.

When I push through the old wooden door into the low light, I see old Susan happily taking cookies out of the oven.

"What are you doing up at this time of night?" I ask. "You should be curled up in bed."

"Ah, young master, my bones don't like to lay still these days," Susan replies. "Too much pain in my joints. I figure if I can't sleep, the best thing to do is be useful."

"Susan, let me help. I can find a healer—"

"We've talked about this, Kit," she says sternly. "I'll take my aging with grace, thank you very much. I've got no problem with growing older, or slipping into the shades,

for that matter.”

I nod, not saying anything. There was a rumor that Grandmother and Grandfather kept themselves young with dark magic, and it was their involvement with sorcerers that eventually got them killed.

“I’ll take a few,” I say, reaching out for a handful of warm cookies. “I’ll never complain about cookies.”

“There you are, then,” she says, holding out the tray. “Eat up as many as you like.”

The sweet, crumbly cookies melt on my tongue, and a tingle rushes through me.

As I was growing up, Susan was my only comfort.

Mother and Father simply told me to obey Grandfather.

Grandmother had little interest in me beyond status and grooming me for power.

It was Susan who patched me up after fights, listened to me cry, and hugged me when I needed it the most.

“Young master, have you thought any more about the council’s directive—”

“Oh, Jesus,” I groan through a mouthful of buttery cookie. “Not you, too.”

“It’s more than time, young man,” Susan insisted.

“The line was skipped to elevate you instead of your father. You need heirs, or your position is not secure.” Her features softened as she looked at me.

“Besides, you seem so lonely, young master. A woman in your life could change things for the better, I promise you.”

I sigh and shake my head, not wanting to answer. Even looking for a woman is pointless. None of them can be the one I want.

I went and screwed that situation as hard as I possibly could. I wish I could explain, tell her the truth somehow. But she’s gone... and I don’t deserve another chance.

“Looking very serious there, young master,” Susan remarks with a smile. “Got a woman in mind, then?”

“No,” I sigh, getting up. “I really don’t. I’m going to the den to rest a bit before I go to bed.”

“Alright, then. But you think about what I said. It could mean a pack war if you don’t solidify your position. Your Grandfather was harsh, but he kept the peace. Don’t forget that.”

I grind my teeth together to stop myself from screaming.

The only thing worse than Grandfather’s cruelty is how the entire pack still tries to justify it and make him out to be some kind of god!

“Yes, Susan,” I say, trying to keep my voice flat. “Goodnight.”

I leave the kitchen with a handful of cookies, my mind reeling at the idea that Susan—and others of her class—looked up to Grandfather and practically worshipped him, even though he treated all of them like dirt.

Service class—completely disposable to him. He literally didn’t give a fuck about

them, and most of them didn't care!

As I settle into my favorite chair in the den, I shove another cookie into my mouth and realize that Susan is right.

I've made a lot of changes to the pack since I took control, but I'm nowhere near done.

If a rival overtakes me, all my good work could be undone, and the pack would return to its militant, bloodthirsty ways.

I have to find a mate. I have to prove to the pack I'm serious about it. Otherwise, this could get messy.

While I work my way through the cookies, I go over my options. I can't stop thinking about Galen and how happy he is with Clara.

Maybe I should try this... Potter's service? Is that right?

I pull out my phone and search "brides for hire." It seems so ridiculous, I expect to get completely bogus results. But to my surprise, the first link is "Porter's Brides for Hire!"

Our phones really are listening to us.

I tap the link and end up on a site with a big pink button at the bottom. The chatbot asks me a few questions, asks for my payment information, and then goes to a loading screen.

What the fuck am I doing? Am I actually signing up for this shit?

Thrills of panic tease the edges of my guts, making my hair stand on end. I don't want to meet a woman—just any woman—but I don't want to go another day without a partner, either.

I have to maintain my power. It's the only way to keep the pack safe.

The loading screen keeps spinning, and I start to relax out of sheer boredom.

Maybe there are no matches.

That would certainly make things easier, at least for now. I could tell the council I made an attempt, and it would buy me a few weeks before they started clamoring about it again.

My phone blinks and makes a tiny sound.

“Hi, Kit! Sorry to keep you waiting. Thank you for contacting us.”

My nerves slam into me again, almost taking my breath straight out of my lungs. I stare at the screen as if the phone has come to life and might be ready to attack me.

“It just so happens we have a potential match for you. Would you be interested in pursuing this?”

My blood rushes to my head, making my temples pound.

Come on, man. This is what you came for.

“Sure,” I reply.

“Excellent! Can you attend a meeting at Gryphon Eyrie tomorrow?”

Gryphon Eyrie is to the south of Cyan Lock. It's a pretty little town under Vulture Peak and Gyr Falcon Lake. The trip isn't difficult, and it won't take me long to get there.

So why am I resisting?

Stupid question... I know why.

I stare at the screen for a full minute, frozen by indecision. The last thing I want to do is meet some random woman, but going through one more day of the current situation is just unacceptable.

My finger hovers over the screen. I'm close to opting out until a clear image materializes in my mind.

It's Galen, hoisting his son up onto his shoulders while Clara wraps her arms around his waist and kisses him.

All of them wear huge, happy smiles. Along with the beautiful memory comes the pang of jealousy I still can't shake.

Maybe this Iris Porter can do the same for me.

Before my hope can fade, I quickly tap the screen.

"Send me the details. I'll be there."

"Wonderful! See you there, Kit."

As I close my phone and put it back in my pocket, dread rises, swallowing my optimism.

What have I done?

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

The harsh glint of the sun hurts my eyes, even through my dark-tinted glasses. I turn my eyes downward and try not to wince.

Anxiety piled on top of a hangover on the eve of a blind date. How could this get any worse?

“Are you alright, dear? Can I get you something?” Iris asks brightly.

“No, thank you,” I mutter, taking a sip of incredibly strong coffee. When I arrived at the park, she was sitting at a picnic table waiting for me with a tall cup of straight black, super strong, sweet coffee.

Did she somehow know I take my coffee black and bitter as hell, or did she instinctively provide a tried-and-true hangover remedy?

Either way, it’s a bit creepy.

Watching Iris shuffle papers in front of me while she swipes on a small tablet, I have to admit she doesn’t look creepy.

She looks sweet, elegant, and extremely trustworthy.

Her shimmering white suit flickers with hints of pastel pink and blue, subtly announcing that it’s made of extremely expensive silk.

The cut is stylish and unique, fitted to her tall, curvy shape.

With her long blond hair pulled up into a complicated knot and her light, perfectly applied makeup, she's the absolute picture of professionalism. Not a single detail is out of place.

Maybe that's what's giving me the vibe. She's just too perfect to be real.

Iris looks up from her paperwork and smiles warmly at me. "Are you sure you're okay? I can find you some aspirin or—"

"No, thank you, it's fine," I mutter. "I just want to get this meeting over and done with. How much longer?"

"He's on his way, dear. Should be any minute now."

"And I can still change my mind, right? If I don't like the vibes, I can opt out?"

"Of course!" Iris smiles again. "There's no pressure at all, and you can keep your initial payment even if you don't go ahead with the contract. I just think that you should give serious thought to moving forward, considering your circumstances."

I glare at her, aware that she probably can't see my eyes through the dark glasses, but unable to stop myself.

"What do you mean by circumstances?" I mutter, taking another sip of coffee. I never mentioned I was on the run from my demonic father and his psychotic second.

"Just that you are low on money, with no place to stay," Iris chirps. "This could be your last chance to turn things around."

When she looks up at me, her face is serious, and her eyes are a little hard. She seems to gaze right through my dark glasses, fixing me with an intense glare.

“What do you mean?” I whisper.

“True love doesn’t come along every day,” she answers, her voice soft. “Sometimes, it needs a little push.”

“What?”

“I think he’s arrived,” Iris says, her chirpy, professional manner returning in a flash. “Head over to the fountain to meet with him, and I’ll send the digital contracts to you. If you decide to go ahead, use a digital signature and flick it back to me. Or, delete the file and the app to decline.”

“Okay,” I answer, standing up slowly. “See you in a bit.”

As I turn away from the table, I realize I don’t want to leave the relative safety of the picnic area. Iris is weird, and she seems to know way too much about me for someone I’ve only just met. But her presence is certainly preferable to that of a random guy I’m supposed to immediately marry.

What if he’s a fucking jerk? Really, what am I going to do then? Am I going to run into the wilderness alone?

Vivid thoughts of furious blizzards, icy winds, and cutting shards of frost flood my mind. I don’t have much chance of surviving out there, even as a wolf.

I have to do this. If he’s better than Vince, even slightly, then I’ve got to say yes.

I stop by the fountain, sitting on the little stone wall around the edge.

The central statue depicts a school of fish leaping upward with water spraying from their mouths and cascading back down into the pond.

The trickling water soothes me, and as I take a deep breath and let it out, I feel a flicker of hope deep inside.

Maybe he's amazing. The man of my dreams. You never know!

Suddenly, a painful prickling races up my spine, sending chills of goosebumps across my skin. It's like getting a nasty electric shock, and I jump so high I nearly fall off the bench. I look around desperately, trying to figure out what affected me so badly.

Lucky that I finished the coffee and threw away the cup already—otherwise, I'd be wearing it right now!

I glance down at my tattered T-shirt and jeans with some amusement. These were the most decent clothes I could find. They're so old and worn, coffee stains could be an improvement.

I hold in a giggle when I think of how desperate this bachelor must be to be showing up like this to claim a bride he's never even met.

He'll probably change his mind the second he sees me, and all this anxiety will be for nothing.

The prickly feeling of being watched is getting stronger, and my instincts are screaming at me. I look around furtively, wondering if it's Father or Vince.

I have to be ready to run, just in case.

Then I see a tall, broad-shouldered man emerge from the trees at the edge of the park. The shape is familiar to me, and my heart speeds up, hammering into my throat and making me light-headed.

It's not... it can't be!

But it is!

He's walking purposefully towards me, his bright blue eyes locked onto me like lasers. With every step, he increases his pace, as if he's afraid I'm going to run away.

I am...

I can't take this—not this!

“Lexa?” The word emerges from his lips, soft and questioning.

I don't blame him for not recognizing me. I look very different than the last time he saw me.

But he hasn't changed at all...

“Kit,” I answer, hardly able to force the word through my throat.

I stand up, glaring at him as he stops in front of me. I try to focus on his eyes and not get distracted by the rest of him, but I can't stop my gaze from sliding down as I devour the details I cemented in my memory so many years ago.

Broad, muscular shoulders, bulging arms, beautiful, long-fingered hands. Thick thighs and tight butt. And his face... oh my God, his face. Eyes like tropical pools, sculpted lips, and cheekbones that could cut diamonds.

“Lexa,” he says again, shaking his head a little. “What are you doing here?”

“I'm here for a matchmaking thing,” I answer tersely. “It's none of your business,

really. What are you doing here?”

“Porter’s?” he asks. “Porter’s brides for hire?”

A sick feeling that has nothing to do with my hangover rises in my guts. I almost take a step back, but then I remember the fountain just in time.

Almost ended up on my ass in the fucking pond. Like I need this shit to get any worse!

“There has to be a mistake,” I say firmly. “Did you see Iris?”

“Yeah,” Kit replies. “She was at a picnic table, over there. She told me to go to the fountain to meet my match.”

“Surely, she didn’t mean me,” I answer, looking around in desperation. To my dismay, the area is empty except for a couple of kids.

“There has to be a mistake,” I murmur.

“Come on, Lexa. How many people do you think booked with the agency for today? It has to be us.”

“I’m not standing for this!” I state. “I’m talking to Iris about this right now!”

I set off towards the trees, with Kit close behind. When I get to the tables, they’re all empty. Iris is nowhere to be seen.

“Fuck!” I cry, stomping my foot with frustration. “She told me she’d stick around so we could talk about it.”

“She told me the same thing,” Kit mutters. “Hold up.”

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and flicks it open.

“She texted me the contract,” he says. “It’s waiting for a digital signature.”

“What?” I almost scream. “How can she do this?”

Kit shrugs. “It’s been filled out with our names. It’s not a mistake, Lexa.”

“But—” Protests rise in my chest, getting caught in my throat. I want to scream at him, hammer my fists against his wide, strong chest. But I also want to throw my arms around him, stretch up on my tiptoes, and touch those gorgeous lips with mine.

I thought I’d never see him again.

“So, shall we sign?” he asks me with a cheeky grin.

How I used to love that grin.

It crinkles his eyes a little and turns up the edges of his mouth, making him look even cuter than usual. He’s practically glowing with amusement, and the urge to give in to it and laugh with him is almost overpowering.

No, Lexa! Remember what that humor is like when it’s turned on you.

I fold my arms across my chest and take a few steps back. He watches me, his cheeky smile still on his face, but the humor drains out of his gaze.

He’s not sure. Good. He damn well shouldn’t be!

“I don’t see how this can work,” I say. “You know exactly how things are between us. We can’t sign the contract.”

“I don’t think there’s another match for either of us,” Kit says with some concern. “Forgive me for saying so, Lexa, but you look a little rough. I’m more than happy to help. Why don’t we just sign on now, and if it doesn’t work out, we can get a divorce later.”

A harsh laugh croaks out of me. “That sounds like a complicated solution to a problem that doesn’t even need to happen.”

Kit shrugs. “And how does it compare to the problems that brought you here?”

My mouth snaps shut as I glare at him again.

I hate this, I hate this!

But... I really have no choice.

Painful memories grip my heart, choking the life out of me. My mother’s death, my father kidnapping me to haul me back to Grace’s Fall... and Kit dumping me.

Dumping me right after we made love. After he said I was all he wanted, and he’d take care of me forever.

A low growl rises in my throat, and I clench my fists to stop myself from slapping him.

“Lexa?”

“Shut up,” I mutter, so low that he probably can’t hear.

“I am happy to see you again,” Kit says almost in a whisper.

I jerk my eyes over to him, examining him closely for lies. All I can see is his wide, innocent eyes and an extremely kissable mouth. Even though part of me is recoiling in fear, another part of me is waking up with breathless, fevered passion.

“Okay,” I answer, my voice croaking as I force the words out. “Let’s sign. As much as I hate to admit it, I am low on options right now, and I need this deal. It doesn’t mean I’m sticking with it, though.”

“Of course,” Kit says, flicking his thumb across his phone screen. “I have no expectations. It is very good to see you, Lexa.”

I swipe to the last page of the contract, looking up at Kit as I leave my digital signature. He looks sincere, and my resolve weakens as I look into his big, beautiful eyes.

What the hell am I doing?

His phone vibrates and pings, then mine does, too. A text message appears, alerting us that the files have been submitted and stored.

“Congratulations!” Iris’s message appears immediately after. “I wish both of you the very best in this union. I’ll be in touch over the coming weeks, but I’m confident that this is a strong match that will meet both your needs! Good luck, you two.”

I stare at my phone, feeling angry enough to hurl it to the ground. Kit holds out a hand to me, and I glare at him.

“Ready to go?” he asks, wiggling his fingers.

“No,” I snap, deliberately turning away from his hand. “But let’s head off, anyway.”

“Okay,” Kit says, following behind me towards the main parking lot. I keep my eyes front and my stride steady, trying desperately to hide the pain growing inside me.

Every horrible thing that has happened to me over the past few years can be traced back to Kit and that wonderful night we shared together.

If he hadn’t abandoned me, maybe none of this would have happened.

My eyes sting, and I clench my fists to push the pain away. When Kit catches up and tries to give me a warm smile, I just glare back, trying as hard as I can to hide my sorrow. He looks away, and I see a dark, haunted look in his eyes.

Good. He feels bad about this on some level. I’ve gone way past needing closure, but I have to admit, it might be good to hear him try to explain what he did to me.

As we approach the truck, I see Kit struggle to find words to say, then completely give up and look at the ground as he opens the door.

I don’t know if I prefer him apologizing or being mute with guilt. But either way, it’s going to be a long ride back to Cyan Lock.

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The drive back to Cyan Lock is pure torture.

For so long now, all I've wanted is to explain myself to her. Now she's right in front of me, and I can't think of a single fucking word to say to her.

I know I don't deserve a damn thing from her. Even if I tell her exactly what happened, it doesn't excuse my actions.

But I had no choice!

"So, Lexa, how have you been?" I ask lamely.

Great job, champ! There's a conversation starter.

"Fine," she answers flatly.

"What have you been doing for work?"

"Not much."

I take a deep breath and keep my eyes on the road before I ask my next question.

"Why did you leave town so suddenly, all those years ago?"

She turns away from the window and looks at me, and I take my eyes off the road for a second to look back. Her silvery eyes are glinting in the midday sun, as if diamond chips have appeared in the layers of icy gray.

She's changed so much...

"There was nothing left for me there," she answers, turning back to look out the window again. I feel like there is a lot to unpack behind that sentence, but I also know I don't deserve to hear it.

I made it clear to her I didn't give a fuck what she did. But I never expected her to leave town.

I look away from the road again and let my eyes linger on her.

When I knew her in school, she was slender, almost willowy, and often looked lost in slightly baggy clothes.

Her black hair was long and wavy, falling all the way to her waist in a messy tangle.

She was soft-spoken and shy, barely noticed by most people.

Now her hair is cut in a short, glossy bob that bounces just above her shoulders, and the pure, jet-black strands are highlighted with violent streaks of purple. She seems a little taller than before, and the tight jeans and faded T-shirt are wrapped tightly around gorgeous curves.

I thought she was hot before, but this new version of Lexa is captivating me even more.

And I think I even like the spicy attitude.

I want to ask her about how much she's changed, but I can't figure out how to do it without openly admitting I'm admiring her body. So I keep my mouth shut.

As we travel along Lycan Pass to Cyan Lock, I look over at her as often as I can. She's always staring out the window, not even paying attention to me, so I end up watching her with intense focus.

I was fucking obsessed with her in high school. I couldn't admit it then, but I was. Now she's ten times as hot... and we're married!

I glance back at the road, then shift my eyes straight back to Lexa. To my shock, she's staring right at me. I jump so hard, I jerk the wheel and almost crash into a tree, correcting hard to get us back onto the Pass.

Even though Lexa is holding on to the grab bar, she's laughing softly. "Don't remember you being the nervous type, Kit," she mutters. "You were always so confident and perfect at everything you did. I never thought I'd see you fumble."

"It's not every day I get matched with my ex," I retort, staring at the road so I don't get distracted again.

"Oh?" she says. "You can't be referring to me. How can I be your ex when we never even dated?"

It feels like all the air in the cabin has been sucked out. I feel dizzy for a few seconds as I absorb those words.

I'm such an asshole.

Winding down the window, I take deep breaths of fresh mountain air to clear my head. My concentration improves, but my mood doesn't.

How can I explain everything to her?

My mind flips back to that night so many years ago. It was an end-of-school party, and everyone was there. All of us had graduated, and I was enjoying some rare time to myself away from Grandfather and his incessant demands.

I felt free, like there was hope in the world. As if maybe, just maybe, I could get away from him and his expectations of me.

I spent the entire night being my usual loud, abrasive self. Grandfather had instilled a certain arrogance in me and ordered me to play it up at all times. I was supposed to inspire fear in the pack, remind the others constantly that they were lower than me.

I cut people off while they were talking, shoved them out of the way, and took liberties with personal items. If I could think of a new way to be a jerk, I did it. And Grandfather always praised me for it.

Very late that night, I saw Lexa sitting with a few people out by the bonfire.

I'd been shocked to see her still at the party because she usually avoided social situations entirely.

The fact that she was there at all was odd, but seeing her still there so late at night was like a gift from the gods.

I went over to the small crowd, where I singled her out and told her to take a walk with me. I didn't ask, leaving no room for negotiation. I just grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet, announcing to everyone in earshot that Lexa was coming with me.

I remember her bright smile, the flickers of excitement in her pale eyes. She was glowing under my attention, and all I could feel was satisfaction.

With a shudder, I remember my thoughts at the time: Of course she fucking wants me. Everybody wants me. She should be grateful that I'm giving her this kind of attention.

The old memories, the words that used to come out of my mouth, flood through my brain, making me sick with guilt.

I'm such a fucking jerk!

I seduced Lexa out there, in one of the empty cabins at the campground. I took her, ravished her, even though she was so hesitant and withdrawn at first. I felt how hot she was for me, and I broke down her defenses and devoured her innocence and purity.

When I woke up in the morning, I realized what I'd done. I looked at her laid out on the mattress, her long waves of black hair scattered across the pillows like the clouds before a storm, her beautiful eyes still closed to the bright new day.

I wanted to take her in my arms and tell her she was mine, that I'd never let her go. I'd never wanted to possess anything as badly as her. I wanted to own her—every inch of her.

I wanted to keep her... forever.

But as I sat there watching her, cold waves of fear rolled through me. I knew exactly what Grandfather would say—that I couldn't have any kind of relationship with gutter trash that fled to Cyan Lock because they'd been thrown out of their own pack.

Oh, he'd be fine with me fucking her. That's definitely something his version of an alpha would do. But keep her? Or even marry her? No fucking way.

So I ran. I left her there alone.

I did what I had to do.

The last thing I expected was for her to track me down and confront me at my parents' house, where my family and I—including Grandfather—were having dinner to celebrate my graduation.

Someone must have told Lexa I was there.

She just showed up on the doorstep with a shy smile on her face and a bright, hopeful look in her eyes.

I knew right then that I was going to have to crush her. So I did. Standing right on the front stoop, in front of my family and friends, I laughed in her face.

I saw her crumbling with every word. I knew I was destroying her, and I hated myself for it, but deep inside, part of me screamed with defiance and determination.

I will make this right , I thought in the present . I promise you, Lexa. Once the old man isn't looking over my shoulder anymore, I can tell you how I really feel—and give the pack what it really needs.

She ran away crying, and I turned my back, slamming the door on the train wreck I'd just made. Grandfather laughed and congratulated me, and the family dinner went on as if we had just evicted a stray dog.

A few days later, Grandfather called me to his office. I could tell from his expression that he had a tough mission for me, one of the ones I hated but pretended to like.

I tortured people for him. I killed people for him. And I let him think I liked it.

Grandfather was a firm believer in final solutions.

He would occasionally issue a verbal warning or a light beating, but mostly, he went straight to death.

Any random wolf I found out on patrol was brutally killed, no matter who they were or what they were doing.

Grandfather said if they were on the boundary, we had to make an example of them.

And he'd said he regretted not being able to do it himself. That he was too old for patrols or hands-on discipline, and that it did me good to step up and learn to do what was necessary.

On that horrible night, he called me to his office and told me to kill both Lexa and her mother.

My struggle in that moment was one of the most painful moments of my life.

If I showed any resistance to the idea, Grandfather would take it out on me—either directly, with torture for punishment, or against others in the family he knew I cared about.

He had his ways of forcing obedience, and he only got more creative as he got older.

Keeping my stance casual, I lightly commented that the two of them were of such little consequence, they weren't worth the effort. Grandfather agreed, but said he'd ultimately decided they were a liability and wouldn't tolerate their presence in the pack any longer.

If I argued with him, then he would know that I truly cared about Lexa. It would only

give him ammunition, and I knew he already had his suspicions.

The only thing I could do was nod in agreement.

Grandfather then revealed to me that he was taking Grandmother to the human world for a week, and he expected the job to be done by the time he got back.

After we spoke, I went to find Lexa, explain everything, and tell her to get out of Cyan Lock. To run and never look back.

And maybe, go with her...

My world was slowly collapsing. I couldn't obey Grandfather anymore, but I knew what he would do if I defied him.

No matter where we ran, he would most likely catch us, but I couldn't think of another solution that would keep Lexa safe.

Even though I didn't want to abandon my family or my pack, I stupidly thought they might be safer if I left.

When I went looking for Lexa, I found her house empty. It looked like it had been broken into, and I could only detect a very faint trail of her scent—a scent I followed into the woods.

Not far beyond our boundary, I found the body of Laura, Lexa's mother.

There was no sign of Lexa, and almost no trail to follow.

It looked like the poor woman had gone down in a terrible fight and had been there for some time.

I took her body back to town, hoping to satisfy Grandfather that the job had been completed.

But I didn't have to, because he never returned. After news of his death was announced, I became alpha. After that, I answered to no one. Unless you counted the council.

I tried to find Lexa for the first two years.

Trackers and investigators were sent out throughout Lycan Pass as well as the human world, but I found no leads to her location or even her previous pack.

Her mother had kept their past a secret, and even though she must have done it for their safety, it had been the biggest barrier between me and finding Lexa.

And all I wanted was to keep her safe...

"Lexa," I say softly as we crest the last hill. The Pass turns sharply down towards the town, and I can see the lake as a perfect smudge of blue against the hills.

"What?" she answers, her tone flat and hard. All the words I want to say get stuck in my throat, and I swallow them down.

I have so much to say, but how can I ever explain? She'll think I killed her mother.

"We're almost there," I say weakly.

She nods. "Yeah. There's the lake. Are we going to your estate?"

"No, we'll have to go into town first. To see the council."

“What?” Lexa asks, her tone pained. “Why?”

“For the ceremony,” I answer. “The binding ceremony?”

“What?” she gasps. “Now?”

“Yes,” I reply with some regret. “Now.”

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When Kit says we are going straight to the meeting hall for the ceremony, my gut drops as if it's suddenly filled with cold rocks. The full feeling expands up into my throat until I feel like I'm going to be sick.

I try to hide my stress by staring out the window, but all I see are familiar side streets and shops, places I was afraid to go when I lived here. Even though we lived in this town for years, my mother never felt like she belonged.

But did I?

Yes, there were times when I felt completely at home here.

My best friends from school, Misha and Kate, were always there for me, no matter what happened.

I was only just old enough for school when my mother brought me here, and I could have been intimidated by the atmosphere if we hadn't been running from something far worse.

The beatings and abuse that Momo endured as I was growing up are blurry in my memory, locked away beyond a fortified wall. It wasn't until my father came to get his wife back and claim his child that those horrific memories came back.

Kit asked why I left town. Does he really not know?

I wanted to run away after what he did to me, that's for sure. I was home alone that evening, contemplating doing just that, when Father and a few of his goons stormed

into the house and dragged me into the woods.

Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, Father showed me my mother's body. She had collapsed in the snow and had obviously been violently killed. I assumed Father or one of his top circle did it, even though they never boasted about it.

The shock certainly had the desired effect. The fight went out of me, and the men dragged me back to Grace's Fall, where I submitted to Father's cruelty for the next few years.

Kit turns the truck onto the main street, heading for the church and meeting hall at the end of the road. My guts twist even more fiercely, and I wrap my arms around myself as I try to gather my courage.

"Are you okay?" Kit asks as he pulls into the parking lot.

"Peachy," I mutter. "I'm about to walk into a church full of people who hate me and marry the guy who dumped me. It might be the greatest moment of my life."

My mind does a quick flick over my memories to put the words into context. Shock floods into my chest as I realize, by comparison, this day actually is one of the best I've ever had.

Just minor discomfort instead of outright abuse and threats of murder.

Wow. My choices are top-tier.

"Lexa, we both signed the contract." There's a hard note in Kit's voice I really don't need to hear.

“Let’s get this over with!” I snap, jumping out of the truck. I stride up the wide steps defiantly, my back straight and my head high. Even though I’m still wearing my threadbare, dirt-smudged jeans and sweater, I’m taking on this challenge as if I’m decked out like a queen.

I don’t wait for Kit, and I can hear him hurrying behind me as he tries to keep up. I reach the heavy double doors and give them a shove, watching all the people in the church turn to look at me all at once.

Decent crowd. They must have all crawled out from under their rocks to witness the return of the outcast.

The pews have been pushed aside to create a space right in front of the altar where the crowd is gathered. I don’t recognize all the faces, but the only important ones are the pack elders and Kit’s parents.

Wait... where’s the old man?

Kit’s grandfather, Leopold, was a brutal dictator. Even though Kit came off as a massive jerk in high school, I could tell a lot of it came from how his grandfather was raising him. My senses are highly tuned to that sort of thing after my own troubled upbringing.

I could tell that Kit was suffering, and it was obvious no one could ever please Leopold. I wonder why the old man isn’t here, though. Did he finally die?

That means Kit wasn’t just appointed alpha under his grandfather’s rule, but that he has complete control over the pack now. My heart lifts a little as a small breath of hope blooms in my chest.

As I approach the altar, that little spark of hope splutters and almost dies. On one side

of the aisle, Kit's parents, Heather and Josh, are watching us approach, and on the other side, the top elders—Loretta, Derrik, and Jones—do the same.

“Kit,” Josh says, looking over my shoulder to make eye contact with his son. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“I’ve brought my mate, just as you asked,” Kit answers, coming up beside me and taking my hand. “We’ve been traveling a bit, so let’s get this over and done with so we can go home and rest.”

“Where did you find her?” his mother asks, narrowing her eyes at me. She steps forward and extends an elegant hand. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure, miss?”

She doesn’t recognize me!

“Lexa Close,” I say firmly. I grab her soft hand in my hard, calloused palm and give her a firm squeeze. Her eyes widen as she looks me up and down, and I can practically hear the dots connecting.

“I’d like to second Heather’s question,” Derrik says, stepping up on the platform around the altar. “You can’t just bring in some random person to lead the pack.”

“It was under the advice of Iris Porter,” Kit answers. “She’s well-known for matching shifters and creating effective, long-lasting partnerships that benefit councils as well as communities within the immediate pack and are good for diplomacy between territories.”

Damn, Kit. You’re so romantic. I’m going to swoon right here.

“I’ve heard of her,” Jones says. “She does have a talent for negotiating very successful marriages. She takes her work very seriously, and considers the needs of

the entire pack when she makes a match.”

“I’ve heard the same,” Loretta says, her voice curt. “That’s the only reason I’ll entertain... this.”

She stops talking abruptly, and I’m grateful that she doesn’t finish the thought. Kit takes my hand and moves me closer to the altar. Before I know it, Derrik is speaking the ritual words, both of us have answered, and the pack declares our union complete.

When Derrik says, “You may kiss the bride,” I tense up with indignation, but Kit just leans over and briefly kisses my cheek.

Okay. I didn’t really want to kiss him, but I have to admit I’m a little disappointed.

The council members all introduce themselves to me, but I know I’ll have trouble remembering their names. I’m even more exhausted than I was the day before. I can’t even really remember how long I’ve been on the run for.

Miles of hard running in wild country, then the shock of meeting Kit, the long travel back to Cyan Lock, then a damned shotgun wedding. I need a hot bath, a decent meal, and a big, soft bed.

I follow Kit out of the church back to his truck, questions still circling lazily in my mind. There are things that don’t add up and details I’m curious about, but I put them all aside to investigate later.

So long as the old man isn’t going to come popping out of the trees at me, I don’t care where he is.

I’m surprised when Kit pulls into the wide driveway of a luxurious townhouse not far from the church.

“We aren’t going to your family estate?” I ask.

“No, I don’t stay out there much,” he answers. “I like to be right in the heart of things, and the estate is so distant from town.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Does your grandfather still live out there?”

“He’s dead,” Kit answers tersely.

Well, that answers that.

I follow Kit inside, trying to figure out something to say to fill the awkward silence. I fail miserably, and the space between us gets bigger as it fills up with all the things we don’t say.

Kit leads me up the little spiral stairs to the second floor. The place is compact but still roomy, and beautifully decorated.

Like a fancy hotel suite. Not that I’ve ever seen one.

“Well, here’s the bedroom,” Kit announces, stopping in the doorway and gesturing to the bed. “I’m guessing you’ll want to get some sleep.”

“The bedroom?” I ask carefully. “Do you mean ‘my’ room?”

Kit frowns. “There’s only one.”

“One what?”

“Bedroom,” Kit snaps, getting frustrated.

I take a slow step back, looking between Kit's face and the huge, soft bed behind him. It looks like all kinds of heaven, a thick forest green duvet draping invitingly over the edges and mountains of soft pillows. It's so massive that it almost covers the whole room.

All I want to do is lay down—but with Kit next to me?

The images are in my head before I can stop them. Even though the bed is huge, I see him rolling towards me. I can feel his hands stroking my skin and the heat rising from his body as I press myself up against his chest.

"Is this going to be a problem?" Kit asks a little indignantly.

"It sure is," I fire back. "I never agreed to share a bed with you."

"No, you just promised to be my wife," Kit answers, exasperated. "You didn't think that would require some kind of intimacy?"

"You're about to get intimate with my foot—right up your ass. I'm not sleeping with you."

Kit puts his hands on his hips and stares me down, but he looks more frustrated than hostile.

"Lexa, we signed the contract. If you didn't want to be partnered with me, you had your chance to back out.

I'll do what I can to make you feel comfortable in my home, but I'm not being exiled to the couch—and I won't tolerate my wife sleeping out there, either.

It's best if we just get used to the new arrangement. "

I stare at him, trying to hold on to my anger even as it fades.

Why does he have to make so much sense?

“Okay,” I mutter. “I see your point, but nothing is going to happen, do you understand me?”

“Nothing?” Kit gives me a little wink.

“I mean it!” I hiss, his cockiness triggering a painful memory. “Don’t even think about touching me, or I won’t be camping out on the couch—I’ll go and sleep on the fucking roof!”

“Jesus, okay,” Kit backs off, shaking his head. “I got it. No touching.”

I glare at him for a few seconds, feeling drawn to him and fighting it with every fiber of my being.

“I’m going to take a hot bath,” I announce, backing away from him. “And I’m locking the door.”

“As you wish,” Kit answers, giving a little bow. “I’ll put together something to eat so you can relax right after.”

I don’t answer, I just turn and run for the bathroom. When I get there, I slam the door and lock it, trembling with something a lot like fear.

As if these physical barriers aren’t enough to keep him out...

I start the water running, and after a quick search through the cupboards, I realize Kit barely has soap and shampoo, let alone bubbles or oils.

Still, this is ten times more luxury than I'm used to. I've been taking cold baths for years. Father's cabin didn't even have running water.

I slip into the hot water, feeling all my small cuts and bruises stinging. Slowly, my muscles relax, and I lean my head back against the edge of the tub, letting myself stretch out.

Memories begin to flicker through my mind, and I let them come. I see Kit striding down the hall at school, his big, confident grin and aggressive swagger. He carried such a presence with him, it scared off people twice his age.

Behind it all, buried in those beautiful blue eyes, I saw the pain. A lost little boy, a tortured soul.

My breath catches in my chest, and I close my eyes as a tear runs down my cheek.

The night of the big after-school party, I felt truly free. Mom had been acting strangely for about a week, but I was trying not to think about it. All I wanted to do was celebrate my graduation and look ahead to a bright future.

I was thinking about traveling through the villages of Lycan Pass for sure, but maybe even beyond. My friend Kate was excitedly talking about her plans to visit major cities throughout the country, and it sounded like a great idea to me.

I drank too much. I let my guard down and stayed out too late. When I looked over the bonfire to see Kit's blue eyes burning in the dark, like cut sapphires shimmering under golden light, I was captivated.

No... captured.

With my eyes still closed, I run my hands down my thighs, digging my nails in a

little. Now that I've opened the door, the memories crash through my mind and press themselves into my skin.

The way his hard hands gripped me, roughly tugging off my clothes... it frightened me but thrilled me as well. I would have struggled and resisted if he hadn't gently taken my face in his hands and looked deep into my eyes.

There. This is the real Kit. Under all the armor, this is him. Sweet, caring, vulnerable.

"You have enchanted me, Lexa. I can't stop thinking about you—it's driving me crazy. I've never had the guts to talk to you before, but I have to make my move now. It's my last chance."

He kissed me so deeply that I could feel it in my core. My blood sang, my nipples hardened to the point of pain, and a fierce, throbbing ache started between my legs.

"Give yourself to me, Lexa. Let me love you. It's you and me, forever. I promise. Trust me. I won't hurt you."

A soft moan slips through my lips as I remember how I melted in his hands. How I writhed in his grip, moaning and screaming as he devoured me. Even though all of these memories are soaked in the pain of his betrayal, the next day, I can't deny the urges reawakening in my body.

With a tear still trickling down my cheek, I bite my lip and run my hand down my thigh, searching for that hot, aching point between my legs.

Shutting off all thoughts of rejection and pain, I relive that moment when all I needed was the pleasure of him inside me and the earth-shattering force of my release.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

I listen to the dull roar of the water filling the bathtub, not even bothering to try and stop myself from thinking about Lexa. Being trapped in the car with her was bad enough—immersed in her scent, her body just inches away from mine. But then, standing in front of the altar, holding her hand...

Kissing her.

That was one of the hardest moments of my life. The urge to grab her shoulders, yank her against me, and press my lips to hers was overwhelming. My fantasy was so strong, I could taste her, feel the wet heat of her lips as I explored her mouth with my tongue.

When I lightly pecked her cheek and stepped back from her, the effort of holding myself back literally made me dizzy. Luckily, my townhouse is close to the church, so I didn't have to keep my shit together for long.

Except now she's in my bathroom. Naked.

A low groan echoes in my throat as I close my eyes and imagine her stripping off her clothes.

Her skin is still pale as ice, just like I remember, but her thighs are shapely, and her ass is ripe and firm.

The narrow curves of her waist accentuate the swells of her hips, and her breasts are big and round, bouncing a little when she walks.

She was always hot. But in high school, she was girl-pretty, delicate, not quite grown up. Now, she's not just pretty—she's beautiful, stunning. A woman, not a girl.

The sound of the water stops, and my eyes snap open. That can only mean one thing.

She's getting in the tub.

My mind lingers over images of her stepping over the high edge and slowly sinking into the water. I can see her hands, slick with soap, lathering up white foam across her breasts, sliding a hand across her belly, delving between her legs.

My eyes have closed again, and my mouth has fallen open slightly as I try to draw in as much of her scent as I can from this distance. Along with the tang of soap, I can detect her sweet, rich scent, carried on drifting waves of hot steam as they waft through under the bathroom door.

My fantasies are suddenly shoved aside as I remember the first time I really got to breathe in her scent. I had been tortured by it every day in school, but I'd never gotten close enough to her to really take it in.

I had to be so careful. I could never show attachment to anyone or anything. It would only draw Grandfather's wrath.

That night in the cabin, when I took her, was the first time I truly knew her power over me. I remember the way her scent engulfed me as I ripped her pants off. How I paused, perfectly still, and tilted my head with my eyes closed and breathed her scent in, letting it fill me.

Then I pounced on her. I plunged my tongue into her pussy and ate her out like a starving man.

I was starving. I had kept my need for her buried under so many layers of control that even I didn't realize the huge, gaping maw of need that yearned within me.

I tried to quench my thirst inside her, drinking up all her sweet juice, making her scream and writhe in my hands, feasting on her soul as well as her body.

Almost panting, I struggle to control myself. I can hear low splashes down the hall, and I'm tortured by images of what she might be doing.

Probably washing her armpits while I'm here fantasizing about her playing with herself.

All of these thoughts come with a heavy dose of pain. I wish I could forget about it, wash it away somehow, but I can't. My wonderful moments with Lexa are tainted, forever poisoned by my own stupidity.

When I woke and the sky was light, I panicked. Grandfather wouldn't mind me partying or staying out late, especially for graduation, but he still expected me to return for my usual duties.

There was also the extreme danger of someone seeing who I was with and reporting back to him.

The idea of him finding out about me being with Lexa filled me with frantic urgency, so I threw my clothes on and bolted, barely even pausing to enjoy the sight of her spread out on the bed, her lips curved in a small smile of pleasure.

Then she showed up at my house like I'd made some kind of mistake, and she was ready to forgive me for it.

Now the groan that shakes my chest is one of pure pain, not lust. The memories of me

laughing in her face are far more vivid than those of her in my arms.

I don't deserve the pleasure of the good memories. Not after what I did.

It seems so obvious now that I could have walked out of the house, right then and there. I could have turned my back on my grandfather and chosen Lexa.

Would he have sent a death squad after us? Would he really have done that to me?

Sighing, I get up from the bed and head downstairs. Grandfather's beatings when I was a child were pretty brutal. I learned early on that strict obedience—and a certain amount of enthusiasm for his cruelty—were the only ways to avoid his punishments.

It's over now. All over. I don't know how to explain this to her or how to apologize, but I'm grateful that I have the chance now.

In the kitchen, I make a big cup of sweet, rich cocoa and put together a plate of cookies and fancy chocolates.

I lived for so many years thinking I'd lost her... and even though I tried so hard to find her, I was afraid to face her.

How could I possibly explain to Lexa that I did what I did because the fear of my grandfather was stronger than my desire for her?

It would have meant explaining everything about him, the inner workings of the top council.

And after she heard about all the other horrible things I'd ever done, there was a good chance she wouldn't even want me.

Then her mother...

I pick up the plate and cup and make my way slowly up the stairs. There is no possible way I can approach this subject. I asked her why she left town as delicately as I could, fishing to find out what she knows, or suspects.

Did she leave, or was she taken? The house was untidy—not exactly wrecked, though. What happened first—her mother’s death or the decision to leave? And where has she been all this time?

I wish I could just ask my questions straight out, but I’m too afraid. If I admit that I found her mother’s body and brought her back to town, she might think I had something to do with it.

She can’t possibly know my grandfather had just placed a kill order on them... and that I was tasked to carry it out!

Fear ripples through me, making itchy goosebumps rise up across my shoulders. As I come back into the bedroom to put the cocoa and snacks down on the counter next to the bed, I let the feeling run in my blood, thinking of new angles I’d never considered.

What if Grandfather gave the kill order to the rest of his squad? Slade, Bolton, and Wick would have jumped at the chance. Maybe they got there ahead of me, killed poor Laura, and sent Lexa running for her life...

The idea is well within reason, and it truly does scare me. Grandfather took Grandmother out on their mysterious mission pretty much immediately, so I never had a chance to talk about other orders he might have given or find out his plans.

It would have been just like him to bring in his favorite brutes to make sure the job

got done.

There was no point in asking those three goons, either. They were savages who lived outside of town and eagerly obeyed the orders of the elders, especially when it involved murder and torture.

I get undressed slowly, putting on an old, soft robe. My mind is churning, and my body feels tense, as if electricity is dancing across my bones.

How am I ever going to sleep in this state?

Even though I decide to wait up so I can talk to Lexa after she finishes her bath, I end up chickening out and pretending to be asleep when she comes into the room. I hear her faint sound of surprise as she discovers the cocoa and cookies, and her moan of pleasure as she enjoys the snack.

I'll make breakfast for her in the morning. This was a poor excuse for a wedding dinner.

The bed squeaks and bounces a little as she wriggles back, getting more comfortable as she finishes her cocoa. Now all the ugly thoughts have fled, and I'm completely distracted by her rich scent mingling with the cocoa and sweet cookies.

I wonder what it would be like to kiss her with chocolate on my tongue.

I hold in a groan as I imagine the soft candy melting slowly, and the heat of her mouth as I paint her lips with creamy chocolate.

Suddenly, I realize I'm hard as a rock, so lost in my lust that I'm almost writhing under the blanket. Thankfully, Lexa is still sipping her cocoa and eating cookies, her back to me. She seems very relaxed, and I say a brief prayer that she didn't notice me

slipping into sexual rapture.

And I am obsessed. Not a single night has gone by where I didn't think of her, dream of her, beg the universe to bring her back to my arms...

Closing my eyes tightly, I force myself to take slow breaths. My muscles gradually let go, loosening up as I focus on relaxing and try to forget Lexa is sitting less than a foot away, wrapped in nothing but a towel.

A towel! Wait... she has no clothes!

She. Has. No. Clothes.

My chest tightens so much, I can't breathe. All my efforts to relax explode in my face as the desire to reach over and take her almost overpowers me.

Maybe I should be sleeping on the couch!

Lexa slurps a little as she drains the last of the cocoa from the cup, then crumbles the last cookie into her mouth. I put all my effort into staying still, wondering what she's going to do next.

If I had thought of it, I could have found her something to wear.

I decide that if she attempts to put her old clothes back on, I'll admit that I'm not really asleep and get up to find her something to wear. Even if my clothes are too big, I'm sure I can find a sweater or pants that would do for the night.

There is a light thunk as she puts the cup down. When she stands up, my ears follow the sounds so I can hear what she's doing.

I hear a rustle as she pulls the towel off, then tosses it over a chair. Her soft footsteps return to the bed, and the blankets crinkle against the sheets when she pulls them back.

Lexa slips into bed.

Naked.

She's so close to me, I can feel the heat rising from her skin. Her scent is all around me, in my nose and painting the back of my throat. My mouth is watering so bad, I feel like I'm going to start drooling like a rabid dog.

Not far from the truth.

To my surprise, Lexa's breathing settles quickly, and she relaxes and drifts off to sleep. I roll onto my back, carefully not brushing up against her or even looking at her. I keep my eyes stuck to the ceiling, trying to empty my mind so I can rest.

I've never felt so guilty in my whole entire life.

My chest seems to crack with the weight of my betrayal. Lexa doesn't even know how badly I've wronged her. And beneath the explanation of my actions lies the ugly details of finding her mother's body.

And revealing that I know who did it.

And that I could have prevented it.

I close my eyes, letting the wreckage of our past expand in my chest until pain is all I feel. The arousal fades from my body, and I occupy myself with thoughts of redemption.

I don't deserve redemption, that's for sure. If I can just show her how I've changed, convince her that all I want is to make up for what I've done and take care of her... maybe then I can tell her everything.

Even in my exhausted, stressed-out state, I know I'm lying to myself. Even worse, I'm lying to Lexa—and I don't know how to stop.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

The woods are dark, casting shadows so deep that even my wolf's eyes can't see into them. The trees are too close together, reaching out to scratch me and claw at my hair.

My chest is bursting with the need to scream, but I don't dare to make a sound. If I do, they'll catch me.

Who are they?

All of them—Father, Vince, even Kit—don't let them get me!

The ground is so uneven, and the spaces between the trees so small, I can't stretch my legs out to run. Even my wolf won't rise. She just snarls in my blood, a creature desperate to protect me. Frantic to get out, but held back by vengeful forces.

I shove through some more branches, feeling the threat of capture right on my heels. As I try to run, the trees finally part. With a great sigh of relief, I'm finally able to let my adrenaline loose and bolt.

I only make it a couple of steps before I skid to a halt, screaming and scrambling back the way I came. I end up kneeling in the dirt, looking at the sight before me in utter horror.

My mother's body.

She's lying twisted on the soft forest floor as if many of her bones have been broken. Wounds and bruises mar her pale skin, and her clothes are torn.

“Mom?” I whimper, knowing that she will never answer me again.

Suddenly, my hair is grabbed from behind, and I let out a bloodcurdling scream that tears my throat. The pressure on my hair increases as someone yanks my head back to stare down into my face.

Father.

“We tried to reason with her,” he says. “Believe me, I tried. All she had to do was come back with me. We’d pick you up, then return to Grace’s Fall peacefully. As a family.”

Father shakes his head, looking over at my mother’s body, then back at me.

“Even if she needed to be persuaded further and I had to use some more forceful methods to bring her around, I still didn’t want this. But she had to go and fight me. She wasn’t fucking around, either. She meant to kill me.”

I wish she had!

Father shrugs. “It’s regrettable. But at least we found you, and you can get a little closure before we leave. Take a good look. It’s the last you’ll ever see of her.”

“But... what about burying her?” I sputter. “A funeral—”

“She doesn’t deserve one!” Father hisses, yanking on my hair again. “She stays here, in the forest, where the wild animals can take her. I want you to remember this and let it be a lesson to you about escaping! I’ll do the same for you without hesitation. You hear me?”

“Yes,” I moan softly. “I hear you. Please don’t, Father.”

“So long as you’re good, I won’t have to do anything like this,” he mutters. “Like I said, I didn’t want this. I wanted a real family.”

With his grip on my hair, it’s hard to breathe, and with all my crying and screaming, my throat feels shredded. I’m too scared to move, though, in case he decides it’s an attempt to escape and punishes me.

“There you are, old friend,” a new voice speaks jovially from the forest. “What have you got for me?”

No, no... please, God, no!

“Your bride, as promised,” Father says, smiling. “Come and claim her.”

As Vince walks up behind Father, a sick shudder runs through me. It’s so powerful, I almost vomit, but it gets stuck in my throat as Father yanks on my hair again.

That’s why I cut it... I remember now.

Vince leers down at me, his pale blue eyes cold and full of malice. He looks me up and down so slowly that it leaves me feeling dirty.

“I like you on your knees, princess,” Vince says. “For so many reasons.”

The terror and denial inside me collide, and I scream at the top of my lungs, twisting desperately to get out of Father’s grip. To my astonishment, I feel his fingers loosen, and I’m able to stumble to my feet and run.

As I bolt through the forest, the trees begin to blur around me, and the shadows bleed together until I’m running through a shadowy tunnel. The light at the end is very dim and gray, but I race towards it as if it’s the fabled bright light.

Safety, comfort, redemption... do I deserve any of these things?

The tunnel ends abruptly, and I stagger to a stop, looking wildly around at my new location. It's a nicely furnished bedroom, with a huge bed dominating the center of the room.

It's Kit's bedroom.

No... no!

"Lexa," Kit's voice is soft, gentle, and soothing. "You came."

"No," I whisper, looking up to see him walking towards me from the other side of the bed. "I can't be here."

"But you are here," he says, holding out his arms. "Stay here. With me."

I shake my head violently, tears pouring down my cheeks. The sensation of being trapped between fear and shame fills my guts and pushes all the air out of my lungs.

"Lexa," Kit says, coming over to put his hands on my shoulders. "I'd never hurt you."

"But you did hurt me!" I scream at him. I thrash back and forth, trying to break his grip.

He's too strong, and no matter how hard I struggle, I can't get away.

"Lexa, Lexa, stop!"

"Let go of me!"

“Wake up!”

The last two words penetrate my mind with a bolt of clarity. Suddenly, I open my eyes and look around, realizing I’m in Kit’s bed and he’s holding my shoulders.

“Are you okay?” he asks, letting go of me immediately.

“Yeah,” I gasp, lying through my teeth. “I’m okay.”

“You were really stuck. I’ve been trying to wake you for a couple of minutes.”

“Yeah,” I reply. “I have nightmares sometimes. It’s not a big deal.”

Kit shuffles awkwardly as if he’s not sure what to do. The fear and adrenaline from the nightmare are beginning to wear off, and I can feel the awkwardness rising in the room.

I look up at Kit again, wondering what to say. His eyes are so deep and compassionate, I’m tempted to tell him everything, but I stop myself just in time.

I’m strung out right now. This closeness isn’t real.

“Can I get you anything?” Kit asks, and I shake my head.

“No, I’m fine—”

But before I can finish the sentence, my stomach grumbles loudly. I grin and blush, and Kit smiles.

“I was just going down to make breakfast before you had your nightmare,” Kit says.

“I’ll get started now. Anything in particular you’d like?”

“No,” I answer, looking away. “So long as there’s coffee, you can’t really go wrong.”

“Okay.”

He shuffles back and forth, and I look up again, wondering what his problem is.

“I found you some clothes,” he says, gesturing vaguely to the dresser. “They’re just there on top. I hope they fit.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, only just remembering that I’m completely naked under the sheet.

I was so tired last night, not to mention drowsy from the hot bath, that I didn’t even think. I just climbed into bed.

It was so nice to finally be on a soft mattress with clean sheets that I immediately fell into an incredibly deep sleep. I spent the entire night lying beside Kit—totally naked—and he didn’t make a single move.

Not what I expected.

“Okay, I’ll head downstairs,” he says, nodding. “You take your time.”

As soon as I hear his footsteps on the stairs, I slide out of bed and run to the bathroom. I almost don’t recognize myself in the mirror. I look haggard, like I aged fifty years in one night.

I probably have. I think that was the longest night of my life.

After I freshen up, I go back to the bedroom to grab the clothes. Kit found me a soft pair of black leggings, a tight blue t-shirt, and a fluffy white sweater. The clothes are a good fit, and I have to wonder where he got them on such short notice.

When I can't delay the moment any longer, I start down the stairs, and as soon as I get near the ground floor, I can smell the bacon cooking. My stomach does another deep, echoing rumble, and I struggle to remember the last time I ate a decent meal.

When I come into the small, bright kitchen, Kit is humming a little tune to himself while he flips eggs and pokes at thick slabs of bacon. He looks up and grins when he sees me, gesturing to the table where the coffee is already set up.

I sit down and pour a cup for myself, sighing with pleasure as I take my first sip.

This is really good coffee. Not like the weak swill at Father's house.

"Here you go," Kit says, putting a loaded plate in front of me. "Dig in!"

I look down at the greasy, salty food, and my stomach shudders a bit.

"Thank you," I mutter, not looking at him. "It's a bit much for me, though. I would have been fine with some fruit and yogurt, maybe some muesli."

"Oh. Okay," Kit says, sounding disappointed.

"It's alright," I say quickly. "I could use some protein, and the eggs are good."

Silence falls between us as we focus on our food, and it's not a comfortable one. I end up staring at my plate so I don't have to look up and think of something to say.

As I'm cutting into my last fried egg and wondering how to leave the room gracefully, Kit's phone buzzes.

"Oh, it's about a meeting," he says as he looks at the phone. "I'll be heading out soon. Do you want to come?"

“No,” I mumble. “Not really.”

“I can give you my card so you can go shopping. Buy anything you want—food, things for the house, clothes. I had to borrow those clothes from my neighbor, Betty.”

“Thank you,” I answer, looking up at him. “I really appreciate that you thought of it.”

Kit smiles, and the warmth on his face touches me. He’s genuinely pleased to have done something nice for me, and I don’t think he did it just to earn points with me. He was genuinely concerned about my comfort.

“So, if you come into town, you can buy a whole new wardrobe if you want,” he says. “Anything you like.”

“Look, Kit,” I say, sighing as I push my plate away. “I should go with you and get some clothes, but I just can’t handle it right now. I’ve been on the—I mean, I’ve been traveling for a long time, and I just need some rest and time to myself.”

I really don’t want anyone, especially Kit, to know I’ve been running for my life. I’ve had enough complications that I can’t pile his reaction, whatever it may be, on top of this.

“Okay,” he answers. “Did you just want to stay here?”

“I might go for a little walk,” I reply.

Even though it’s risky and stupid, I want to go back to the woods and see what happened to my mother’s body. I know there is very little chance I’ll find anything useful, but deep inside me is a fierce, relentless pain that demands to know what happened to her.

“Sure,” Kit answers, nodding. “We can set you up with clothes later.”

He gets up to rinse his cup, and suddenly, I don’t want him to go. Questions blister on my tongue as it dawns on me that he might know what happened.

He was involved with the patrols! If there was anything to find, he might know...

“Kit!” I say far too loudly.

“Yes?” he asks, turning back around.

“Did you know what... I mean, I left town so quickly. I don’t know what happened to the house or... any of my things.”

My voice trails off as I watch Kit’s expression change. His eyes widen, and all the color drains out of his face.

He looks like he’s going into shock!

What the fuck?

“The house was claimed by pack, the property and contents sold for revenue,” he says, his voice tight. “Your mother... your mother was given a proper burial.”

It takes a moment for those words to sink in. I close my eyes and feel a cold wave of relief rush through me.

Thank God.

“Where?” I mutter, opening my eyes to look at Kit again. “Where is she buried?”

“In the main cemetery. Just a small stone toward the back. Grandfather wouldn’t approve of a full funeral, but I made sure she was laid to rest.”

There is trouble lurking deep in Kit’s eyes, and the way he hesitates between words speaks of a big story he’s not willing to tell. Normally, this would frustrate me, and I would grill him for all the details. But today, I just don’t care.

“I’m going,” I announce, shoving my chair back. “I have to go right now.”

I turn and run from the house, racing down the street towards the edge of town. My emotions are crashing through me, colliding with each other, and I don’t know if I’m scared, relieved, or just plain crazy.

Why choose, when clearly I can do it all at once?

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

After Lexa runs from the house, the air seems to echo with chaos. As if something violent and horrific just happened, leaving its imprint on the empty spaces of the room.

Something violent and horrific did happen.

My heart is pounding up into my throat, making my head ache. Sweat trickles down my sides as I take deep breaths, trying to calm myself down.

How much does she know?

Obviously, she knows her mother died, but did she find out about that before she left town or after? It seems odd that she didn't take any of her things with her or tell anyone she was leaving.

Unless she heard the death squad was coming for them. Maybe she found her mother's body—maybe she was even there when they killed her. For all I know, Slade, Bolton, and Wick dragged them out of the house and tortured them both before Lexa got away.

Of all the questions I have about this situation, that's one of the biggest. It doesn't make any sense that those three would let her get away. Their actions are always very thorough.

Unless Laura fought them to give her some time.

From the look of the body and surrounding area, this is entirely possible. My heart

goes out to Laura, pitting herself against brutal, violent monsters, giving up her life just so that her daughter could get away.

But does Lexa know that I was involved? The two of them were supposed to die by my hand. If she knows that, then she'll never be able to trust me.

Too many uncomfortable thoughts jam through my brain, twisting my mind. Lexa might suspect I killed her mother and was given orders to kill her as well. Or maybe, she knows who killed her mother and knows I'm involved, that it was supposed to be me, and hates me for that.

Piled on top of that mind fuck, there's the horrible way I used and discarded her. The timing of it all comes together in a hard knot, and I put my head in my hands, groaning softly.

How was I supposed to know that they were next on Grandfather's kill list? Why didn't I just tell him where to go that day she came to the house?

Maybe I could have saved them both.

Maybe I would have died with them.

My phone buzzes again, and I get up slowly, putting it in my pocket. The last thing I want to deal with right now is a council meeting, but since I just got married, I know the pack elders would like to set up plans for the future.

So would I.

As I walk to my car, I think about where Lexa has been all this time and what happened to her when she was away. I tried so hard to find her, and my scouts always came up with nothing.

But I didn't go out into the human world, and there were just a few packs we didn't search.

Most of Wolfshade is amicable, or at least neutral, but there are a few territories we don't go into. It's important to keep the peace because the series of valleys is the only place we are free to be what we are.

There are other places of magic in the world, but they belong to different creatures. This is the home of wolves, and if we don't keep peace within it, the entire Range could tear itself apart.

The idea makes me shudder. As I start the truck and pull out into the street, my discomfort slowly turns to horror.

Grandfather wanted war. He was always pushing the other clans. Would he have torn up the Pass with his lust for power and violence?

My thoughts turn to how my grandparents were killed and how the murderers were never found. It was almost as if the second they left the safety of the Range, the assassins were waiting for them.

If Grandfather intended to sink the entire Range into war, I'm not sure I blame them.

I pull up at the old church and take the back entrance into the meeting room. Grandfather always insisted on having meetings at the estate, the church, or the rec hall attached to it. But since I became alpha, I've begun holding council in a small study behind the church.

The room is bright and comfortably furnished. A wide window at the back lets in clear, golden sunlight and crisp, fresh air. The walls are lined with shelves of books, and a thick red carpet covers the floor. There are soft armchairs and couches, and

small crates of toys in the corner.

The younger members of the council—Mabel, Xavier, Cass, and my beta Cade, are gathered around a low table piled with cookies, cakes, and tea.

“Hey, big man!” Cade greets me, toasting me with a slice of cake. “Big married man, I should say.”

“Yeah,” I chuckle, trying to cover my inner turmoil. “It’s been a rough night.”

“I bet,” Mabel says, wiggling her eyebrows.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Cass snaps. “As if anything is happening yet. I’m sure Kit means getting used to each other is tiring. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

Mabel blinks innocently. “I meant the long drive, then the rushed wedding. I have no idea what you’re talking about. Maybe you should get your mind out of the gutter.”

Cass rolls her eyes and goes to sit on a nearby couch. Mabel sticks her tongue out at her, and Cass giggles, almost spilling her tea. The two of them have been teasing each other since the first year of school, and it’s never serious.

Well, okay, maybe that one time. But after we disarmed Cass, it all worked out.

I turn slowly away from the refreshment table to face the end of the room. Sitting together on a long couch are Loretta, Derrik, and Jones, the pack elders.

All of them look annoyed, but that doesn’t surprise me. I doubt any of them has ever smiled in their lives.

“Kit,” Loretta says, a hard edge in her voice. “Sit down, please.”

I turn my back on them and get a slice of butter cake and a cup of sweet tea. I enjoy making them wait, and I know they hate the informality of these meetings, so I want to rub it in their faces as hard as I can.

I'm in charge now, not the old man. You can't intimidate me.

While I'm getting my food, Mabel casually tosses herself down onto the couch next to Cass, cursing when she gets a shower of cookie crumbs across her chest. Cade goes to sit on the floor next to them, and I can practically hear the blood vessels popping in the elders' brains.

I take my time going back towards them and sit down in a comfy armchair, casually resting my foot on my knee as I start eating my cake.

"Okay, guys, let's begin," I say. "What's the matter of discussion today?"

Loretta takes a deep breath, ready to unleash a scathing tirade of some sort, but Cass speaks up, not even noticing she's cutting Loretta off.

"Your wedding!" she says brightly. "That's the only thing that matters. I'm so happy for you. We should really have a party."

"Yeah!" Mabel agrees. "A big one. With a bonfire, and some games, and—"

"That's enough!" Loretta snaps. "This is an official meeting, and all of you should conduct yourselves as such!"

I keep my eyes on the elders, my gaze steady and a casual smile on my face. I hear Mabel snicker quietly.

"This is important business," Derrik adds. "As you know, Kit, we have urged you to

find a mate for some time—”

“And I finally did,” I answer. “Shouldn’t we be celebrating?”

“You did not consult us about your choice!” Loretta argues. “We should have had a vote. This affects the whole pack, not just you.”

“Well, for a start, it wasn’t my choice,” I answer. “And I know how important it is. That’s why I asked for professional help.”

“When we told you to marry, we gave you a list of acceptable females,” Jones says. “We expected you to court them until a match was made. Setting off down the Pass to bring back a—I mean, a—”

Jones stumbles over his words, eventually giving up and staring at the floor. I keep my steady gaze on him, then look over at Derrik, who immediately turns his face away. When my gaze reaches Loretta, she glares right at me, her wolf shimmering in her eyes.

She might know about my orders and that I did not carry them out... and that Lexa should have died by my hand.

I refuse to look away, and Loretta doesn’t back down. We glare at each other as the tension in the room rises until Cade clears his throat.

“What about heirs?” he asks, settling himself more comfortably on the floor. “Isn’t that a major part of this?”

I tear my eyes away from Loretta to look at my friend. He grins at me like he just came in for the big rescue, but I don’t feel rescued.

“Yes, thank you, Cade,” I mutter. “Thanks so much for bringing that up.”

“Offspring are of the highest importance,” Loretta huffs. “If she cannot produce within a reasonable time frame, you will have to put her aside.”

“We have quite a bit of time before considering that,” I answer, trying to keep my voice even but getting exasperated. “I have every reason to believe Lexa is fertile.”

Why did I just say that?

“Fertile, maybe,” Loretta says, taking a sip of tea. “But willing? I mean, we know she isn’t worthy. But willing is pretty important, too.”

I glare at Loretta again. She glares right back, a nasty smirk on her face.

This is it. Right here, right now. I’m calling her out to battle for insult against the alpha. I can’t let her get away with this—

“There’s still time,” Derrik cuts in, getting up and putting himself between Loretta and me. “You can change your mind. Admit you made a mistake, banish Lexa, and take one of the females we suggested. My daughter Elaine is perfectly suited to you. And she is most certainly willing, my alpha.”

I look away, sighing as I pinch the bridge of my nose. I don’t know if Derrik intentionally stepped up to save Loretta, or if he just decided his point was so important that he had to make it immediately.

“Thank you,” I say firmly. “But I won’t be putting Lexa aside. As I mentioned, I went to a professional for help, and I trust her judgment. She is very good at this kind of thing, and her matches always work out for the individuals—and packs—involved.”

“It is true,” Loretta admits, her voice low. “I have heard good things about this Iris Porter.”

A little smile sneaks onto my face as I realize Loretta must have done some digging, hoping to undo my contract.

How does it feel to be wrong, you old bitch?

“Is the match working out for you?” Jones asks, his tone overly casual. “Are you... getting along?”

I look up at him sharply, and his grin is a terrible expression, full of malice.

He knows!

But how much does he know?

“There was so much confusion the day she left town,” Jones goes on, sounding sincerely regretful. “All that business with her poor mother, and you... where were you, Kit?”

I meet his eyes, but I can’t find anything to say. They’ve got me, and they know it.

What do they know? And what will they tell Lexa?

“I’m done with this discussion,” I state, standing up. “It’s the first day of my marriage, and I have important matters to attend to. We’ll follow this up another time.”

I see the elders ready to protest, but I just turn my back on the entire room and stride out. I hear Mabel’s voice and know she’ll distract the elders with an inflammatory

topic, giving me time to get clear.

I have to find Lexa! What the fuck am I going to do here? I don't know who knows what, and I can't trust anyone.

The only thing I know for sure is, when the shit finally hits the fan, it's going to be a fucking catastrophe.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

I run down the street, barely able to see through the flood of tears running down my cheeks. I push myself on faster and faster, hearing the slap of my feet on the ground as my breath begins to burn in my throat.

She was buried... someone took care of her. Who? Why?

My exertion collides with my terror and confusion, leaving me so breathless that dark spots start to bounce through my vision. I stop so suddenly, I almost fall down, bracing my hands on my knees while I pant to get my breath back.

Something isn't right.

Father said that he killed Mom and that they fought to the death. But if that were true, why did anyone come looking for her?

And if someone took care of her, why didn't they come for me, too?

My misery and grief feel like a sharp, hard stone in my chest. We weren't popular here; I know that. Kit's grandfather didn't like us and probably wanted to kick us out from the moment we arrived.

I was so young when we came here, I had no idea about any of this. I only found out as I got older that we weren't welcome. Luckily, Mother had a few friends who were close to the top families. They fought for her so she was allowed to stay.

Fresh tears sting my eyes as I think of my beautiful, gentle mom standing up against all this adversity. I remember so little of those early years because she got us both out

of there before Father could turn his cruelty on me.

And he found me, anyway. Mother, I'm so, so sorry I let you down. You tried so hard, and I let him get me.

Standing up straight, I take a deep breath and hold it, looking at the tall, wrought-iron gates ahead of me. As I walk through, I feel like I'm passing into another dimension or maybe a different time.

Echoes from the past. That's all that lives here now.

The front rows of the cemetery are neat and well cared for. There is an impressive stone monument in the center for the families of the Alpha line. I pause as I walk by, seeing the graves of Leopold and Alisha, Kit's grandparents.

I wonder how they died. It must have been around the same time as when I left.

Shaking my head, I turn away from the monument and head for the back rows of the graveyard, where the aisles are choked with weeds and unruly, long grass. There are so many loose ends floating around in my mind, I can't even begin to make sense of them.

Secrets. Secrets buried all around me. I don't even know if I want to know the truth.

Briefly, I try to imagine what would have happened if I had just kept running. I'd be high in the mountains now, probably somewhere in Canada. I like to think I'd be safe, wild, and free, but in all likelihood, I'd be starved, frozen, and probably under attack by wild arctic wolves.

Natural wolves won't go after a shifter... unless they're a big pack and a shifter wanders into their territory.

My eyes have been lightly running over the headstones, and when my mother's name leaps out at me, it hits me like a blow.

"Laura Close. Dear friend, valued member of the pack, and beloved mother. May you run free on the hills beyond our world."

"Who wrote that?" I whisper as if the spirits around me could answer the question. No conclusion comes, even though the wind picks up and moans through the headstones. Maybe the ghosts do have something to say.

I fall to my knees in front of the grave, tears pouring down my cheeks. The grief in my chest is so extreme, I know I can't let it out all at once, or it would completely destroy me.

Some things are so sharp, dark, and heavy that they can't be let go... or held on to.

Memories flood through my mind, and slowly, the pain consumes me.

I see my mother standing in our kitchen, waving a wooden spoon as she sings and dances to the radio.

I can almost smell the cookies baking, and taste the hot cocoa.

Her voice rings through me, her love and encouragement always lifting me up and making my heart soar.

I love you, Mom. I love you so much.

The beautiful memories are shattered by the image of her broken, bloodied body. She was crumpled in the dirt, arms, and legs twisted, blood smearing her pale skin. It looked like she'd been brought down by a pack of wolves, not one.

But if that's what happened, why would Father lie and say he did it?

Useless questions. The kind that could drive a person completely insane. No one can fathom the actions of a sociopath, and trying to gain closure about it would only shatter my mind.

Would knowing the answers to these questions really bring me peace?

Now that the idea is in my head, though, I can't shake it. If Father really didn't do it, then who did?

Was it the person who found her body? Is that why they knew where to look? Were they coming back for her... or me?

A new terror blooms in my chest, so shocking that it makes the tears dry up. I stare at the headstone, my hands gripping the grass beneath my knees.

Leopold's kill squad... Kit ran with them. I heard rumors of things they did in the alpha's name, but I never believed it.

Oh, God! What if—

“Lexa?”

I almost jump out of my skin when I hear Kit's voice. Shock and fear race through me, and all I can do is stare up at him, my body frozen, all my accusations locked in my chest.

Would he really lie to me about this? Would he take everything I had, then brutally dump me in front of his family... and then... and then kill my mother?

“Lexa,” he says again. There is so much genuine care and warmth in his voice, I can’t point any blame at him.

But he knows something. He knows she was found, and buried. I need to know more...

“Are you okay?” he asks, sitting down next to me. “I mean, I know you’re not, but is there anything I can do for you?”

Yes... answer all my fucking questions!

I shake my head slowly, still staring at the headstone. Kit takes a breath and pauses as if he wants to ask me something, but he doesn’t say anything, and the moment passes.

“I’m here,” he says. “Anything you need, just tell me.”

I nod slowly, crumpling slowly as I start to cry again. He puts his arms around me, and I let him, staying tense at first, but eventually falling against his broad, strong chest and clinging to his shoulders as sobs shake through me.

I remember this feeling from that night I spent in his arms. I’d never felt so safe. I had so much hope for the future. It was like everything in my life was finally coming together, and I didn’t have to fear the past anymore.

Kit rocks me gently, stroking my hair, and I gasp through my sobs as I try to calm myself down. The magic between our bodies is undeniable, and having him so close is doing things to me.

It would be so easy to let go. I want to love him. It’s all I ever wanted.

But the ugly questions in my mind come back, and even if I could put aside my

suspicious, I know I can't ever forgive the way he dumped me.

It would have been bad enough if I went into it as a silly fling, but I didn't. I gave him my heart and soul that night, and he threw it away.

"Get off," I mutter, shoving him. He falls on his butt next to me, and I pick myself up, dusting the grass off my hands as I take a few steps back.

Kit looks up at me with wide eyes, as if he's afraid of me.

Looking away, I wipe my nose, sniffing a bit as I try to get myself under control. I hear him stand up, but he doesn't try to get close to me. A shadow falls on us, and when I look up, I'm shocked to see the sun sinking below the horizon.

"It's late," I whisper.

"Not that late," Kit says. "The sun sets early in Wolfshade."

I nod, looking at my mother's gravestone.

I don't want to look at him. I'm scared of what I see in his eyes.

"Thank you for telling me she was here," I say. "It's a relief to me, to know that she was taken care of."

"You left town so suddenly, and no one could find you. I didn't even know if you knew she died."

"I knew," I mutter, looking up at him. I keep my voice firm and my face blank, waiting for his reaction.

To my surprise, his eyes widen with shock, and he takes a little step back.

There it is again. As if he's scared of me.

The questions arise in my mind, teeming against my skull, begging to be let loose, but I still feel it might be more painful to learn the truth than to leave the secrets buried.

And it's just like with Father. Who can I really trust? Would Kit tell the truth if I asked?

"Lexa," Kit says, looking over at the mountains and not at me. "Would you run with me in the forest, up to the high ridge?"

I follow his gaze to the dark line of trees just above the town. Not as high as Lycan Pass, but above the rough hills around the town.

The idea of going that far into the wilderness alone with him scares me for a lot of reasons.

Best-case scenario, I let him seduce me again. Worst case... I find out what really happened to Mom.

The possibilities are too painful to contemplate, but a run does sound good. My wolf is almost howling with tension and need, and I'm more than happy to give over my higher thinking to her primal mind.

"Sure," I answer. "That sounds like a good idea."

Kit looks surprised but pleased. He holds out his hand and gestures towards the back of the cemetery.

“There’s a path through here. Come on.”

I don’t move, just stare at his hand, then let my eyes flick back to his face. Reluctantly, he lowers his hand.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t think this meant—”

“Good,” I reply, cutting him off. “Because this doesn’t mean anything.

I could use a hard run. Today has been a difficult one for me.

I think it would do us good to go together, but this is my commitment to making an amicable partnership with you.

It doesn’t mean I’m letting you back into my heart—or my pants. ”

Kit shakes his head. “No, I’d never dare to suggest that. I know what I did was unforgivable, and I wanted to tell you I’m sor—”

“Don’t,” I snap, cutting him off. “Don’t say you’re sorry, or give me any speeches. I heard quite enough the night you seduced me, and the next day when you tossed me aside like a used tissue. Do you really think I’d believe anything you have to say?”

I’m surrounded by liars. There’s no one I can trust.

“Okay.” Kit looks at the ground, his shoulders sagging.

“I understand. I don’t deserve your trust. I lied to you horribly, and if you never believe a word that comes out of my mouth, that’s exactly what I deserve.

Just know that I am committed to making it up to you, and I can’t thank Iris enough

for bringing us together so I at least have a chance. ”

Iris! What was she thinking, matching me with him? Did she know? Did she know about all of this?

More questions pushing into my mind just make my head hurt even worse. My wolf throbs in my blood, begging to take over. I can't keep my shit together a second longer, so I gesture to Kit to lead the way.

“Let's go, then,” I mutter. “I don't want to talk about this anymore.”

“Okay, Lexa,” he answers, his voice very soft. “I will make it up to you. I swear.”

I shake my head, refusing to answer. I'm distracted momentarily as Kit pulls off his clothes, but once he shifts, the flicker of arousal is snuffed out.

He doesn't stop being nonstop gorgeous.

When my wolf takes over, the hunger returns. Being naked in front of him is tempting enough, but in my wolf shape, I feel even more bare than I was before.

Luckily, Kit turns and bounds into the forest. All I have to do is follow him, letting the thrill of my wolf swallow all my doubt and most of my pain.

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Shifting mid-run, I feel a surge of excitement as my paws hit the dirt and my wolf takes over. A sizzling wave of exaltation floods into my skin, accompanying the thick fur covering my body.

Instantly, sound and scent engulf me, refreshing all my senses. The thick pine smell mingles with the damp air, and the soft noises of small animals as they move through the forest make me feel so alive. My emotional turmoil falls away as I immerse myself in my wolf.

I can hear Lexa bounding along behind me, and in this state, divorced from my higher thinking, the sensation of having her with me is pure bliss.

Running with my mate... this is how it should be. How it always should have been.

Echoes of memory shiver in my mind, like reflections rippling on water. I see myself standing over her in the pale morning sun, watching her for a moment before I slipped out of there like a thief and left the love of my life sleeping alone.

I had to! It was all I could do to keep her safe!

But what if I had run... like I am right now.

Joy surges through my wolf's soul, and it can't be contained inside my chest. I hurl my head back and howl, a sound of pure happiness. Behind me, Lexa howls, too, and I know the good feeling inside me is being shared by her.

It's as if both of our wolves know the same truth—that if I had chosen her, in that

moment, we would have shifted and run into the forest, never needing to look back.

My wolf mind can't contemplate the complexities of human situations, and the bubbling press of those thoughts dilutes my focus. I shake my head briefly, letting the unwelcome images fall back into the hidden part of my mind.

I turn my eyes up to the sky, seeing the stars beginning to come out. They flicker like diamonds under white light, reflecting back in the full spectrum of colors. The sight empties my head of thoughts, and I push up towards the ridge, enjoying the way the physical exertion feeds my primal soul.

It takes some time to get up the steep rock walls as we leave the hills, and I look behind often to see how Lexa is coping. Every time I look back, she's leaping fiercely from rock to rock, bounding up the hill and keeping pace with me.

When she sees me looking back, her ears prick up and her eyes brighten. She bursts out with a happy bark, and I answer her, my tail wagging in wide circles as I turn back around to tackle the hill again.

We're almost at the ridge when ugly thoughts begin to slither beneath my wolf mind again. Even in my animal shape, I can sense them, and they are so intense, it almost shocks me back to being human.

I have to tell her the truth.

I can't tell her the truth!

I want to ask her for more details about how and why she left town. It's something I've always wanted to know. But now, it's absolutely vital.

If she knows her mother was killed by the death squad and that they were coming for

her, would she even be here right now... with me?

Iris Porter may have assured her safety or given some other kind of guarantee. Maybe Lexa wants justice—or revenge—for her mother.

If she knows it all, she could be playing me—right now.

The thought is not a comfortable one. The idea that she is gathering information, waiting for an opportunity to use it, and attack other pack members, fills me with fear.

Not just that someone could get hurt, but that she could look right into my eyes and lie to me.

But that's exactly what I'm doing to her.

A soft growl rumbles through my teeth, and I shake my head back and forth, putting more energy into my run. The sight of Laura's broken, bloodied body rises in my mind, and I can't get free of it. I can even hear my own words echoing in my mind as I demand that Grandfather give her a decent burial.

He didn't confirm or deny that the death squad was responsible!

The realization hits me hard. Now that the conversation has surfaced from the depths of my mind, I can clearly remember that he never took the blame for it.

Maybe he didn't care, or just assumed his goons did it. He cared more about the fact that I failed to do it.

When we lowered Laura into the earth, only three of us were there. Myself and two of her friends from town, Poppy and Jinette. They had no idea what had become of

Lexa, and after I became alpha, they helped me search.

But I lost contact with them... I don't even know if they've heard she's back. But it's been almost a full day... surely the gossip has gone the full rounds by now.

When I finally burst through the trees and leap up onto the high ridge, I'm trembling from the exertion of running so fast and hard.

To my surprise, Lexa is right beside me, and she still looks fresh and full of energy.

Her ears are pricked up, and her eyes sweep across the town, reflecting back the myriad of lights laid out before us like crystal shards scattered on black velvet.

She hurls back her head and howls, and the sound comes from so deep inside her, it feels like it echoes through my bones.

My own howl spirals from my chest, my entire body consumed by the sound and the emotion behind it. Our voices mingle together and become one. A new song, one made by both of us.

The forest seems to hold its breath, and a deep silence falls as our howls die down.

The forest—and the entire pack—knows now that we are bound.

Lexa takes a few steps to the edge of the rock, her body trembling as she looks beyond the town to the savage mountains beyond it. She seems distracted now, her eyes searching the darkness as she shivers.

My need to ask her what's wrong is so strong that my human shape takes over all at once. Suddenly, I'm kneeling on the cold rock, my wolf gone and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

“Are you okay?” I ask, struggling to master myself so soon after the shift.

Lexa looks over her shoulder, tilting her head again. Her human shape comes over her slowly, and a sigh eases through her as the wolf falls away, leaving her sitting on the rock outcrop with one leg dangling casually over the edge.

I can only see her silhouette, traced by faint starlight. She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

“I’m okay,” she answers, still looking into the forest. It’s as if she expects answers to be waiting there, or she’s waiting for something to come out of it.

The pressure to talk about the past looms over me, something with real, tangible weight. I feel like I’m going to be crushed under it, flattened by my lies if I don’t let them out.

But in the end, I’m too much of a coward.

I struggle to find something to say that won’t evoke bad memories, but there’s absolutely nothing—no topic that doesn’t touch the horrors of the past. I ignored her most of the time in school.

We shared an art class together once, which was fun, but any mention of school will inevitably connect her mind to the end-of-school party.

“How did your grandparents die?” Lexa asks, making me jump.

I’m surprised she spoke, but even more shocked by the question itself. She doesn’t look at me, just keeps her eyes on the faraway hills. I can’t discern anything from her manner.

“I saw their graves,” she goes on. “When I was at the cemetery. I was wondering if it happened right after I... left town.”

“Yes, very close to it,” I answer. “They went to the human world on some kind of mission and were killed there. It’s been a mystery as to how it happened. The wolves we sent out didn’t actually find the bodies, but the pack doesn’t know that. We held a full funeral with empty boxes.”

Tension floods across her body, and I know she’s probably thinking about her mother’s grave and how it isn’t empty.

I want to get us off these topics and focus on us.

“I know you weren’t up to it today,” I say, trying to keep my voice even, “but I do need you to attend meetings with me. It’s important to have your input as we move the pack forward in a new direction.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I’m trying to get the younger people involved and start new traditions that are more inclusive than our old ways.”

“That sounds good.”

“I’m getting some resistance from the older members, but once you’re a part of it as well, we’ll be able to push back. I don’t just want to make our pack conditions more welcoming; I want to make alliances with other packs, too.”

“Like who?” she asks, turning to face me.

“Oh, my friend Galen, for a start. His pack is closest to us, and the situation was a bit

frosty when my grandfather was in charge, but now we can come together and support each other. Heal the old wounds.”

“A bit frosty” is a hell of an understatement. Grandfather fought Galen’s grandfather once, and it ended up being a draw. It was the only reason we kept peace between our two packs—because both of them were unbeatable.

“I like the sound of that,” Lexa says, smiling.

I move up to sit next to her, and when I take her hand, she doesn’t move away from me. When I turn to look at her, she still has her face turned towards me, her lips only an inch from mine.

“I need you, Lexa.” My words come out as a hushed whisper. It hurts my chest to let them out, as if my ribs have peeled back to expose my heart.

A flicker of doubt crosses her face, and my heart speeds up a little.

“I mean—the pack needs you,” I say. “All of us need you.”

She gives a small nod, her eyes still fixed on my face. She hasn’t moved away, and when I feel her fingers run up my arm, I almost jump out of my skin.

I stay completely still as she runs her nails gently down my wrist, then slowly wraps her fingers around mine. When she squeezes my hand, I squeeze back, and a smile brightens her face.

I remember that smile.

The night we were together, I saw her truly smile for the first time. I’d like to believe I’m the first person who ever saw that expression of pure, complete joy on her face.

I love you, Lexa. Please believe that.

She tilts her head a little, her lips so close to mine I can feel her breath on my cheek. Memories flood through me from that night, and I can feel my hands slick on her sweat-soaked skin, taste her on my tongue, and feel the unbelievable thrill of moving inside her.

I never knew sex could be like that.

Her hand tightens on mine, and I know she's remembering, too. Arousal floods through me as I remember how she gave herself to me completely. She opened herself up and let me do anything I wanted, bending to my will and urging me on until I ravished her completely.

There's no part of her I didn't touch. She gave it all to me, and I threw it away.

Even though the guilt still weighs heavily on me, all I can think about is having her again. I waited so long, believing I'd never see her again, and now she's here, right in front of me, naked, with her sweet lips almost right against mine.

I don't do it—she does. It's Lexa who leans forward slightly and presses her lips to mine.

The shock floods into me, and shivers run across my skin as I fight to stay still. The urge to grab her and throw her on her back so I can finally spend my pent-up lust is almost overpowering. But somehow, I stay still.

Lexa closes her eyes, leaning forward to put her hands on my shoulders. She kneads her lips against mine, her slick, hot tongue darting out to tease at my own.

My mouth returns the kiss, but I'm afraid to even touch her, so I keep my hands

braced on the ground, letting her control everything. She leans in even further, tightening her grip on my shoulders as she deepens the kiss.

I don't deserve this...

I don't deserve you.

I wish I were a strong enough man to pull back, but I'm not. When it comes to Lexa, I'm completely lost. Utterly helpless.

I am yours, my love. It doesn't matter if you claim me or not. My body, heart, and soul are yours, and always will be.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

The feel of Kit's lips against mine sends a warm rush through my body, so powerful that I have to press my thighs together as goosebumps rise on my skin. My hands have a life of their own as my fingers dance up his arms to settle on his shoulders, giving me leverage to kiss him even harder.

Oh, my love! I've wanted this for so long. Did you miss me as much as I missed you?

The horrible thoughts and suspicions bubble up inside me, but I run from it. I run from the pain into the sweet release of Kit's kiss.

I kissed him.

I grip his shoulders a little tighter, trying to deny the fact. It would be a lot easier if he seduced me, then I could lay all the blame on him. Just like last time.

I can't deny it. This time, it's all my fault.

And I can't stop.

The run up the mountain freed me, separated my body from my mind, and released me from the torture of my thoughts.

I hadn't shifted much while I was my father's prisoner—he forbade it—and the last time I shifted was to take to the woods, relying on my wolf to take me far from Grace's Falls and hopefully into safety.

I did... my wolf whispers.

Is this safe? Really?

Yes...

I struggle against the truth of my wolf, not daring to let go of Kit. His touch is addictive, and the hot press of his mouth has cleared my mind and turned me into a creature of pure sensation.

It's been so long since I felt this good! It's been so long since I let my wolf run for joy alone.

I can't deny the pleasure racing through me, like golden sunlight rushing through my blood. It hums through my muscles and into my skin, a vibration that makes my body sing.

More.

I lean in harder, feeling the heat intensifying between my legs, begging to be satisfied. I'm about to climb into his lap when the full force of what I'm doing hits me like a truck.

This is how I felt when...

When he took me.

I let go of Kit, shoving him away from me now instead of pulling him closer. I scrabble back a little, putting distance between our bodies. For a moment, I just stare at the ground, panting to get my breath back.

My body throbs, a horrible, fierce ache that mingles with the betrayed cry of my wolf. Both demand satisfaction, but I refuse with every fiber of my being, willing my desire

to die and my wolf to be at peace.

Kit doesn't say anything; he just sits on the outcrop, watching me. Again, I get the feeling that there are secrets lurking in his beautiful, bright blue eyes, hidden truths that flash beneath the surface, gone before I can be sure I even saw them.

Maybe I'm just suspicious of everyone. Kit may have nothing to hide, and I just see betrayal and abuse everywhere I look.

I take a deep breath and let it out as a sigh, feeling my body finally release. My muscles tremble a little as the tension drains out of me, the effect of dropping from such a high point of adrenaline to nothing, leaving me shaken and fragile.

"Do you want to go back?" Kit asks.

I nod, not looking up at his face.

He shifts and takes a few steps towards the trees. I call up my wolf, and it's not as easy as I'd like it to be. The second she takes over, desire lights up again, running through my body with the unbridled passion born of a wild thing.

Kit flicks his tail and runs into the forest, and I follow in hot pursuit.

I can't hold back the wolf's needs, so I surrender my mind to her again as we run down the mountain.

I find myself coming even with Kit and playfully nudging at his shoulder, barking and wagging my tail wildly as we chase each other.

I'm so, so tired of fighting... of being in pain. I have to stop. I have to...

The last of my resolve disappears, and my human mind vanishes. There is nothing but love and joy, a connection to the land and to Kit that transcends the complications of human reasoning.

I never thought I could be so happy.

The run down the mountain doesn't take very long, and we get back to the graveyard sooner than I'd like.

Can't we just stay out there, wild and free, forever? I don't want to come back here, to a world of pain, doubt, and loss...

As my human shape takes over, my wolf gives me control, and the second my thoughts return to me, I'm full of conflict again.

I get dressed, keeping one eye on Kit the whole time. He doesn't try to sneak glances at me, which I appreciate.

If he really was using me, surely he'd use his gaze like a weapon, just like Vince would. It's one thing to have a guy look at you, and quite another for him to look at you with intent to harm.

Vince could make me feel like I'd been violated by just looking me up and down. It didn't matter if I was naked or not—his eyes carried the weight of his intent, and I know there are plenty of men in the world who can make a woman feel that dirty, just with a glance.

And Kit's not one of them.

"Are you ready?" he asks, startling me just a little.

Nodding, I follow him down the path to the gates, where I see his truck parked in front of the cemetery.

Kit opens the door for me, and I climb into the passenger seat, feeling the silence growing thicker around us. If Kit was respecting my need for quiet, that would be a good thing, but I'm sensing tension in him that means he's holding back as well.

But how do I even start a conversation like that? "Hey, it totally sucked how you dumped me right after I gave my heart and soul to you. Then I got kidnapped and abused by my dad for years.

"Oh, by the way, did you kill my mom?"

As Kit starts up the truck, I let out a long sigh. He looks over at me with concern.

"Are you alright?" he asks. "We could go to town and grab some food if you like?"

"No, thanks," I answer. "I just need a shower and bed for now. It's been a long day."

"It sure has," he agrees. "Would you like to talk about it?"

Yes.

"No," I reply. "At least, not now. I know there's a lot of ground to cover between us, Kit. But we're just going to have to take it slow."

I notice that his fingers are gripping the steering wheel, and his jaw looks tight, as if he's holding back a whole ton of words. I'm curious, but I'm also afraid of what he might say.

Not now, for the love of God. I can't deal with any more fear tonight.

When we get back to Kit's townhouse, I follow him up the path. As soon as we get inside, I tell him I'm going for a shower and hurry up the stairs. Slamming the door behind me, I lock it and brace myself against it with my arms wrapped around myself.

What the fuck am I doing?

To my frustration, tears leak down my cheeks again, and I wipe my nose angrily. Hurrying to get my clothes off, I turn on the shower and get in to wash the tears from my cheeks with the rush of hot water.

I kissed him.

Even with all the ugly shit circling around in my brain, this thought has the most impact. I start to tremble, and it gets worse when my body throbs. My nipples harden as I wonder where that kiss might have led us.

I lean against the wall, letting the rush of water flow over my chest as I run my hand across my breasts. I don't want to let Kit in again, but I've suffered for so long, I forgot what it was like to feel good.

And Kit makes me feel very good.

Sniffing to get my tears under control, I wash myself over quickly, not daring to linger in case I awaken my lust again. I rub myself dry with a towel and put on a robe that's hanging on the back of the door. It's way too big for me, so it has to be Kit's.

Just a hint of his scent rises from the fabric. I close my eyes, savoring it.

How am I supposed to go to sleep, completely wrapped in his scent, with his body right next to mine, close enough to touch?

When I get to the bedroom, Kit has his back turned to the door, the blanket wrapped around his body. His breathing is slow and even, so I assume he's asleep.

I'm touched to see the cookies and cocoa on the nightstand, just like the night before. It's such a small gesture, but it really makes me feel cared for. I eat the cookies slowly, washing them down with the rich cocoa.

Even though I was worried about being able to sleep, the second I curl up under the covers, a wave of exhaustion flows through me, loosening my muscles and clouding my thoughts.

Stress and conflict fade, leaving only the imprint of Kit's mouth on mine.

Fantasies of what comes next drift through my mind.

I'm surprised when I wake to a bright, sun-filled room. Even with the curtains drawn, I can tell it's at least mid-morning. I can't remember the last time I slept this late, or this well.

Father would never let me sleep in, and I was lucky if I got four hours a night.

Even better, I don't remember having a single nightmare. I haven't had a night free of bad dreams since the day I saw my mother's body and Father dragged me to Grace's Fall.

I can hear Kit downstairs. I get up to join him, wrapping the robe around me a bit more tightly.

I can't put on yesterday's clothes—they're filthy. I'll have to take up Kit's offer about breaking his credit card.

Kit's money and status never meant anything to me. For the first time in my life, I realize what it means to have a rich husband, and how different my life is really going to be.

I used pots and pans without handles because we couldn't afford to buy new ones! Forget things like appliances or new mattresses and pillows—you just get used to the bed bugs.

I'm still thinking about going down in my robe—and wondering if I have the self-control to not flash Kit at least once—when I notice the bags by the door. A quick inspection shows me they're full of clothes.

Kit probably had them delivered. Express post. By helicopter.

I giggle to myself and find a pair of jeans and a dark red sweater, looking in the mirror and liking what I see. Even though I still have so much uncertainty inside me, I feel better today than I have in years. And I look it, too.

I bounce down the stairs, and Kit waves to me as I come through the door. He gestures to the table, and I see he's put out a few bowls of berries and yogurt as well as muesli and toast.

"Thank you," I say, reaching for the coffee. "And good morning."

"Good morning to you, too," he says, turning away from the stove to put a stack of pancakes on the table. "I see you found the clothes."

"I did, thank you. How did you organize that?"

He shrugs as he sits down. "It wasn't hard. When I borrowed some old clothes from Betty yesterday, she said she'd be happy to go out and get a few things. She dropped

them off this morning.”

“She sounds nice,” I answer, filling my bowl with berries.

“She is. You should meet her.”

Even though Kit has just said an extremely normal, everyday thing, my blood freezes in my veins.

I’m going to have to meet a lot of people. I’m the alpha’s mate!

In high school, I was quite happily off the radar. I had my friends and didn’t look for popularity. I preferred it if most people didn’t notice me.

Then, for years with Father, I was kept in his cabin like a prisoner, only let out a few times a week to work at the factory. There were other workers there, but we weren’t allowed to socialize. All of us were slaves.

I’m about to be the center of the spotlight, with the whole pack focused on me... and I have to help rule them.

I feel like there should be a part of me that’s looking forward to having power over people who wronged me. But instead of feeling triumphant, I just feel scared.

“You okay?” Kit asks. “You’ve gone a bit pale.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I say, taking a sip of coffee and starting on my yogurt. “Just thinking.”

The look in his eye changes, just slightly, but it’s gone before I can say anything. The ugly questions rise in my mind, but I push them away.

I'm having so much fun right now, just eating breakfast that I didn't have to make, relaxing in a nice, clean place where I'm safe...

Well... relatively safe.

"Ah, Lexa?" Kit says.

"What?" I ask abruptly. My heart trembles a little as I wonder if this is it, the moment when all this goes to hell.

"There's a meeting today, and you need to go with me."

My guts twist, then sink. I put my bowl down on the table, taking a sip of coffee to settle the sudden bubble of nerves.

"What?" I blurt. "Why?"

"I told you yesterday—you're expected to be part of things from now on. That's the main reason the council wanted me to get a mate, so we could lead the pack as a team."

Wrapping my hands around my cup, I let out a sigh, trying not to show how freaked out I am.

Standing up in front of a bunch of people who never liked me, who probably want to get rid of me, and may have been involved in my mother's death?

Sounds like a fucking picnic.

"After we finish breakfast, we'll go, okay?"

“Okay,” I agree reluctantly.

As I finish my coffee, I wonder exactly what I’ve gotten myself into. And how much Iris Porter really knows.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

I can feel Lexa's discomfort growing as we finish breakfast, but there's nothing I can do to shield her from this situation.

It's a fact of life that she will have to face the elders sooner or later, and even though I know it will be unpleasant for us both, I think getting the first contact out of the way will help Lexa feel more confident about our future.

I hope.

Hope is all I have, and I'm surprised to find out that I actually have a lot of it.

Secrets from the past, the conflicts within the pack, and my past with Lexa form sharp jaws around me that I can't escape, but deep inside me, there is a glowing flame of faith that gets stronger every second I spend with her.

And it's because I felt it in her kiss...

I get up from the table to do the dishes so I don't run the risk of saying something too forward or revealing my emotions. The truth is, I'm still hung up on last night, and the urge to grab her and press my lips to hers is so strong I can barely think straight.

The run through the woods awakened that spark in me, and I felt her wolf answering mine. There was no denying the connection between us, a deep, enduring knowledge that our primal souls are bound as one, always have been, and always will be.

When she initiated the kiss, it surprised me, but didn't shock me. I knew after our wolves had run together, it was only a matter of time until our human sides were

brought together as well.

Magnetism. Pulled together. The closer we get, the stronger the draw.

My body starts to wake, and sensory memories from the night before begin to throb through my body. I focus intently on washing the bowl, scrubbing hard at the edges to banish last night's encounter from my mind.

I manage to hold it at bay and not give in to it, but the memory of that kiss still lives on my skin, and I don't want to forget it.

It's the source of all my hope...

I finish the dishes and turn around, hoping that my smile is easy and relaxed. I already had enough to hide—adding furious, burning arousal to the weight I'm already carrying seems impossible—but I have to stay cool if I want to make Lexa feel safe.

She looks up at me and smiles. Her pale gray eyes light up, shining like crystal. This looks like a true expression, not something forced, and the hope inside me blooms.

"Ready to go?" I ask.

"Sure," she says, shrugging. "It's not like I have a purse or anything to get. I've got absolutely nothing of my own here."

How did she end up in Gryphon Eyrie with no belongings? Where the hell has she been?

"I can take you shopping," I answer. "After the meeting, we can go to town and get anything you need."

“Sounds good,” she agrees.

Even though she smiles, she doesn’t get up, and I can feel her reluctance growing.

“It’s okay,” I say gently. “You’re the alpha’s mate, and you aren’t walking into this meeting as the town misfit. You’re walking in as their queen.”

Lexa looks away, a little shiver running through her. “That doesn’t exactly make me feel better.”

“Well, maybe think of yourself as a princess?” I chuckle. “Or, I don’t know, ‘insert confidence-building noun.’ Call yourself whatever you like.”

For a moment, there is so much pain in her eyes, I wish I could take the words back, even though I don’t know what was wrong with them. Her mouth twists into a hard line as her face pales.

“Someone used to call me princess,” she says quietly. “Someone I don’t like.”

“Okay,” I say, floundering. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she answers, sighing. “You didn’t know.”

I stand there for another couple of seconds, feeling like I’m in the deep end of a pool with no edge in sight. To my relief, Lexa gets up and sticks her phone in her pocket, walking determinedly towards the front door.

The meeting is being held in the rec hall today, which is slightly less formal than the other locations, but a lot less than the study behind the church.

I would have liked for Lexa to meet the council in a more casual setting, but I had to

bargain hard enough with Loretta to get this concession. There was no hope of doing any better.

Loretta would have had a town ceremony, with Lexa standing up on a podium for the entire pack to stare at and judge. I can't imagine anything worse.

When we pull up in the parking lot, Lexa jumps out confidently, but I can see the color draining from her cheeks.

I wish I could hold her hand or put an arm around her. I'd do anything to give her comfort and strength.

Even though it's hard, I resist the urge to touch her. I know that the urge is more about comforting myself than her, and it's important to put her needs first.

Lexa pauses at the big swing doors, and I step in front of her to shove them open. The council is gathered around a huge table in the center of the room, and the way everyone looks up at once is almost comical.

Even from across the room, I see Loretta's eyes narrow. Her lips curve in a cruel smile, and I have to wonder what evil torture she's planning.

I'm still thinking about calling her out to the alpha's challenge. Grandfather killed a lot of wolves that way—enemy or not, he didn't really care, just so long as it spread his reign of terror.

"Hey!" Cass yells, bouncing up and down. Her high, excited voice shatters the silence and breaks the tension. She runs towards us, and I see Lexa flinch a little.

Cass either pays no attention or doesn't even notice. She barrels straight up to us and wraps her arms around Lexa, giving her a squeeze.

“So great to see you!” she cries. “It’s about time Kit took a mate, and I was so happy to hear that it was you, Lexa.”

“Really?” Lexa asks, looking stiff in Cass’s arms.

“Misha works with me at the charity center, and Kate is good friends with my sister. When you first left, they were really worried about you.”

Lexa’s eyes fill with tears, and her lip trembles. “Are they alright?” she asks. “I never got to say goodbye.”

“They’re doing great,” Cass says, hugging Lexa again. “And they can’t wait to see you.”

Cass holds on to Lexa for a little longer, giving her time to get herself back under control. I feel like a complete idiot that I didn’t look into Lexa’s friends from school and try to get her in contact with them.

“When you’re done assaulting her, can we get on with this, please?” Mabel asks, rapping the table with her knuckles.

“You think everything is an assault,” Cass replies flippantly as she takes Lexa’s hand to lead her towards the table. “No matter how soft and gentle I am, you continue to spread the complete lie that I am a violent brute.”

“Excuse me?” Mabel replies, indignant. “Should I show everyone the bite marks?”

Cass wiggles her eyebrows. “Bold choice, but I won’t stop you.”

Xavier bursts out laughing, and Mabel narrows her eyes, shooting mental daggers at Cass. I move over to the side of the table and pull out a chair, gesturing for Lexa to

sit. She moves gratefully out of the line of fire and takes a seat out of the action.

“If you’re done,” Loretta says in a scathing tone, “can we return to business?”

“I don’t know,” Cass mutters, sounding completely mystified. “Can we?”

Loretta’s face goes red, and she looks like she’s about to explode.

After my grandparents died, I was required to appoint three new council members, and I chose Cass, Xavier, and Mabel because they were very active in the community.

All three volunteer regularly for charity and help to even the class divide in Cyan Lock.

And they are all my age with innovative ideas for the future. All of them can help me take the pack in a new direction.

Loretta looked like she was going to rip my face off when I made the announcement, but speaking against me at that time would definitely have resulted in the alpha’s challenge. As much as she disagrees with me, it’s obvious she wants to avoid that.

Even if she considers me to be a misbehaving pup, she knows what I’ve done. What grandfather forced me to do. He made me into a killing machine, and no one knows it better than his right-hand lady.

“The ball,” Loretta says, clearing her throat. “We are here to discuss this year’s event. We should keep with tradition and have it here at the hall. The usual caterers. I’ll take care of the invitations. The dress code will be—”

“Wait, wait,” Mabel cuts in, waving her hand. “Word about town is that most people

are sick of the formal ball. To truly include the whole pack, I'd like to propose a carnival. We can have rides and junk food. Games for the kids, face painting, balloons—"

"Excuse me?" Loretta cuts her off. "Are you really suggesting we turn our formal dinner into a literal circus?"

"Yes," Cass answers, grinning. She puts her elbows on the table and props her chin in her hands, raising her eyebrows at Loretta.

"The first families won't stand for this," Derrik says firmly. "They won't be comfortable going to such an informal event, and they won't like the break in tradition. Thank you for your suggestion, Mabel, but Kit—"

"Thinks it's a great idea," I finish for him. "I need to do a bit of thinking about the location, because we'll need a lot of room. But otherwise, I think a carnival would be wonderful."

"Yay!" Cass bounces in her chair. "Great! I already booked a cotton candy machine."

Loretta glares as if the force of her gaze could push Cass right off her chair. Cass looks over at Loretta and smiles sweetly. I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from laughing.

"Get together a list," I say to the others. "Just something basic at this stage, what sort of rides and games we want, and food. Then we'll hash out exactly what we need."

"This is going to be so fun," Xavier says. "I was not looking forward to six hours in a tight suit."

"It's tradition!" Loretta hisses at him.

“To dress as befits our station, gather with those of the highest class, and discuss between us what shall be done with the pack for the next year and what could be improved from previous years. We are the ruling class, and it is our right to govern and divide the profits of this town as we see fit.”

There is a shocked silence around the table as everyone stares at Loretta.

We were all thinking it, but did she really just say it out loud?

“You mean, take more than your share?” Lexa asks Loretta very softly. “Exert your power over those weaker than you and consume more resources than you need so you can let others starve? Is that what you mean by rule?”

Loretta turns her gaze on Lexa, and the two women glare at each other. Even though Lexa stays casually seated in her chair, there is a quiet resistance in her that slowly overpowers Loretta’s high-born indignance.

“I’d expect no less from you,” Loretta spits.

“Watch it,” I growl, letting my wolf shimmer in my eyes and echo in my voice. I want to make it clear to Loretta that if she threatens my mate, I won’t wait for a challenge—I’ll just tear her apart right here and now.

Loretta takes a deep breath, blinking as she turns to me. I watch her visibly compose herself, letting the rage slide away as she covers it with a perfect mask of civility.

“I—or anyone else on this council, for that matter—don’t have to listen to a single word from this...

female.” She spits the last word out, as if she wishes it could have been a worse one.

“Lexa has been appointed by name and contract only. She has not earned her position and, as such, has no authority here.”

“But I do,” I say, glaring at her. “And I command you to listen to Lexa and take her every word under consideration.”

“Of course I will, Alpha,” Loretta practically purrs. “I remain ever loyal. But you and I are both aware of the duty that must be fulfilled before Lexa can truly claim her position.”

Don’t say it, you fucking bitch.

Loretta smiles, licking her lips a little as if the words she’s about to speak feel delicious in her mouth.

“In order to be truly accepted as luna, Lexa must bear heirs to the alpha. Without that service, she is just... a consort. A momentary distraction.”

The words cut the air with the force of a blade. A strangled gasp gets caught in Lexa’s throat. I reach out to her, but she’s already running, shoving away from the table so hard, the chair crashes to the floor. She bolts from the room.

“Not a shred of class,” Loretta mutters.

“We are not done here!” I roar, pointing at her. “You’ve challenged my authority too many times now to be unpunished. I will be back to settle this matter with you—make no mistake!”

Loretta nods and tries to keep her face calm, but I see a flash of fear deep in her eyes.

Good. You should fear me more than anyone ever feared the old man.

Not wasting another second, I turn and go after Lexa.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

I run from the room so fast that everything around me becomes a blur. I can barely feel my feet hitting the floor as I race across the rec hall and slam through the huge swing doors.

I have to get out of here!

Loretta's words ring through my mind, over and over. I can't escape them, the shocking vocalization of my worst fear echoing through my soul as I try to flee from the shame they invoke.

A toy, a concubine... a momentary distraction!

I don't know where I'm going, and I can barely see through my tears. Somewhere ahead, a smear of green appears against the neat rows of buildings. I bolt towards it.

I have to get out of here... but where am I supposed to go?

I manage to push down all my emotions as I focus completely on running. The ridge of green gets bigger, and as I get closer, it swallows my vision, becoming a welcoming stretch of forest that leads directly into the Range.

Go, go! Alone forever... It's the only way to be safe!

I keep up my pace for about a mile before my foot hits a big tree root, sending me crashing to the ground. The forest floor is soft, padded with fallen leaves, so I don't get hurt, but the shock leaves me trembling so hard I can't get up.

I wrap my arms around myself, curling up and letting myself cry.

A momentary distraction...

The humiliation of that day is still too much for me to bear. In a way, Father's abuse was more honest. He made it clear from the outset that he had no respect for me and that he was going to hurt me as often as possible.

Kit promised me the world. He told me he loved me, and I believed him.

Pain rips through me again, and I sob as hard as I can, letting the grief take me. I can't hold it back anymore, and I don't want to.

Let me be unmade. Pain is all I am, and I'm trapped now, just like I've always been.

Through the horrible memories of the last few years, older ones begin to surface. I see my mother's soft smile, hear her voice.

You are beautiful, dear one. Precious and loved. Never forget that, my darling.

"Mom," I whisper. "I don't know anything anymore."

Calmer now, I sit up and look around. Tears still slide down my cheeks, and I'm shivering from exertion, but my emotions are beginning to settle down. I wrap my arms around my knees, rocking back and forth.

All of this would be bearable if I didn't want him so damn much!

Pain throbs through my chest, making me scrunch up my face and fight against it. That is the ultimate truth here—that I don't trust myself around Kit.

I'd let it happen all over again, just to feel the excitement of being in his arms. If I could go back, I wouldn't change a thing...

Shame and denial rise in me, but I know I won't have peace until I face this.

I'm not afraid of Kit.

I'm afraid of myself...

If my thoughts slip back to that night years ago or even just to last night, my body begins to throb and ache.

The sensation is so pleasurable, I close my eyes and simply feel it, letting it banish all the fear and pain.

For a few minutes, I ride on the sweet wave of desire, imagining how it could be if I trusted Kit.

We are married now. It's not like he could just dump me.

Then Loretta's words return to ring through my mind. He absolutely could put me aside and take someone else, if he really wanted to.

He could marry Derrik's daughter, for instance. Maybe he just wants another night with me. One last roll with the girl from the wrong side of the tracks before he goes back to his own kind.

None of these doubts would hit so keenly if I felt Kit was being truly honest with me. There is still that tension in his face, the way he slides his eyes away from mine. I don't know if it's to do with what happened between us or something to do with my mother.

It was easy to believe Father when he said he did it. But the more I think about it, the less likely it sounds. He would have done anything to capture her and take her back as his slave. Anything else would be a waste and a failure of his ego.

Bringing Laura back in chains would definitely deter any other prisoners of his from attempting to escape. My mother made a good run of it, too, evading him for several years. Reclaiming her would have been his ultimate triumph.

I'm not as afraid of Father as I was. I know that my current position grants me security and safety. But all this recent talk about putting me aside awakens fresh terror inside me.

Father could reclaim me, and no one would stand in his way. Cyan Lock would probably say good riddance.

If only Kit—

“Lexa,” Kit’s voice breaks through my jumbled thoughts. I’m so shocked, I jump.

I look up at him, not even trying to hide my red, swollen eyes.

“Oh, Lexa,” he says, kneeling beside me. “It’s alright. That’s not how I feel about you, I promise. Loretta is just being mean, don’t let her get to you.”

“Is it true, though?” I ask. “What she said about putting me aside if I’m not... not fertile?”

“Yes,” he affirms, nodding. “But it’s not like I would. That’s tradition in a lot of old families, not just wolf lines. But I would never let you go, Lexa. Don’t you know how hard I tried to find you?”

I keep my eyes on him, seeking any sign of falsehood in his manner or words. He appears completely sincere, and it doesn't comfort me.

What's harder to believe? That he wants to use me, or that he's done a complete turnaround from the day he dumped me in front of his whole family?

For the first time, I truly take into account that his grandfather is dead. I saw the dissent at the meeting, how the younger members are trying to change the pack for the better.

Maybe there's no more death squads, no more killing.

Maybe... Kit did what he had to do.

I look up at him, a new realization dawning. I was so wrapped up in my own pain, I never considered that he was also carrying his own.

It can't have been easy, living as Leopold's second. Leopold might have been just as bad—or worse—than my father.

An uncomfortable feeling rises in me that I might be making excuses just so I can kiss him again. Maybe even justify falling into his arms.

"We'll need to fix this," Kit says. "Obviously not today, but you'll need to face the elders—"

"No!" I cry out.

"You have to, Lexa," Kit insists. "It's the only way to maintain our power. I'll punish Loretta—I'm not sure how yet, but I will. You'll still have to face her and remain confident in yourself and your right to rule, no matter what she throws at you."

“I’m not cut out for this, Kit!” I protest. “Don’t you see? You have no idea the life I’ve had to live, the things I’ve done—”

“Then tell me!” he says a bit too forcefully. He lunges towards me, grabbing my arms and making me look into his face. “Tell me everything, where you’ve been all this time, what happened the night you left... tell me what you know!”

There is a frantic look in his eye, and I sense volumes behind that last question. Suddenly, my guard comes up again.

“Tell me what you know,” I echo, searching his face. His eyes widen, and his fingers tighten on my arms.

“I don’t know anything,” he whispers hoarsely. “I know nothing.”

Liar!

I don’t know what he’s lying about, but I can sense it. There is some dark, ugly secret inside him, and he definitely doesn’t want me to find out about it.

I’m doing the exact same thing, so how can I blame him?

“I’m sorry, Lexa,” he says, pain in his voice. “I really am so, so sorry. All I can do is keep apologizing, and swear to you I will never let you get hurt... ever again.”

Even though there was a lie in his previous words, there is no dishonesty in him now. I can feel the truth of that statement, and it’s the one thing I needed to hear more than anything else.

“Do you promise?” I ask, my voice coming out high and trembly. “Do you promise you will protect me, no matter what comes?”

“I do,” he says fiercely, gripping my arms and pulling me closer. “These aren’t empty words, Lexa. I made my oath to you, and I will stand by it!”

His face is so close to mine now, his eyes are all I can see. Deep, warm blue, swimming with points of turquoise. I never knew how beautiful his eyes really were until that night he pulled me close to him and I saw into his soul.

I try to stop it, but lust rises in me, an ache that spreads between my legs, throbs across my belly and chest, and tightens my nipples. Kit feels it, and I see the look in his eyes turn desperate.

He’s so close, I barely have to move at all. Just the slightest tilt of my head, and our lips touch.

Kit stays almost completely still, letting me kiss him. I softly run my lips across his, teasing gently as I enjoy the thrills of pleasure that sing through me. With these tender touches, memories return to me in a rush. Things I locked deep inside so I never had to feel them again.

But I want to. Oh, dear God, help me, I’ve never wanted anything more!

I can feel his mouth all over me, devouring my breasts, diving between my legs and lapping deep into me with his tongue until I came like a fucking fountain. How he made me come, over and over again, with his hands and his tongue, teasing me with his body until he finally pierced me with his cock.

The memory of the hard length of him sinking into my hot, wet heat breaks me.

I lunge at him, grabbing his shoulders and hurling him to the ground.

I grip his sides with my knees and grind downwards with my hips while I devour his

mouth, sliding my lips against his and darting my tongue between his lips.

Kit groans under me, his hands roughly moving up my waist and caressing my ribs under the shirt. I thrust into the pressure, encouraging him, and as his hands cover my breasts, I gasp with pleasure, falling against him to writhe in pure ecstasy.

This... this is what I ran from. The pure truth of our bodies together, the absolute rightness of it... and his impossible denial.

With Kit's hands on me and his hard body clamped between my thighs, it's easy to push away thoughts of his betrayal. I've held my lust back for so long, it's incandescent. A living fire that burns away all my restraint.

Even if this is the stupidest fucking idea I've ever had, I'm still going to do it. I can't stop... I won't!

Kit wraps his hands around me, caressing my back as he pulls me down against him. I can feel his erection through my pants, and a moan pours out of my throat as I rock back and forth, teasing myself with it.

Oh my fucking God, this is hot.

I feel Kit's fingers trail down my back, and he grabs my ass, squeezing hard and making me jump. I grind down harder with my hips, making him cry out as my weight presses against his hard cock.

I break the kiss, grinning as I look down on him, my mind completely empty of all trauma and doubt. He smiles back, and I know he feels just as free. All the secrets between us, the pain in our past, none of it matters right now.

Kit reaches up, cupping my cheeks with both hands. For a moment, his eyes shimmer,

and his lips part as if he's about to say something. I feel a trickle of fear attempt to break my desire, but then he pulls me down to him and kisses me hard.

I moan through the kiss, loving the feel of his arms pinning me against him as his mouth devours mine.

Trapped by my own lust and Kit's obvious desire for me, I writhe in ecstasy, squirming on top of him as I urge him on, almost begging him to take me and replace all the pain in me with pure, white-hot pleasure.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

Lexa squirms on top of me, her fingers digging into my shoulders as she braces her knees against my hips. Her mouth is hot and eager on mine as she presses me to the ground, kissing me even harder.

This! Oh, God, yes, this!

I'd closed this memory off, locked it somewhere deep in my mind. It was too awful to contemplate never feeling this way again. As Lexa rocks back and forth on me, I slip my hands under her shirt and run my hands across her skin, the light touch thrilling me to the bone.

Suddenly, she shivers, a shudder that runs through her from her shoulders right to her toes. She gasps, almost as if she's in shock, then flings herself away from me.

I lay on the ground for a second, so stunned that I couldn't even move. As I sit up slowly, I look across at Lexa, where she's sitting under a tree with her arms wrapped around her knees.

"Lexa, are you okay? Did I do something wrong?"

She shakes her head, and that only makes me more confused. I shuffle across the ground to get a bit closer to her, and she looks up at me, a hard glare that stops me as if I've hit a force field.

Her eyes were always so soft and gray, like a sweet snowfall with pale, fluffy clouds. Now they're violent blizzards, with dark sky and chips of ice.

“Can I do something?”

She shakes her head, her lips pressed together. I cross my legs and sit comfortably on the ground, deciding that I won't leave her unless she really wants me to.

“I'm right here, okay? Tell me what you need. If you want me to go away, I will.”

It's hard to speak calmly while my body still rages with red-hot lust, but I rein myself in, refusing to let my desire for her get in the way of taking care of her.

It was my selfishness that got me into this mess. I won't make that mistake again.

Lexa looks up, then her eyes dart furtively around, looking into the trees.

“No,” she whispers. “Don't go.”

“Okay,” I answer, nodding. “Do you think we should go back home? You look like you could use a rest.”

“Uh-uh,” she mutters, shaking her head and wiping her nose. “The last thing I want to do is just get stuck between four walls, locked in with my thoughts. I need a distraction.”

“How about we go out?” I suggest.

“Out? I don't think I could deal with people right now.”

“We'll go to a movie. Nice and dark and cozy, no interaction. We can get takeout for dinner.”

For a moment, her face is fairly blank, then a smile slowly creeps over her face.

“Okay, Kit. That sounds like a great idea. Thank you.”

I stand up quickly, reaching out to her. Joy surges through me at the knowledge that I’ve finally done something right, something good.

Lexa looks up at me and takes my hand, letting me help her up. She carefully dusts off her clothes, and I notice the deep blush of red across her cheeks.

Thinking about how all the dirt and dry leaves got there, maybe.

Lust threatens to rise in me again, but I hold it back. As wonderful as our time in the woods was, it doesn’t mean she forgives me or that I have a free pass. I still have a lot of work to do.

And secrets to keep.

When we walk over to the movie theater, the streets are fairly empty. Lexa looks comfortable with me, which is a good thing. If the town suspects the match isn’t a good one, then the elders can contest it.

Like Loretta is already doing. I still have to decide on a punishment for her.

We stop outside the theater to check out the showings. I point out a couple of foreign films that catch my eye.

“This Polish one, I’ve been wanting to see it. It’s a historical piece about a poet and the development of literature.”

Lexa looks at me like I’ve grown a second head. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“What do you mean?”

“That is not my idea of fun, Kit. I’ll be bored as hell.”

“Okay, well, what about this one?” I point to another showing. “It’s a modern film, with main themes of the survival of the human spirit, the meaning of true courage—”

“Kit,” Lexa says, crossing her arms, “if you want to go to the movies with me, these are your choices.” She walks over to the last two posters and points to them with a big flourish. One of them is apparently about machine guns and monster trucks, and the other is about a lake monster.

“Are you serious?” I mutter.

“Completely,” Lexa answers. “Action or creature feature. I’d argue that the creature feature has all those elements you like—the meaning of courage, I think you said?”

“I don’t see how—”

Lexa giggles. “This was your idea. Are you with me or not?”

The sound of her laughter is so sweet to me, and the smile on her face touches me so deeply, it hurts.

All I want is to make her happy.

“Okay,” I say. “Monster trucks, it is.”

I buy our tickets, and we hit the concession stand. Lexa seems hesitant to spend a lot of money, but with my encouragement, she orders popcorn, candy, soda, and ice cream. We practically waddle to our seats, our arms full of junk food.

I prepare myself for two hours of absolute hell, telling myself anything is worth it just

to be with Lexa. To my surprise, I get into the movie, enjoying the tale of guys caught in a corrupt demolition derby and how they shoot their way out of it in the end with a big machine gun battle.

“You seemed to enjoy that,” Lexa laughs as the credits begin to roll.

“I did,” I answer. “It was really fun.”

“Good, I’m glad you liked it. Should we get some dinner now?”

“I’d love to! There’s a French restaurant not far from here.”

Lexa sighs. “Not what I had in mind, Kit.”

“Italian? Thai?”

Lexa sighs, her breath rattling from deep inside her chest, sounding a bit like a tired horse.

“Is there a food truck in town?”

“Food... truck?” I try not to gag on the words.

“Yeah. Something that sells burgers, fries, and corn dogs. That kind of thing.”

My stomach shrivels up, but I nod and try not to let my disgust show. “By the park. In... West End.”

“Oh, cool,” she says enthusiastically. “That’s Harry. I used to go there a lot. It’s so cool that he’s still operating.”

As we head out of the theatre, I wrestle with both my reluctance to eat any kind of food from a burger truck and sheer relief that Lexa did not react to my “West End” comment.

It’s where the poor live. It’s always spoken of in derogatory terms by the elders and first families. Grandfather would have burned it to the ground, but if he did, he’d have fewer people to rule.

I drive out to the park. When we arrive, Lexa bounces out of the car, hurrying over to the truck.

She’s definitely distracted, and that’s all that matters. I can cope with anything, so long as I can make her happy.

“Harry!” Lexa cries, jumping up at the middle-aged man in the truck window. “How have you been?”

“Lord, Lexa, is that you?” the man replies after a moment. “You’ve changed a bit, lil’ bub.”

Lexa laughs. “Not a bub anymore, old man.”

“You’ll always be a bub to me, lil’ girl. You want your usual?”

Lexa raises her eyebrows. “You still remember it, after all this time?”

“Of course I do! You’re a loyal customer. Hell, you’re practically family.”

“Cool, then make me the usual, and a beef special for my… date.”

Her hesitation over how to introduce me could have triggered me a little, if Harry

wasn't staring at me with massive, wide eyes and a slack jaw.

"Alpha!" he gasps. "It's an honor to serve you."

Please don't fear me. I'm not my grandfather.

"Good evening," I answer, unable to stop the affected tone that creeps into my voice or the noble posture. "It's an honor to visit your establishment."

Lexa looks at me in complete shock, her mouth twisted into a tight line. "Don't embarrass me!" she mutters.

I look down at her, more confused than I've ever been in my whole life.

I can't stop myself from using a commanding tone or threatening body language. Grandfather beat it into me from the time I was five.

"It's okay, Harry," Lexa says, a slight drawl echoing at the edge of her words. "He's my mate. You didn't hear?"

"Nah," Harry answers, still watching me warily. "No one thought to tell old Harry."

"Well, now you know. It's all good, old friend. We're just here for dinner."

I feel like shouting out loud that I'm not going to murder his whole family if the burger is undercooked.

"One chicken supreme and a beef special, coming right up!" Harry waves his spatula and disappears around the corner, and I hear the grill start up.

"That didn't go as expected," Lexa remarks. "Is the whole town that scared of you?"

“Probably,” I sigh, shaking my head. “Except the north side.”

“Maybe you should do something about that,” she muses, tilting her head. The intense look in her eye is slightly mischievous, and I grin back.

“I think I will,” I answer. “Things are out of balance in this town, and it’s time to set it right.”

I thought I’d done enough to undo Grandfather’s reign of terror. Now I know I’ve barely scratched the surface.

“Order up!” Harry calls.

We hurry to the window to get our food, and I manage to pay without frightening the old man. I leave a big tip for him, and Lexa leads me over to the picnic tables in the park.

When we sit down, Lexa immediately opens up the little cardboard boxes and starts stuffing fries into her mouth. I open mine to reveal a huge burger and a mountain of fries.

“So what, exactly, am I about to put in my mouth?” I ask warily.

“It’s a bacon cheeseburger. Trust me, you’ll love it.”

“Hmm,” I mutter, picking it up. There’s not a shred of salad in sight, and grease drips from the side of the bun to run down my hands.

“I’m going to get this junk all over my shirt!” I complain.

Lexa laughs. “I think you can handle a little grease and dirt on you—besides, is it

really that hard for you to buy a new shirt?”

“No,” I answer, suddenly realizing how ridiculous it is to care so much about temporary things. “It’s not. Okay, I’m going in. Let’s see how this goes.”

Lexa watches me with amusement, starting on her own burger. I have to squish it a little and open my mouth wide, but I manage to get a big bite without the whole thing falling apart.

I chew carefully, waiting to be assaulted by disgusting flavors. To my surprise, the meat is just nicely charred, on top of crisp bacon and melted tasty cheese. With barbecue sauce on the bottom bun and mayo on the top, the entire burger is a symphony of flavor.

“Oh my God,” I mumble. “This is fucking fantastic.”

“I told you!” Lexa laughs, looking truly pleased. She keeps watching me as I finish the burger, enjoying my sounds of satisfaction and surprise as I make my way through it.

“My lord,” I mutter, wiping my mouth with a napkin. “The fried onions hidden in the top bun with a spot of mustard really pushed it over the top. Thank you, Lexa. I’ve never had food like this before.”

“My pleasure,” she says, finishing her own food. “But the night isn’t done yet.”

“Oh?”

“We’re going to the bar for shots.”

“We are?”

“It’s the only way to round up a night like this.”

“Okay.”

We throw our trash in the bin and hurry back to the car. I turn towards the north side, but Lexa directs me back to the West End.

We pull up outside a very dark, dirty bar with covered windows. It had a bright sign once, but now the words are so broken, it’s impossible to tell what they might have said.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask hesitantly.

“Yep,” she answers. “It’s a good place. We used to sneak in when we were sixteen, and Carly would give us glasses of champagne—that we later found out was apple juice and mineral water.”

“Nice trick,” I chuckle. “Carly’s the owner?”

“Yeah. It’s family-run.”

Lexa leads me through the front door, and the place is even worse than I imagined from seeing the state of the outside. It’s extremely dark, with crowded tables almost completely hidden against the walls and corners. The air is lined with shifting waves of smoke.

I stumble along behind Lexa, knowing that if she weren’t holding my hand, I’d probably turn around and run.

“Hey, hey!” Lexa says, sitting down on a bar stool. “Is that you, Bobby?”

“Is that you , Lexa?”

A short, dark-haired woman shuffles over, and they briefly hug over the bar. I sit down awkwardly, trying not to draw attention to myself.

“So you’re back. The rumors are true,” Bobby flicks her eyes in my direction. “How’s married life?”

“Just fine,” Lexa answers, shoving the topic aside. “We’re celebrating. Pour some shots of bourbon, will you?”

“Yeah, I could definitely use some Jim Beam,” I say without thinking.

Both girls look at me with amused expressions.

“What did he just say?” Bobby asks.

“No idea,” Lexa shakes her head. “Must be a foreign language.”

“What?” I mumble, completely lost.

Bobby leans down and grabs two shot glasses. She smacks them down on the bar, then turns to get a tall bottle without a label, half filled with incredibly dark liquid.

“Raw bourbon,” she announces, pouring two shots. “Off-label. We can’t afford any name brands down here.”

“I didn’t know such a thing existed,” I say, picking up the small glass to look deeply into it.

Lexa grabs hers, downs it in one gulp, and smacks her glass on the table. My hand

trembles a little as I bring the shot to my lips.

Is this stuff going to send me blind?

There's no time for fear—the girls are staring at me, ready to pass judgment. I slam down the alcohol and drop the glass to the counter, waiting for the ill effects.

To my surprise, there are none. The bourbon doesn't burn as much as I thought it would, and complex flavors dance across my tongue.

“Another?” Bobby asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” I answer. “That stuff is really good!”

“You'd be surprised, kid,” Bobby says. “There are all kinds of special gems you can find down here in the West End.”

Neither one of us looks at Lexa, but I know that's what Bobby means from the way her eyes dart to the younger woman.

“Don't worry, Bobby,” I say. “I know I've found some extremely valuable things down here, and I'll treat them with care and respect.”

“See that you do,” Bobby answers, filling the glasses again. “Now, let's see how many of these we can get into you.”

I tilt my head back, letting the sweet, spicy rush of bourbon flow across my tongue. “You're on, Bobby,” I gasp, smacking my glass down. “My wallet is open, so you just keep 'em coming.”

“Dangerous words, son,” Bobby says, grinning as she pours another shot. “I'll teach

you to challenge me!”

I wink at her, toasting with my glass before I slam the shot down. I look over at Lexa, and I see her eyes sparking with amusement, a big smile on her face as she tries to hold in her giggles.

Seeing Lexa so happy has lifted my spirit, and I feel more connected to her than I ever have before.

I had no idea there was so much fun to be had on the wrong side of the tracks.

I’m having the time of my fucking life!

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

The kiss really shook me up.

It's the second time my urges have overpowered me, and I know I'm getting into dangerous territory. I can't deny the hold Kit has over me, and I know I won't be able to hold out forever.

I needed to blow off steam in the worst possible way, and even though a cheap night with greasy food and cheap drinks was top of my list, I never expected Kit to agree to it.

Watching him laugh with Bobby, downing shot after shot, I almost don't recognize him. His dark brown hair is unruly, falling around his face in twisted tendrils. His clothes are smudged with dirt and grease, and his hands are dirty.

Looks like he just did a ten-hour shift in the factory, then six hours of straight drinking.

Kit turns to look at me, his blue eyes burning with excitement. "Thank you for bringing me here," he says, the cultured tone of his voice clashing violently with his rough look. "I'm having a really good time tonight."

"I think you've had enough of that rotgut," I reply, putting my hand over the glass so Bobby can't fill it again.

"Oh, come on," Kit protests, jiggling the glass. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not." I shake my head, grinning. "You're fucking drunk."

“Pretty sure you are, too,” he laughs. “And your glass is full.”

I knock it back quickly, then show the empty glass to him. “Now it’s empty.”

“You’re no fun,” Kit groans. “You seriously want to go home?”

Even with my senses blurry and my mind a bit numb, I still don’t want to get stuck sitting in Kit’s living room. Or worse, curled up next to him in bed, trying not to touch him.

“How about darts?” I suggest. “Are you any good?”

“Never played,” he answers. “But I’m willing to try.”

“How about some dark ale?” Bobby asks, putting two big jugs in front of us. “And some mixed nuts and jerky?”

Kit grabs a slice of jerky and bites into it, making noises of approval as he follows it with a handful of nuts and a big swallow of dark ale.

“Oh my God.” He shakes his head, his eyes rolling back in pleasure. “Bobby, this stuff is amazing. I want you involved with the annual event.”

Bobby’s eyes go wide, and she stares at Kit like a rabbit frozen in headlights. “The big shindig? Beggin’ your pardon, Alpha, but I don’t think the likes of me are welcome there.”

“Apparently, we’re having a carnival,” I say. “Not a ball.”

“Even then,” Bobby mutters. “Doesn’t seem right.”

Kit raps the table with his knuckles. “We’re making changes, Bobby. Believe that. Residents of the West End are absolutely welcome on the north side. Just give me and my new council a few months. The elders are offering resistance, but we’re making changes.”

“How about your grandfather’s other... friends?” Bobby asks carefully.

Kit looks at her evenly, his face open and honest. I don’t know if it’s the alcohol or a personal revelation, but he looks like he’s suddenly become enlightened to a great truth.

“Bobby,” he says softly, “there are certain members of grandfather’s staff who are no longer in my employ, or that of the council. When grandfather died, so did that arm of the pack. There will be no more... visits from those three particular wolves. Never again.”

I swallow down a gasp as my heart flutters in my chest. Kit didn’t really reveal much, but it was enough.

He confirmed that the death squad really did work for Leopold, officially on the payroll. Even though most people knew, Leopold kept it as vague as possible so he could maintain his flawless image. Got to make the rich feel safe—but who cares about a couple of worthless peasants here and there?

I look away in a hurry, not wanting Kit to see my emotional struggle. I know richer families were sometimes hit, too, just in a much more discreet way. Leopold ruled by fear, and the kill squad was his weapon.

And Kit... did he approve of it? Was he part of it?

I turn to look back at him, and all I can see in his eyes is need.

He's trying to change. I've got to give him that.

"Well, that's good to know," Bobby says. "Drink your ale, you two, and have a good evening."

"I will. I mean, I am." Kit smiles. "Here, let me buy a round for the bar."

He goes through his wallet and pulls out a small stack of bills. He doesn't even count it, just slams it on the table in front of Bobby.

"That's far too generous of you—" Bobby begins.

"Take it," he insists. "Spoil everyone in the joint. My grandfather told me the poor were dishonest, always scheming to get another dollar out of you. I'm pleased to find out that isn't the case."

"Get off with you," Bobby says, waving at us. "I can't take much more of this civilized conversation."

"Let's go," I say, nudging Kit as I grab the beers. "Darts are over here."

Kit stumbles a little as we reach the table, but manages to stay on his feet. I'm worried about how we'll play darts, but after the first round, I can see he has a steady arm, even as drunk as he is.

"You can really play," I comment as he pulls his darts from the board. "You really never handled darts before?"

"Nope," he answers. "But I have aimed things at targets."

He doesn't elaborate, and I don't ask. I take my turn with the board, most of my shots

going wide.

“Might be time to call it a night,” I say, pulling the darts out of the board. “My arm is done.”

“Yeah,” Kit says. “I’m reluctant to leave, though. This has been so much fun.”

“We’ll come back,” I reply, patting his arm.

While I’m packing away the darts, I see a huge, lumbering shadow lift itself out of a back corner and trudge slowly towards Kit. I rush to get back to him, dropping the darts and cursing as I try to hurry.

“What’re you and yer fancy kind doin’ here?” the voice drawls.

Shit. It’s Johnny Cain.

Johnny Cain was the neighborhood hitman. People used him when they were under threat from anyone else—death squads or otherwise. Johnny was the only one in town to fight the squad and win.

Well, so goes the rumor. But the truth is, they would have faced each other at some point, and Johnny still isn’t dead.

“Excuse me?” Kit asks, his cultured voice no doubt grating on Johnny’s ear.

“I seen ya and yer fancy kind. Drinkin’ in my bar. Whatcha doin’ here?”

Finally, I get the darts back into the box and run across to the table, putting myself between Cain and Kit.

“Johnny!” I say loudly, waving my arms. “It’s me, Lexa!”

“Lexa? Naw. Y’aint. She was skinny with long hair.”

“I grew up a bit, Cain.”

He squints, but I know the light is too dim. And he’s way too drunk to confirm my identity.

“I dunno,” he rumbles. “I still think ya outta git out. Makin’ me uncomfortable. Don’t like your kind.”

“Of course,” I say, stepping back.

“Do you know who I am?” Kit asks suddenly.

I turn around, glaring at him furiously. Did you have to? I mentally tell him.

He shrugs as if to say, What?

“No, I don’t!” Cain yells. “And I don’t much care. Git out!”

“You can’t speak to me like that,” Kit mutters, getting up.

I hurl myself at him, slamming our bodies together so he stumbles back a few steps. I laugh loudly, way over the top, as I catch Kit and start dragging him towards the door.

“Don’t mind us!” I yell back at Cain cheerfully. “Just a bit too drunk. We’re leaving now!”

“Good riddance,” Cain grumbles.

I get Kit outside, and the crisp air hits me in the face, clearing my head. From the way Kit is stumbling, it hasn’t had the same effect on him.

“Hey,” he says. “Where are we? I was gonna—”

“Nothing,” I cut him off. “You’re doing nothing. I’m taking you back to the car, and I’m driving us home.”

“It’s my truck!” he protests.

“I’ll do you a deal. You find the keys, and you can drive.”

Kit starts patting himself down, looking confused. “I know I had them on me.”

He has no idea I slipped them out of his pocket when I jumped between him and Johnny.

“Too bad,” I snap. “You lost. I’m driving.”

We make it back to the truck, and Kit dozes on the way home, snoring softly. I’m worried about getting him inside by myself, but when we pull up in the driveway, Kit opens his eyes, and they look clear and focused.

“Wow,” he mutters. “I was really out of it.”

“There’s no way the alcohol is completely out of your system,” I reply. “You should take it easy.”

“Yeah, I will,” he answers, slowly getting out of the truck. He stumbles a bit, but

otherwise seems fine.

“Thanks for driving me,” he says as I unlock the door. “I definitely wouldn’t have made it home.”

“It’s no problem—”

Suddenly, Kit stumbles into me, tripping over the stoop. I hold him up and shove him through the door, slamming it behind us.

“Home,” he says, throwing himself down on the couch. “Thank you, Lexa, for such a great night.”

“You’ve thanked me a lot tonight,” I answer, chuckling.

“Because I mean it. I’ve never let loose like that. It was great.”

“That’s good,” I say. “I’m guessing you didn’t get a lot of time to go out with your pack duties and stuff?”

“You said it,” he mutters, sitting up and running a hand through his thick hair. “I was allowed to go out, though. Just only to certain places.”

“Sounds like a prison,” I say, sitting down next to him.

Kit stares at the wall, his face shrouded in darkness. I only turned on one lamp as we walked in, and the room is full of shadows. I see his eyes shimmer, and I don’t know if it’s the rising of his wolf or unshed tears.

“You have no idea,” he whispers.

There is so much pain in his voice, I feel it in my own body. A sharp ache tightens my chest.

I can't stand the thought of his suffering. Even when I thought I hated him, I never wished him pain.

"Kit," I say softly. He turns to look at me, and I'm almost certain the gleam in his eyes is from tears he refuses to shed.

He reaches out, running his fingers down my cheek very gently.

"I'm so sorry, Lexa. The guilt in me, the regret...

sometimes it's so huge, I can't even breathe.

It squeezes the joy out of my life until everything is bleak and hopeless.

Finding you again, having this chance... it means more to me than you'd ever know.
"

"I think I do know," I whisper, brushing his hair back from his forehead. Suddenly, I feel so close to him, and I can't understand why I've resisted him all this time.

That might also be the rotgut talking.

Even though I was able to drive home, it's only because I have a high tolerance for rough liquor. I'm still hammered enough to have extremely poor judgment.

"Lexa," Kit whispers, staring into my eyes. "I'll do anything to make it up to you, I swear. If I could take back those words, I would. I didn't mean it. Any of it."

I want to run. Fear sparks deep inside my guts as I remember Kit told me a lot of sweet words once before, but he rescinded them easily enough when it suited him.

But I'm too drunk to remember the details exactly, and the one and only thing I can really feel is the desire sweeping through my body again, even stronger than before.

It's almost as if I've been holding it back since the encounter in the woods, and every second I've kept it chained up, it's gotten stronger.

It's a torrent now, a rushing flood that I can't hold back.

I moan softly as I run my hands down Kit's neck and on his shoulders, enjoying the feel of his hard muscles under the soft shirt.

I keep moving my hands down, teasing him and myself. When I reach the top button, I pause, but only for a second, before I undo it and move to the next one.

"Lexa, what are you doing?"

"Shut up," I answer, undoing the next button. Kit's breathing speeds up, but there is no other sound as I finish with the buttons and slowly roll the shirt off his shoulders and down his arms, pinning his hands behind his back.

Doubts flutter through my mind, but they're far away, completely insignificant against the inferno of desire that's building in me. Kit watches in stunned silence as I put my hands back on his shoulders and brace myself so I can slide over and straddle his lap.

"Lexa," he murmurs.

I just shake my head, running my fingers over his smooth chest. I'm completely

mesmerized by the sensation, and it intensifies my arousal, making my body throb and ache.

Leaning in, I kiss him gently, keeping him still with my hands and my knees. He gasps, leaning back into the couch as I deepen the kiss. I can feel the muscles in his shoulders straining as he tries to free his arms, but I just pin him even tighter.

I start to rock back and forth a little, teasing myself with pressure and grinding down with my hips. Kit's breathing gets faster, until he's taking short, panting breaths. Sweat starts to trickle from his brow, and I wipe it away gently with one hand.

I cling to his shoulders and tilt my head back, rocking away from him and driving my hips down. He moans, much louder than usual, and it sounds like he's in pain.

Maybe that's not such a bad thing...

With an evil grin, I lean in again, gently caressing his lips with mine and teasing with my tongue.

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I struggle underneath Lexa, trying to free my arms, but it's no good. She has me pinned.

And I like it.

She digs her nails into my shoulders, making me gasp with equal parts pleasure and pain.

Okay, maybe a bit more pleasure.

She teases me with soft touches of her lips, rocking back and forth to rub herself against me. My entire body is hard as a rock—not just my cock—and the need to hurl her onto her back and fuck her as hard and fast as I can is overwhelming.

Don't. Don't do anything to scare her. Let her explore, let her feel safe.

Through the drunken haze of my thoughts, I also remind myself that with her weight pressing down on my thighs and her hands pressing me into the couch, I can't fucking move.

Lexa leans back, taking her hands off my shoulders to tease her fingertips across my chest and belly. I struggle again against the shirt, hoping to tear it off if I can't get my arms loose, but I still can't get free.

"Lexa," I whisper, my voice full of need. "Please."

"Please, what?" she asks, blinking innocently. "Am I doing something wrong?"

My mind tries to understand her question. Drunken brain cells collide with each other, leaving me even more confused than I was before.

“Should I stop?” she asks with a grin.

“No!” I almost yell. “Don’t stop. I mean, unless you want to—”

“Shh.” She puts her fingers across my lips. “You just settle down and be quiet like a good boy.”

A strange sensation flows through me. As if I should feel uncomfortable, but instead, I feel kind of warm and fuzzy.

No one’s ever called me a “good boy” before.

Lexa runs her hands down to my thighs, and with one quick movement, she drops to the floor between my legs. I feel her fingers on the button of my jeans, and a painful throb rushes through me as my cock strains against the zipper.

Lexa pulls down the zipper very slowly, watching my cock rise through the gap, still covered by my underwear. She strokes me gently, and I almost scream with frustration and pent-up desire.

Holy fucking God, this is not the woman I remember!

The girl I took to the graduation party was sweet, hesitant, and completely untouched. She shrank away from me, unsure and afraid, until I awakened her lust and made her beg for me.

Now I’m the one fucking begging.

I look up at Lexa, not daring to speak. She keeps her eyes down, looking at the tent poking up through my jeans. I'm so eager to set it free, I struggle a bit more, and she stands up abruptly, slamming her foot into my chest to pin me down.

"What did I tell you about trying to get away!" she snaps. "Stay still."

"Okay," I mutter. My heart is pounding so hard, all I can hear is the rush of my blood in my ears. I faintly register that she's barefoot, and I stupidly wonder when she took off her shoes.

"Hey," Lexa says, grabbing my chin. "Look up."

I fix my eyes on her face as she stands above me, her arms folded across her chest. She tilts her head, and the look on her face is powerful, something almost predatory.

And she looks hungry.

The barest thought of what she might do with those lips and that tongue makes me gasp again, trembling as my body fights against my clothes. I've never been restrained before, and even though I know I could get free if I really wanted to, it doesn't seem worth it.

The next thought that comes to me is so heavy, it almost shatters my mind.

I feel safe for the first time in my life.

"Kit," she whispers, tapping my chin.

I focus my eyes on her face again, enjoying the bright look in her eyes and the mischief in her grin. She brings her hands up to run them over the soft fabric of her sweater, and my eyes follow as she reaches down, grabs the hem, then rips it off over

her head.

I shudder as if I've been kicked in the ribs. I can't take my eyes off her breasts, the way they bounce when she moves. They're bigger and softer than they were when she was younger, and my fingers ache as I think about squeezing them while I suck on her nipples.

Lexa gives me a little wink before bending back down and yanking my jeans down my legs. I'm trembling now, my body so exhausted from being bound, my muscles are completely letting go and relaxing under the forced tension. She tugs my jeans to my ankles and leaves them there, shackling me.

When she stands up in front of me again, I watch as she wiggles her hips, running her hands across her belly. She teases at the waistband of her pants before turning around and pulling them down, slowly exposing her buttocks.

She's not wearing underwear!

"Fuck." The word slips through my lips, an expression of pure shock. My arms and legs are starting to jerk in irregular movements as the adrenaline runs crazily around my body, with no way for me to let it out.

Lexa turns around, rubbing her hands over her breasts and belly.

"You want this?" she murmurs.

"Yes, Jesus, dear fucking God!" I almost scream, the words a heartfelt prayer to any deity that might grant me mercy. "I want you more than anything in this world, Lexa!"

She leans forward, putting her hands on my knees to kiss me, gently, softly, and

briefly.

“Good,” she whispers, reaching down for my boxers.

She grabs the front, pinching my cock a little in the process, then yanks my underwear to my thighs. She straddles my lap, linking her hands around my neck as she maneuvers, then I feel her hot, slick pussy pushing against the head of my throbbing cock.

Oh my God. She’s wet like a fucking river! She wants me as badly as I want her!

Lexa lowers herself slowly, her hands wrapped around the back of my neck and her eyes closed. She frowns slightly as her body gives way to mine, my cock sliding into her inch by inch.

By the time she settles on my lap and my cock is fully sheathed inside her, I’m so excited, I feel like I’m going to pass out. My arms are trembling from being pinned behind me, and my legs are numb. Even though my heart was pounding a few minutes ago, I can’t feel it at all anymore.

Maybe I had a heart attack, and I’m already dead. This definitely looks—and feels—like heaven.

Lexa moans, rocking herself back and forth. She keeps her eyes closed, focused on something deep inside her. I can feel her body clenching around mine, not just deep inside her pussy but her legs and arms, too.

Even though her pace starts slow and gentle, it doesn’t take long before every stroke becomes harder and more forceful. As her inner muscles begin to spasm, she grips my neck with both hands, thrashing me with her hips as she throws back her head and howls at the ceiling.

Her climax breaks across her body, spreading from deep inside her to shudder through every muscle, leaving a wash of goosebumps across her skin. She hangs helplessly around my neck, throwing herself down against me, making happy little murmurs.

My cock is still rock-hard inside her, and it looks like she's gone comatose in her afterglow. I wriggle around a bit and get my arms free, moving her onto her back on the couch beside me.

She murmurs happily as she settles onto her back, and I reach out and stroke her thigh.

"More?" I ask, terrified to hear her rejection.

I feel like I'm going to die if I don't get to come between her thighs...

"Yes," she nearly whispers, her eyes still closed. "More."

With a sigh of relief that sounds like a sob, I crawl towards her, still tangled in my pants. She opens her legs for me, and I settle between them, reaching down to slide my cock into her hot, wet pussy.

"Oh, God," I whisper, burying my head against her shoulder. "You feel so fucking good."

"Fuck me," she mutters, her tongue flicking out to tease my ear.

Growling, I wrap my arms around her waist and brace my knees against the couch, thrusting into her with long, hard strokes.

She's teased me so much, I know I don't have much left in me. Within only a few

thrusts, I can feel her inner walls tremble, and I know she's going to come again. I pound her as hard and as fast as I can, feeling her pussy spasm around me as she cries out in joy under me, almost deafening me.

I don't fucking care if my eardrums shatter. Scream, baby, scream!

Just as her pussy tightens around me and her arms and legs lock me in a death grip, my cock swells and throbs in a moment of tension with no breath and no heartbeat. Nothing except the promise of pleasure that is about to destroy me and remake me all at once.

The little death...

Lexa screams, the climax roaring through her body as she thrashes under me. My cock swells, harder and thicker than it's ever been, then the orgasm crashes through my body, a tidal wave with the force of the entire ocean behind it.

I collapse against her, shaking, feeling her chest heaving against mine. I hold her in my arms, knowing that I have to move soon, but never wanting this moment to end. I float through endless seconds of perfect bliss, finally letting go of Lexa when I feel her arms slip away from me.

I'm still tangled, half in and half out of my clothes.

While I undress, I watch Lexa slip into a deep sleep, curling up on the couch with her arms around a thick pillow.

I want to sleep beside her, so I pull out the bottom sofa section of the couch and lie down as close to her as I can without disturbing her.

I want to burn this moment into my memory and never let go of it. I've never been so

content, and the hope I had before has exploded inside my chest, letting me see the full brightness of our future together.

It's all behind me now. All the pain, violence, and darkness. It's gone, and this is where I belong.

I keep my eyes on Lexa for as long as I can, even as I struggle to keep them open. When I drift off, it's into the deepest, most restful sleep I've ever had.

A sharp bang wakes me, and I almost jump straight off the couch. For a second or two, I don't know where I am, then it all comes back to me.

Lexa.

I look around, but she's obviously not beside me anymore. I get up and stagger towards the kitchen, holding my head as I try to get fully upright.

Whoa, there! That's one hell of a hangover.

I don't fucking care. It was the best night of my life.

"Lexa?" I ask, coming into the kitchen. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," she says, turning towards me. "I just knocked the frying pan off the bench when I was looking for a cup. Sorry I woke you."

"It's no problem," I answer, taking unsteady steps into the kitchen. "I could use some coffee, too."

"I figured," she says with a giggle. "You hit the sauce pretty hard."

“I sure did,” I agree. “No regrets, though. Well, okay, maybe the last couple of shots didn’t have to happen.”

She laughs, putting two cups on the counter. She doesn’t look hungover at all—her skin is glowing, and her short black hair looks glossier than usual. There are no rings under her eyes or any sign of tiredness.

“You look like you slept well,” I remark.

“Yeah,” she says lightly. “I did.”

Something’s wrong.

I can’t tell exactly what it is, but the way her eyes slide away from mine and her bright, almost brittle tone of voice are making me feel like I’ve missed something.

“Is everything okay?” I ask as Lexa puts a cup of coffee down in front of me.

“Fine,” she says in a clipped voice, giving me the weird little smile again.

“Can I have a good morning kiss?” I ask tentatively.

The smile falls right off her face, and she puts her coffee down purposefully on the counter before meeting my eyes again.

Oh, shit. I feel like I’m in deep trouble. But all I can think about is how fucking beautiful she is.

A ray of sun angling from the kitchen window casts soft light across her head and shoulders, making her skin glow. The purple streaks in her hair shine with vibrant intensity, and the pale gray of her eyes looks studded by falling snowflakes.

“Kit,” she says, “what happened last night was just a bit of drunk sex. I got carried away.”

“What?” I mutter, still staring at her as if she’s a goddess who just turned me to stone.

“I realize it might be confusing for you, and I’m sorry, but it was just the heat of the moment,” she continues. “It doesn’t mean that we’re... together.”

“Oh,” I answer, trying to absorb her words. My brain still feels shattered from the night before, and I’m wondering how she can be acting so normal after I’ve just had a mind-altering experience.

Oh...

Guilt floods through me, my first clear emotion of the day. I look at the floor quickly, and I hear Lexa pick up her coffee and take a sip.

“I’ll throw together some breakfast,” she says casually. “You might want to go and get cleaned up?”

I suddenly realize I’ve been standing there totally buck-ass naked this whole time while Lexa is fully dressed for the day, as well as looking fresh and completely clear-headed.

I feel fucking ridiculous.

“Sure, yeah,” I mumble. “That sounds good.”

I turn and walk down the hall, heading for the bathroom. The shock of her words is still sinking in, and I don’t know how to take this news.

She's not the simple girl I knew before. There's so much more to the story than what I know.

My brain bends under the weight of my thoughts, and I shake it off. First, coffee and hangover remedies, then try to face the day, and then rewrite my future.

Again.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

I have never felt so powerful.

While I make coffee and try to ignore Kit looking absolutely delicious as he stands naked in the kitchen, I try to pretend last night's events were just a very vivid dream.

A bit difficult to do that while he's standing there with everything on display.

Seeing him naked was enough of a tease before this happened. Now that I've had more direct experience with his body, my hunger has intensified. And being more mature, I have an appetite my younger self couldn't have even imagined.

Even though I see Kit's face crumple at my words, I turn away as if I didn't notice—or just don't care. I don't want to explain myself to him, and in a way, I don't even think I should have to.

I sit down at the table to scroll through my phone while he goes to get dressed. I can't focus on anything. My mind is spinning relentlessly between, I shouldn't have done that and Fuck, I want to do it again!

It's dangerous and self-destructive, but I let my mind drift back to last night. We had such a good night together, and seeing him loosen up and enjoy himself on the rough side of West End deepened my attraction to him.

There's nothing hotter than a good boy getting dirty.

“Oh,” a gasp slips from my lips, forced through my chest by a wave of heat that rushes through my belly, making my pussy throb so hard, I have to press my thighs

together.

The feeling of having him pinned under me and being in complete, total control, owning him, taking him the same way he took me...

I drop my phone and put my head in my hands, rubbing my temples. I didn't even know myself last night, and that was the only way I was able to let go the way I did.

I wasn't thinking about the future, or what any of it would mean in the light of day. I was so hot for him, so desperate to feel good, then I got a taste of being on top for once... and for the first time in my life, I was in complete and total control.

And I fucking loved it.

I hear Kit's step in the hall and quickly pick up my phone to hide the fact that I'm having a severe freakout. I even manage to look relaxed as he strolls into the kitchen and picks up the coffee I made for him.

"It'll be cold by now," I say, amazed by how smooth my voice is.

"I don't mind," he answers gruffly, sitting down across from me.

When I glance up over the edge of my phone, he's looking at me, but the second my eyes meet his, he directs his gaze straight to the table. I try to think of something to say, but nothing comes to me, so I just look at my phone again.

Then the damn thing buzzes in my hand, and I jump so high I almost drop it. The banner flickers across the top of the screen, and I tap it to take me to my texts.

"Who is it?" Kit asks.

“It’s Cass,” I reply, staring at the screen. “She says they’re doing some planning today, and I should go in to help.”

“You should. It will be good for the pack—and for you.”

I look over the edge of my phone, a hard look in my eye. “Don’t tell me what’s good for me, Kit.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I wasn’t trying to tell you what to do, but it is important for you to be involved in the pack business.”

I hold in an exasperated sigh and close my eyes for a second to give myself strength. “You’re right,” I agree. “Should we head to town?”

“Yes, let’s go,” he answers, getting up a bit too fast. “I’ll have council duties, too.”

Standing up, I slip my phone into my pocket and head outside. I can hear Kit’s footsteps behind me, and I have to force myself to keep walking and not look back.

I am not going to spend the day sneaking glances like an infatuated schoolgirl! Been there, done that.

When we pause by the truck, Kit looks towards me, and I manage a casual smile. He takes a breath, and an expectant silence hangs in the air for a second, but then he just unlocks the truck and gets in, shaking his head a little.

Please don’t say anything...

While we drive to the hall, his scent slowly drifts over to me, and I have to fight the urge to throw myself into his lap.

By the time we reach the hall, my muscles are locked up with the effort of sitting still. As we get out of the truck, Kit reaches out as if to take my hand, then quickly steps back and tries to hide the gesture.

“I’m going to the rec hall,” he says. “Cade’s over there. I’m assuming the girls are out the back of the church in the study. Do you know where it is?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” I answer, not actually having a clue. “Thanks.”

Kit waves and walks off around the front of the church to head to the hall, and I follow the little path around the edge of the building to the garden out back.

Attached to the main church is a small house made of very old stone. I shove the wooden door, and immediately, I hear cheerful laughter from down the hall. I follow the sound.

Warm air and the scents of sugar and butter drift towards me as I approach the end of the hall. The sound of laughter gets louder, and when I knock hesitantly on the door and stick my head inside, I’m desperately hoping I’m in the right place.

Surely an official meeting wouldn’t be so informal?

“Lexa!” An excited shriek tears through the laughter, and an incomprehensible blur streaks right at me, throwing me against the wall. The second I put my arms around her, I know who it is, and my eyes sting with tears.

“Kate,” I whisper, hugging her so tight, I feel like I might crush her. My old friend is giving as hard as she gets, though. It feels like my ribs are about to break.

“Where the hell did you go?” she practically screams, pulling back to grip my upper arms and shake me. Her expression is a mess of confusion, relief, joy, confusion...

and fear.

“I... uh, had to leave,” I say, knowing my words are woefully inadequate. “I will explain everything, I promise. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you I was leaving.”

Kate’s eyes glimmer a little, and I see her lip tremble.

“I thought you were dead,” she whispers.

I wrap my arms around her, whispering very softly in her ear. “I nearly was.”

When I pull back, her eyes are wide as if her dozens of questions are going to leap out of her right here and now. I shake my head slightly, and she nods, the small gesture letting me know she expects a full explanation at some point.

“Leave some for the rest of us,” I hear another voice say behind me.

“Misha?” I gasp.

My other high school friend pushes her way past Kate to hug me, and I feel tears threatening me again.

“It’s good to see you,” Misha says, and I know I’ll have to explain everything to her as well.

Where do I even start? I was kidnapped by my father, whom I barely knew, and traumatized by my mother’s mutilated corpse, and then forced into slavery.

“C’mon in,” Cass says, gesturing me towards her. “We’re just going over the planning for the event. Kate and Misha are often involved in the pack business, and there was no way they’d miss today.”

“I’m glad they didn’t,” I say, giving Kate’s hand a squeeze. Misha puts her arm around me from the other side, and I lean into her.

“Get some cake,” Mabel says. “And some coffee or tea, then get comfy.”

“There are no rules in here,” Xavier says, raising his teacup. He’s sitting on the floor, his back propped against the couch so he can rest his head against Cass, who is stretched out from one end of the sofa to the other like a big cat.

Mabel has claimed the biggest armchair and is sitting cross-legged right in the center of it with stacks of cookies and slices of cake perched on the long arms as if she’s stocked up for a weeklong sit-in. I take an extra hard look around the room just to confirm Loretta isn’t here.

Kate and Misha go to the big couch at the end of the room while I grab some tea and cake. I wiggle into the seat between them and take a huge bite of vanilla sponge and raspberry frosting.

While I chew, the room goes very quiet. I start to look around uncomfortably as the others look my way.

“We need you to officially start the meeting,” Mable whispers.

“Oh, fuck,” I mumble through a huge mouthful of cake.

The silence only holds a second longer before everyone bursts out laughing.

“Just kidding,” Cass giggles. “We’re completely lawless in here. Now! Let’s get together some ideas. You all know I’ve got the cotton candy sorted. What else do we need?”

“Fried food,” Mabel says, her eyes closed as she chews on a cookie. “Fried chicken. Fried butter. Fries.”

“Right!” Xavier says, looking down and furiously air-writing with an imaginary pen. “One heart attack, coming right up.”

“You shut your mouth,” Mabel snaps. “Or I’ll shove a cookie in it.”

A mischievous grin flashes across Xavier’s face. His cheeks color a little, as if getting pinned down by cute, chubby Mabel isn’t a threat of punishment in the slightest.

“Seriously, though,” Cass says. “Are we going to hire games and rides, or run it with people from town?”

“I think we should hire some of it,” I answer. “That way, everyone can just have fun. If people want to run stalls, then that’s up to them. Can we put up a community group or something online to chat about it?”

“Great idea!” Mabel says, grabbing her phone and typing furiously. “I’ll get on that right now.”

“You’re going to get grease all over your phone,” Xavier says, raising an eyebrow.

“Not your business,” she growls. “These sticky fingers will be all over you if you don’t shut it.”

Again, Xavier blushes a bit, but Mabel doesn’t even notice. I wonder if the two of them might need a nudge, and what it would take to get them together.

I’m heading up one meeting, and I’m already matchmaking.

“There’s a company in one of the towns at the far edge of the Pass, towards the human world,” Cass says. “They can get us what we need, but it’s a bit pricy. They have to bring the equipment a pretty long way.”

“What’s our budget?” I ask.

Cass reaches for a stack of paper on the table beside her, holding it out to me. “It’s significant,” she says in a low tone.

When my eyes scan the text, I have to read it three times.

“Half a million?” I whisper. “What the fuck? Do we even use that much money on this thing?”

“It has been known to go over,” Mabel says. “Depending on what the elders want to do, and who they want to impress. Sometimes, they bring alphas and top families from other packs to rub their noses in it.”

“Jesus, fuck,” I mutter. “There are people in the West End who don’t have enough to eat!”

“I’m aware,” Cass says ruefully. “A lot of us are. The elders have a lot to answer for. We’re glad to have you here, Lexa.”

When I look over at her, Cass is holding me in her steady gaze and gives me a little nod. Her confidence in me gives me strength, and I feel a true sense of responsibility to the pack for the first time.

Things need to change, and I’m going to see that it happens.

We spend the next half an hour deciding what games and rides to have at the carnival

and taking expressions of interest for stalls. I want to get into the topic of charity and improving conditions for the West End, but I decide to put it aside for now.

I'm going to make damn sure every single pack member gets to enjoy this party, though. No one will be turned away from the gates.

As the meeting wraps up, Kit messages me, giving me his financial details so I can do some shopping while he concludes his meeting. Everyone has places to be, so we go our separate ways after I make sure they all have my number so we can catch up.

"You still owe me a big chat," Kate says, pointing her finger at me.

I nod and smile as if my hidden secrets don't weigh me down like the chains of hell. "Will do. It's so great to see you again, Katie."

"You too, hun. Catch up soon!"

The church isn't far from the main street of town, and it only takes a few minutes to reach the shops. At first, I head straight towards the budget stores, then I realize what I'm doing.

I wonder how long I'll have to live with a poor-person brain. I don't have to "make do" anymore... I can actually buy things I like!

I feel like a complete impostor going into the fancier shops, but the second I walk in, the attendants recognize me and make me feel welcome. I don't know if they're just nice or if it's because I'm the luna, but at the moment, I don't even care.

The stores offer to deliver my things so I don't have to carry bags, and I happily agree. I wonder briefly about the charges to Kit's card, but then I don't worry about it at all.

He said to get whatever I want. A girl never knows when she's going to need a full-length red dress in finely spun alpaca wool... with a long shawl to match.

After I've had my fill of shopping, I look for a place to get a decent coffee. The one I liked as a teenager has closed, and I find myself in a very quiet side street far off the main drag, not knowing which direction I want to go.

While I'm scrolling maps and "coffee shops near you," I start to get a creepy, prickly feeling down my back. I look up so quickly, I almost drop my phone, but the street is still empty.

Get out of here, Lexa!

Now!

My instincts have never failed me, and years of abuse only honed them to a keener edge. I turn and jog towards the nearest corner, taking the street even though I'm not sure where it goes. I immediately join a small crowd, and to my relief, there's a big café just a few blocks away.

As I walk towards it, I wait for the creepy feeling to fade, but it doesn't. I have to keep scanning the crowd, looking for faces that might be familiar.

Could my father be here? Or Vince?

A shudder runs through me, and my throat closes in terror. Even though it's only been a couple of days, the memories of abuse are fading swiftly. I want— need—to believe the world can be a safe place.

Still, the feeling of being watched doesn't leave me. While I sit at the café, I keep scanning the crowd, telling myself over and over again that nothing is there and that

I'm safe.

But I don't believe it.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

Even though I'm still a bit rattled by Lexa's announcement and a bit anxious from the silent, tense ride in the car, by the time I walk into the rec hall, I'm calm, collected, and ready to throw down.

I've spent the last few years cleaning up Grandfather's mess, and I won't tolerate the elders attempting to get in my way anymore.

When I see Cade, he gives me a wave and a smile, but a slight narrowing of his eyes warns me of trouble. The only others at the table are Derrik, Jones, and Loretta.

I'm a little surprised she's here to face off with me. I half expected her to go and wreck the informal meeting.

"Kit," Loretta says, her voice as hard and cold as a blade made of ice. "I see you've finally joined us."

"I'm not late," I answer casually.

And even if I was, it's not up to you to call me out.

"Come in," Derrik says, gesturing to the paperwork laid out on the table.

"I need you to look at these arrangements. We've decided to go with a fairytale theme, an enchanted forest type of thing.

There will be fairy lights strung across the ceiling and wicker wreaths hung on the walls.

The decorations will lead right out through the back door, where we are going to have a dance floor ringed with magical accompaniments. ”

“It’s going to be wonderful,” Loretta says, smiling. “Soft, white light, elegant natural decorations, crisp white tablecloths. I’ve already ordered hundreds of white rosebuds for the centerpieces. They cost a small fortune, but every crystal vase will have an utterly perfect rose arrangement.”

I stay quiet but shoot a glance at Cade. He raises an eyebrow.

“White coats for the men,” Loretta continues dreamily. “I’ve got an ice blue dress being made, with a lace overlay studded in diamonds. I’m going to personally invite Regina Glass, an elder from Gryphon Eyrie. She’s going to be mad with envy—”

“Hmm,” I cut in, rubbing my chin. “I hope she likes corn dogs.”

Loretta goes dangerously silent, and it feels like everyone at the table steps back, leaving the older elder and me glaring at each other.

“You aren’t still on that nonsense,” she huffs. “This is a travesty. Your grandfather would be thrashing in his grave—”

“Probably a good thing he’s not in it, then,” I snap. “I wouldn’t want the undead anxiety to attract necromancers.”

Loretta pales, and she clenches her fists as she stares me down. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing,” she hisses, “but—”

“No, Loretta, I don’t think you realize what you are doing.”

Even though my voice is soft, it resonates through the hall. All the elders take another

step back in response to the threat.

She opens her mouth to speak, then closes it again. Doubt is starting to cloud her eyes, and for the first time, she actually looks like she's listening to me.

"This is nonsense," she protests, her voice getting shrill. "You can't possibly be considering cotton candy and bumper cars! Not for our annual event!"

"I'm not considering it," I say, watching her face briefly relax with relief before I add, "I've already decided."

She glares at me, and I glare right back. I've never stood directly against her like this before, but the time has come to put her in her place.

"Kit," she says cajolingly. "You're so very young. You must listen to me. The first families—"

"Will do whatever I say," I cut her off smoothly. "Because they are loyal, and they pledged fealty to me, just like you did."

Loretta opens her mouth again, but I slam my hands down on the table so hard that everybody jumps. Even Cade.

"I am going to say this very slowly so you don't misunderstand me," I say.

"Loretta, you have argued with me and opposed my orders since I became alpha. You have disrespected my mate. Now you think you can organize my event for me. This is your last warning. Either you help us organize the event the way I want, or you can leave the council—right now. If that is your choice, I want you to know that if I hear any word from you about me, my choices, or my mate, I will call the alpha's challenge."

Her eyes widen, and I see a shudder run through her.

She's scared of me. Good.

"Kit," she says, "I understand, but—"

"Good," I answer. "I'm glad you understand. Now, show me what you have here."

The others pass the paperwork to me, and I spend a few minutes crossing out most of the orders on the invoices.

"Since Loretta is so keen to help, we can get her to cancel these," I say, shuffling the paperwork into a big stack and handing it to her. "I'm going to give you guys some jobs relating to my new orders."

I pull out my phone and see a text from Cass inviting me to a new group page. When I get into the site, there are comments from others as well as pictures and links for food, games, and stalls.

"Okay, guys, join this chat." I text the link to everyone, hearing phones buzzing all around the table. Cade opens his immediately.

"Wow, a Ferris wheel," he says. "I haven't seen one of those in a while."

"Looks like it's going to cost a lot," Derrik mutters.

"Don't be ridiculous," I say. "It's less than the rosebuds. This entire event is going to come in under budget."

"Then we should still hold a formal ball," Loretta says. "Maybe a smaller one, but—"

“Sorry, Loretta,” I answer. “Any excess funds have already been allocated.”

“To where?” she asks warily.

“We’re opening a soup kitchen and expanding the charity center in West End,” I say, looking up to see how she reacts.

Her face pales, and she seems to shiver all over as if she’s about to be sick. When she sees me looking, she looks down at the paperwork, clearing her throat.

“I better get started on this,” she mutters.

“Very good,” I say. “I like to see you taking some initiative.”

Loretta’s eyes flick back to me, just briefly shooting daggers before she slides her gaze away again.

I spend the next half hour going over things with Derrik and Jones, organizing invitations and security for the event.

When I talk about inviting first families from other packs and telling them it’s informal, Loretta pales again and has to leave the table.

She takes her paperwork with her, so I have to assume she’s canceling the orders.

The others get fully involved in the work, and I can see the old guys getting excited about the new plan. They both have grandkids now, and without Loretta looming over them, they readily admit they like the carnival much better than a formal ball.

After about half an hour of planning, I step back from the table, feeling satisfied about the progress we’ve made. The group chat has been updated with everyone’s

work, and the event is almost fully planned.

“I’ve got things to attend to,” I say, stepping back from the table. “You guys are good here?”

“Yep,” Jones says. “I’m pairing up with Mabel to get a few of these things done. I think we’ll have it settled in a couple of days.”

“Good,” I reply.

Loretta comes in from the back garden, looking more like her usual bitchy self. She’s holding the stack of paper against her chest like she doesn’t want me to see it.

“All done, Loretta?” I ask.

She nods. “Yes. Of course, my alpha.”

“Okay. Cade, follow up on those canceled orders, won’t you? Make sure they’re finalized.”

“Will do,” Cade agrees, barely even looking up from his work.

“What?” Loretta splutters. “Why?”

“I just want to be thorough,” I say, smiling sweetly at her. “Trying to ease your workload.”

I look over at her, letting my eyes glow a little. I don’t trust her even slightly, and I want to make sure there are no mishaps with the money or any of the orders.

It would be just like her to have the formal decorations show up and spend the money

on them, so I can't afford to pay for the festival gear.

I don't bother holding back a wide smile. If it came to that, I'd pay for it out of Grandfather's money. Loretta, of all people, should know how rich we are. She was close to Grandfather for many years.

"I'm leaving this in your hands, Cade," I state, moving away from the table. "I'm going to find Lexa."

"All good," Cade answers, waving me off.

I manage to walk calmly out of the hall, but once I'm through the doors, I can't hold back my anxiety any longer. I start to jog, desperate to find Lexa.

I know she said that last night didn't mean anything, and I'm trying to accept it, but I just don't believe it.

I could feel her love for me... it was real.

As I enter the main street, I am reminded again of how I pledged my love to her and then took it back.

What she did to me today is nothing at all like what I did to her. There's just no comparison.

Walking down the street, I don't see any sign of her. I check out a couple of the shops, and the shop owners confirm that she'd been there and that delivery of her items is being organized.

I hope she had fun. She deserves a little spoiling.

I'm towards the end of town when I see her strolling into a side street. Not far behind her, a tall, wiry guy in beat-up clothes is going the same way.

Who is that person?

He's unkempt and a little dirty, as well as wearing shabby clothes. I assume he has to be from the West End and might know Lexa.

It doesn't necessarily mean anything that I don't recognize him. I've never spent much time in the poorer section of town.

There aren't any shops in that area, so I have to wonder what both of them are doing, going in that direction. Even from this distance, it looks like the guy is following Lexa.

Do they know each other? Is she going down there to—

I shove that thought out of my mind and start to jog. By the time I round the corner, both of them are gone. I can't discern any particular male scent—the air coming from the street is too complex—but I can pick out Lexa's scent. I follow it like a golden thread.

It only takes me a couple of minutes to track her back to the main street, and I don't see the guy anywhere. Having him suddenly disappear disturbs me, because I'm pretty sure he was shadowing my mate.

Maybe he wasn't. Don't get paranoid.

That good sense doesn't really sink in, and I start wondering if Lexa is pushing me away because she has someone else.

Then why did she marry me?

For the money, maybe, or the status. But that doesn't make any sense. She's never cared about those things.

It doesn't mean she hasn't had a lover. She's so bold and confident, nothing like the girl I knew years ago.

I track Lexa to one of the big coffee shops and see her sitting outside. When I hurry over and tap her shoulder, she jumps so high in her seat that she almost knocks over her coffee.

"Hey!" I say placatingly. "Lexa, it's me. Are you okay?"

"Yeah! Sorry. You surprised me."

"Who else would it be?" I intended to make a joke, but my voice comes out a bit hard.

"I thought I saw... I don't know." She shakes her head. "I'm just glad you're here."

"Okay," I say cautiously. I sit down across from her and try to read her expression. "You sure you're okay?" I ask again.

She nods, trying to smile but looking very uncomfortable. "Everything's great. Don't worry about a thing, okay, Kit?"

I smile, hoping it's warm and sincere. "Okay, babe, I won't," I say as worry builds in my guts and bleeds through my limbs.

She smiles back, and the entire moment feels like a thin veneer that's about to shatter,

revealing the ugly truth underneath.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

As Kit sits down in front of me at the coffee shop, I try to settle the wild beating of my heart. I'm so relieved to see him, I could throw my arms around him. But at that thought, a whole new wave of anxiety rises, attempting to swallow me.

I'm trapped!

Trapped just like I've always been!

"Should we grab some dinner on the way home?" Kit asks, and even though his tone is light, I can see tension in his eyes.

What's wrong with him?

Maybe the talking-to I gave him this morning has him on edge.

Even though that's a perfectly reasonable explanation, it doesn't convince me. My anxiety is starting to escalate into full-on nerves.

First, I feel like I'm being tracked, and now Kit is getting weird.

"Sure," I murmur, hoping that my nervousness isn't showing. I suddenly feel completely out of place, like I don't belong here, and there's no one I can trust.

I went from feeling welcome and safe at the meeting to feeling like an outcast, slowly being dragged back into a world of isolation and pain.

"Where would you like to go?" Kit asks, and I'm so distracted, it takes me a minute

to realize what he's talking about.

"How about some pizza?" I suggest.

"Sounds good," he answers. "I haven't had pizza in a while. How did the meeting go with the others?"

"Really good," I say, smiling. "I didn't think an official meeting would be so... cozy."

He shrugs. "I've made a lot of changes. I'm determined to change this pack for the better after years of Grandfather's tyranny."

There is a hint of pain in his voice, and I feel like I have the perfect opening to ask about his involvement with the kill squads. But I can't bring myself to say the words.

So, hey, Kit. Did your grandfather kill a lot of people?

Like, maybe, my mom?

"It looks like you have a council dedicated to the task," I say instead.

He nods. "I want you to know that right after you left, when Grandfather died, there was quite a bit of chaos. My mother and father wanted nothing to do with the council. Grandfather had decided from an early stage that my father was too weak to be alpha—well, at least the kind of alpha that Grandfather wanted him to be."

"That sounds awful," I say sympathetically.

"I believe it was. He attempted to train several other young men, constantly pushing Father and telling him he'd replace him and humiliate him in front of the whole

pack.”

I’m too shocked to speak. The more I hear about Leopold, the more I think he would have gotten along great with my own father.

Treating people as objects, possessions. Everything in this world is a tool to be used, and pain and fear are the only things needed to rule.

“After I was born, he finally left Father alone,” Kit continues.

“He said I had the makings of a truly great alpha—he could smell it in my blood. But he wasn’t going to let me be polluted by gentle treatment.

I had to be honed for the job from day one.

I spent most of my time growing up at his house. ”

I blink in surprise. “Kit, I had no idea!”

He shrugs. “Anyone who knew about it considered it to be normal. I used to blame my parents, but as I got older, I realized they were terrified of him, just like everyone else was. God knows what he threatened them with to force them to comply.”

I have difficulty absorbing these words. Kit always looked so happy in high school, laughing and joking, being the center of attention. He knew he was going to be alpha and wielded his power with relentless force.

He always acted like he had it made, and his life was a nonstop party. I had no idea he was hiding so much pain.

Kit looks off into the distance, and I study his profile, watching a muscle jump in his

jaw. His bright blue eyes are the shade of a troubled, stormy sea. Tension lines stretch across his forehead.

He must be so strong to have borne this alone, to hide it from the entire town. At least I didn't have to hide a monster. The entire pack knew what my father was.

"So, when he died, you immediately became alpha?" I ask.

He sighs, shaking his head. "It took a few weeks for the council to formally declare him dead. Everyone was really suspicious about them going away on holiday and disappearing. We had to actually hire a couple of investigators to track what happened. The wolves who checked it out told us no one could have survived that amount of blood loss and lived."

"You never found the bodies?"

"No. It made my ascension a little difficult. Loretta tried to claim the position as regent. She said I was too young and Father was unworthy, but she could rule until I was old enough or when it was truly confirmed that Grandfather was dead. But Grandfather's order was that I would become alpha immediately after his death. "

"How did you resolve this?"

He smiles, and a pale light flashes deep in his eyes.

"I threatened to call the alpha's challenge.

I was so close to being free and changing the pack for the better; I wasn't going to let her take it away from me.

I didn't think she'd back down, but she did.

She knew more about Grandfather's methods than anyone else, even the special missions. ”

I can't speak for a minute. “Special missions?”

Kit looks at me, his face going slack. I keep myself calm, trying not to show my anxiety. For a moment, all we do is stare at each other, the air between us almost boiling with untold secrets.

“Nothing important,” he finally says, looking away.

I drain the last of my coffee, looking around the square furtively as I get up. There is still a bit of a crowd around, and it unnerves me that someone could be easily hiding in it.

I've seen no sight, sound, or smell that could indicate my father is here, so why am I freaking out so hard?

Because he could be here.

“Let's go,” I say to Kit, gesturing towards the doors. “Let's go get that pizza.”

I try to sound enthusiastic, but my tone falls flat. It's never been so obvious that both of us are going through the motions, and the awkwardness is almost unbearable.

In spite of this—or maybe because of it—I take Kit's hand as we walk down the street. He laces his fingers through mine as we walk, smiling at people as we pass them and acting like happy newlyweds. It feels so good that for a while, I let myself believe it just might be true.

Kit's hand is warm in mine, and when I lean on his shoulder and look up at him, he

smiles down at me, his eyes shining with love. I reach up with my other hand and put it on his chest, reminded sharply of the night before, how I pinned him underneath me to take my pleasure.

This was a mistake.

My body is aching now, and by the time we pick up the pizza and walk back to the truck, I'm so horny that I can barely think straight.

The second we get in the car, Kit drops the act. He seems distant and aloof, a low-level tension settling across his shoulders.

Maybe it's out of desire for me, and he's making every effort to hold it back.

I don't know if I love that thought or hate it. My head is starting to ache with the pressure of everything I've been through today.

Will I ever feel completely safe? I thought getting married would protect me and give me a place where I could finally be myself. Now I feel more trapped than ever before.

When we get home, Kit carries the pizza inside, and we sit at the table to eat. The silence rings with tension, and I try to think of a way to break it.

"Kit?"

"Yes?" he answers, not looking at me.

Words bubble up in my mind, threatening to pour through my lips. The way he revealed himself to me earlier made me feel like maybe I could open up to him. Even trust him with my secrets.

But now I don't feel safe.

Even though he did open up, he still left out a lot of details. And he stayed far away from the hard topics.

If I start talking about where I've been and what's happened to me... would he understand because it's what his grandfather did to him?

"Lexa?" he prods, looking slightly frustrated.

"Nothing," I say firmly. "It's nothing."

He gets a strange look in his eyes. It makes me so uncomfortable, I look down and glare at the pizza.

"You still haven't told me why you left town," he blurts. "Or where you went."

I look up at him in shock, a piece of pizza trembling in my shaking hand. It's so close to what I was thinking that it scares me.

What does he know? Is he trying to tell me he knows the answer to these questions?

"I'd rather not talk about that," I say, trying to sound firm.

"Why?" he presses. "Is there something you don't want me to know?"

His eyes seem to turn a brighter blue, burning into me like lasers. The fear ignites down inside my belly, tightening my chest, and all my doubts and questions stir like leaves in a tornado.

"I'm done with this conversation!" I snap, praying that I sound angry, not terrified.

“I’m not letting you bully me like this.”

“Bully!” he repeats. “How is it bullying to ask why you left town or where you’ve been living all this time? You left right after we slept together, and then your mother—”

Kit stops talking abruptly, his face going completely white. He stares at me with wild eyes. I don’t know if he’s scared or about to tear me apart in frantic rage.

I can’t take this.

“Fuck you,” I whisper. “How fucking dare you.”

I turn around and storm out of the kitchen, running up the stairs to the bathroom. As I flick the lock, it isn’t lost on me that this is a very routine thing for me to do.

I used to hide in the bathroom from Father... until one night, he broke through it. I had to beg him just to put the door back on. He never replaced the lock.

For a few minutes, I just sit with my back pressed against the door, trying to stop myself from trembling. The idea of sinking into a nice, hot bath is tempting, but I know I’m too wired to enjoy it.

Am I ever going to feel safe? Is this feeling going to chase me for the rest of my life?

When I slip under the hot water in the shower, I immediately feel exhausted. The emotional toll weighs me down, making it hard to keep my eyes open. I rinse myself off quickly and dry off, hoping Kit is asleep by the time I get to the bedroom.

When I walk in, the room is dark. His breathing sounds slow and even.

I'm surprised that he can sleep at a time like this, but I'm also grateful I don't have to talk to him.

Part of me wants to shake him awake and scream all my questions in his face.

The rest of me wants to run from the house and never see him again.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, I see he's left me a cup of warm cocoa and some cookies. I have to wonder about this small, sweet gesture that he has done every night and what it means.

Surely, he can't know this is what mother always made as a treat to make me feel better?

How could he know that?

I crunch through the sweet cookies, washing them down with the warm, rich cocoa. It does make me feel better, and I feel grateful to him for making the effort.

This means more to me than anything else he's done, like letting me go shopping. Instead of just going to bed angry, he makes me cocoa and leaves it for me to find, like it's his way of caring for me, even if I'm angry with him.

Tears fill my eyes, and I wipe them away, finishing the cocoa so I can finally curl up in bed. Even though I was exhausted, the second I lie down, I feel completely awake. I can feel the heat radiating off Kit's body and taste his scent on the back of my tongue.

My body comes alive, lines of lust running across my skin, hardening my nipples and making my pussy throb. I struggle to get myself under control, hoping Kit won't wake up and notice me sweating with desire right next to him.

The memories from the night before come rushing back—the intense thrill of being with him again, satisfying my craving for his body, and completely owning him, bending him to my will.

Powerful, in control, and safe—so safe. I've never felt like that before.

The urge to reach out to Kit is almost overpowering, but I can't do it. I lay there, struggling, torn between my desire for him and the fear that lives deep in my soul.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

When I hear Lexa enter the room, I keep still, trying to relax. It takes all my concentration to keep my breathing even, and I'm not sure I'm even doing a great job of it.

Why am I even pretending to be asleep? I should just confront her. Right now.

The idea seems incredibly adversarial, and the last thing I want to do is fight. I don't know how to ask my questions—or expose my secrets—in a calm manner, so I bury myself under the blankets like a coward and pray that she falls asleep soon.

I feel her sit on the edge of the bed and hear her crunching the cookies. It gives me a warm, satisfied feeling that she's accepted my gift, even though it's such a small one.

The idea of just going to bed and not speaking to her doesn't feel right. I have to do something to show her I'm thinking of her. So far, cookies and cocoa seem to be the best way of doing that.

I squeeze my eyes shut, making another attempt to settle, but every time I try to fall asleep, I see that guy again, trailing her into the side street. My first reaction is to protect her, to absolutely destroy anyone who would dare threaten her.

But she is not the sweet, shy girl I knew before. Last night proved that. She's confident and powerful. If she can fuck me like that, she must have experience. She knows how to take her own pleasure... and tie a guy up in his own damn clothes!

My heart starts to pound from a combination of my own passion and the horror of my suspicions. If there was someone else she really wanted, then I wouldn't be able to

stop her... and I wouldn't want to. All I want is for her to be happy.

I'd be jealous as fuck. Destroyed.

But I'd let her go.

That idea brings me unbelievable pain. I almost groan in agony before I remember that I'm supposed to be asleep. It's not so much the idea of another guy that's tearing me to shreds, but the possibility that Lexa might be lying to me.

She hasn't done anything to soothe my suspicion, either. She won't tell me why she left or where she's been. If I had those details, I might feel safe enough to explain what actually happened.

Briefly, I think about her running away with another man, releasing me from the guilt of explaining to her how I found her mother and the possibility I might have had something to do with it.

The idea of slithering out of that situation disgusts me so much, I immediately discard it.

Besides, Loretta would never let her live. By the old laws, a runaway bride can be hunted down and killed, and I wouldn't be able to stop her.

I hear Lexa stretch out beside me. Her sweet scent fills my nostrils. Lying beside her and not reaching for her is the hardest thing I've ever done, and it only gets harder as the seconds drag by.

Speaking of hard...

I can't calm my body down, not even slightly. Her scent gets thicker, and I can

almost taste her sweat on my lips.

I want to devour her... every inch of her...

Oh, God, I want to eat her pussy so bad!

Memories flow through my mind, and I don't try to stop them. That night, all those years ago, when I made her gasp and cry out in my arms, hearing her scream for pure joy as my tongue explored deep inside her.

And last night, when she had me pinned in my clothes, completely at her mercy...

The dreams are too sweet, and they lure me in. I don't feel sleep creeping up on me, but suddenly, I'm back in the cabin with Lexa all those years ago. Her long, wavy hair is spread out across the pillow like dark clouds, and her pale gray eyes shimmer like stars as she writhes under me.

I stroke her cheek, not taking my eyes off hers as I thrust into her. She stares back, confident and unafraid, letting me into her soul.

"I will love you forever," I whisper.

"And I have always loved you," she answers.

The moment of connection streaks through me, the pleasure becoming one with hers. Her pussy tightens around my hard cock, and she gasps, digging her fingers into my shoulders and not breaking eye contact as she comes.

I've never, ever felt anything like this before. You are mine, Lexa. I will never let you go.

The dream changes abruptly, with Lexa disappearing from beneath me and appearing on the other side of the bed, sitting with her back to me. I'm standing naked on the other side, reaching for her, but she's too far away.

"You didn't just let me go," she says. "You threw me away."

"No, Lexa," I moan. "I had to. You don't understand."

She turns and looks at me, her eyes blazing red.

The shock is so extreme, I awake with a jump, as if I literally leapt from the dream back into bed. The sheet is twisted around me as if I've been wrestling with it, and I'm soaked with sweat.

That's when I realize Lexa isn't beside me.

Panic hits me right in the chest, and a billion possibilities spin through my mind. I sit up so fast, my head spins, and I have to wait for the room to stop rocking.

How did we even get here? We had so much fun on our date. It felt like we were really connecting. But today, it's worse than being strangers.

I'd almost rather be strangers—two people who have never met before can't have this kind of complicated history.

I get up slowly, wrapping my robe around myself and hurrying downstairs. I decide that I have to stop being a coward and come clean.

It's time to tell her what happened that day. Grandfather's plan, the way I found her mother—all of it.

I'm still terrified she's going to blame me, but I have to trust her. Maybe then, she'll be able to trust me.

I can hear Lexa moving around in the kitchen, and even though I'm relieved that she's here and safe, my anxiety rises sharply as I think about telling her what I know.

"Hey," I say gently as I come through the door.

Lexa jumps, turning around so fast she knocks a jar of sugar off the bench.

"Shit!" she yells.

"Hey, it's okay," I say, grabbing the broom. "It's no problem. Sorry I startled you."

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry. It's your kitchen. I can't be spooked if you want to use it."

"Let me sweep this up," I say. "Pour me a coffee, please?"

"Sure," she agrees. "I'll try not to drop it."

"That would help. I'd rather not drink it off the floor."

She laughs, and I hope that it's a good sign. When I sit down at the table across from her, she slides a coffee cup over to me.

"Here you go," she says.

"Thanks," I answer, taking a sip.

Wow. Way to go. I really know how to talk to the ladies.

I look up at Lexa, trying not to sigh. I catch her eyes for a second before she quickly looks away.

“Look, Lexa...” I begin.

“What is it?” she asks.

I wait for a moment, struggling with my words. I have no idea where to start, and I’m ashamed to find that a lot of my struggle still has to do with jealousy.

If I just knew where she’s been all this time, and why she left, I’d feel better.

I’m a coward. I just don’t want her to run away from me again.

The realization shocks me, like lightning is sizzling through my bones. I’m so startled that I completely lose track of reality.

“Kit?” Lexa asks.

“Yeah?”

“Were you going to say something?”

I look up at her, and I’m so full of shame, I can’t believe it isn’t all over my face.

“I was wondering if you’d like to go out to the estate,” I say in a rush. “Grandfather’s estate? I think we could use a couple of days out of town, just to be together.”

She frowns, shaking her head. “Don’t we have the event to plan?”

“The others are happily doing that. Besides, we won’t be far away. It only takes an

hour or so to drive there.”

“I’ve never seen the estate,” she remarks softly. “Or the lake.”

Silence falls between us again, and my anxiety rises. I feel ridiculously transparent. Surely she knows I’m just trying to get her alone, isolated, and focused on me.

Even if I can’t get her to tell me all her secrets, I won’t have to worry about her meeting up with anyone in town. I can see and smell intruders for miles up there, so if anyone comes after her, I’ll be ready and waiting for them.

“I’d love to go,” she says, smiling. “It would be really nice to see the estate.”

Her reply shocks me into silence. I was carefully preparing arguments about why we should go. The last thing I expected was for her to just agree.

“Okay,” I say with a small smile. “Let’s finish our coffee, pack some clothes, and then head out. It’s almost dawn, so we should be getting there by mid-morning.”

“Kit,” she says, looking down at her coffee cup and fidgeting. “I know I’ve been... weird, but I really do want to spend time with you. I’m feeling pretty conflicted because I had good reasons for agreeing to this—and those still stand—but seeing you again isn’t what I expected. At all.”

“Okay,” I say, watching as she looks up at me again. Her eyes are wide, full of an emotion I can’t identify.

Is she going to break up with me out there? Is that why she wants to go—to break the agreement without telling the rest of the pack?

The thought is terrifying to me, but even so, it increases my eagerness for the trip.

The tension between us is so high, something has to burst soon. And I'd really prefer it wasn't one of my brain cells.

"This is all very strange, you know," she goes on. "And the last couple of days have been rough. We need to talk about so much, but it's just really hard to say some things. Do you know what I mean?"

Yes, I fucking do.

"I do," I reply. "I know I haven't made this easy on you—"

"Oh, Kit," she chuckles, shaking her head. "I think you've done a lot to help me feel comfortable. You deserve answers to your questions, and I will give them to you. I just don't know how."

This is sounding more and more like a "Dear John" letter.

"Okay," I answer, nodding. "I'm really happy you'd like to come out to the lake, and even happier that you want to open up to me. I'm sorry if I've also been... weird, but I have some things I need to talk about as well."

"Oh?" she asks, her eyes turning dark and serious.

"Yeah," I answer, unnerved by her stare.

It's almost like she knows how much blood there is in my past...

Oh, God, how can I possibly tell her all of this?

"Well, I'll go pack," she says after a moment. "I don't have to do much. All my stuff is still in bags."

“Yeah, right,” I remember, laughing softly. “I only need to grab a couple of things. The estate is always well-stocked, so we won’t need to pick up groceries or anything.”

“Cool,” she says. “I’ll get dressed.”

I watch her leave, trying to feel enthusiastic about the trip. In a way, I do. Sitting by the fire, walking along the shore, and exploring the manor with her all sound like great things to do.

But in my fantasies, she’s laughing with me, happy and relaxed. I’m a goddamn fool if I think that’s how this is going to go.

The sharp alternative slams into my mind—we fight bitterly, then go in separate directions. The manor is so huge, we could lose each other in there for a week if we really wanted to.

And no matter which way this goes, I’m going to be constantly tortured by her body. So turned on that I can barely breathe, but knowing the whole time that I can’t touch her.

Hell, knowing that I don’t even deserve to touch her.

Going to the estate suddenly seems like a bad idea. At least in town, there are distractions. Friends, pack business, restaurants, and shopping. Out on the lake, it’s just going to be us and our problems.

Fuck!

Can I get out of this somehow?

Lexa appears in the doorway, a big smile on her face. “You ready to go?”

No way.

“Just let me get dressed,” I say.

I trudge up the stairs, feeling like a man about to face the jury and not knowing if he’s about to be eternally punished or finally set free.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

The drive out to the estate is tense. I'm not entirely happy about being stuck with Kit while we're having so many problems, but I had to get out of town.

I want to believe I was imagining it, but the feeling of being stalked was too real. An intense aura of threat surrounded my father at all times. All he had to do was glare at me too hard, and I'd start trembling.

And that's exactly how I felt in town yesterday. I didn't imagine it.

Even seeing that Kit was close behind me didn't put my mind at ease. It just made me wonder what kind of stunts my father might pull to stay undetected by others as he kidnapped me right out from under Kit's nose.

But then he'd be subject to Lycan Law. It rules all the packs. If he took a wedded bride, his entire pack is forfeit. Kit can move against him with the help of every pack in the Range.

Surely not even Father is that stupid?

As I gaze out the window, misery slowly spreads through me. Father isn't stupid, but he is reckless.

The trees around us get thicker and taller, enclosing the car in a tunnel of green.

I can't see the sky above or the road ahead, just a never-ending wall of close-knit branches and fluttering leaves.

The early morning light dapples across the smooth dirt road, flickering across the windshield like glowing embers.

I glance over at Kit. His eyes are focused forward, as if he doesn't dare to look at me. For a few moments, I let my gaze linger on him, watching his muscles bulge as he reaches out to shift gears, the way his long fingers grip the steering wheel.

Suddenly, he looks at me, his blue eyes locking onto mine. A little shock runs through me, but I don't look away.

I need you, Kit. I have to get through all this crap between us... because I need your help.

The truck hits a small bump, and Kit looks back at the road. I swallow down my anxiety, trying to quiet the torrent of words threatening to burst through my lips.

I came here because I need help. It would be pretty stupid to cop out on that now, especially since I think my father really has found me...

The idea of being back in that town, in Vince's arms, makes me shudder. Hot sweat breaks out under my arms and trickles down my sides. I remember Father telling me how lucky I was. How once I married Vince, I wouldn't work in the factory anymore.

I'd just stay locked up in Vince's cabin, cooking, cleaning, and always pregnant.

The idea makes me physically sick. For a second, I think I might have to ask Kit to pull over, but the trees around us start to thin out. Suddenly, we're cruising along in bright sunlight. Ahead of us, a long blue streak appears with a rough line of green above it.

The road curves to the left into a circular drive, and that's when I see the estate.

I'm shocked into complete silence. The place is huge—three stories high, with wings built around a central structure.

The architecture is exquisite, with stone scrollwork and statues worked into every roof corner and wall edge.

Ivy grows wildly against the edges, as if the house has been embraced by the forest.

“You could fit a hundred people in here!” I gasp. “This place is huge!”

“More than that, actually,” Kit says with a little grin.

“Each wing has a suite, with a bathroom, parlor, and a guest room attached. The central hall contains the study, library, and ballroom. Kitchens are dead center. Around the back, there is a series of small rooms intended for the staff to relax in. And behind that, a cottage for the caretakers.”

“You’d need a fucking team of them,” I mutter.

He sighs. “I do, in fact. Susan and Joe are very old now. I pay them far more than I should—Grandfather would have fainted dead away if he saw the figure—but they do so much out here. I know Joe can’t keep up the gardens by himself, and Susan can’t possibly handle all the cleaning.

I’ve spoken to them about getting more staff, but they keep insisting they can handle it.

” He sighed again. “Grandfather may be dead, but so many people are still insanely loyal to him.”

“I think you should just make the decision yourself,” I say. “And get some new

people out here. Their comfort and safety are more important than their pride.”

“I agree. I just don’t know how to go about hiring anyone trustworthy. All the people I can think of to do the job wouldn’t want to move out here.”

I take a few steps towards the house, looking up at the high roof. Considering the imposing structure and the cruel old man who used to live here, I expect the place to feel uncomfortable, maybe even spooky. But it doesn’t.

It feels friendly, almost. And... expectant. Like it’s waiting for something.

Thoughts run through my mind, disjointed pieces and parts that haven’t fully come together. I remember how many people in town are homeless or in unsafe conditions while this beauty sits here with empty rooms, desperate for dozens of hands to care for her.

“Would you like to go inside first?” Kit asks. “Or go for a walk around the lake?”

“Let’s bring our bags in,” I answer. “Then you can show me around.”

As we approach the front door, a small old woman with dark gray hair appears in the doorway. She looks fragile, but her steely blue eyes fix on me with a powerful, determined gaze.

“Hello there,” she says, smiling. “I hear you’re the new luna, my dear. I’m Susan, the housekeeper.”

“Nice to meet you,” I answer politely, holding out my hand.

Susan shakes it in a firm grip. Then her lip trembles, her eyes tear up, and she throws her arms around my neck.

“Thank heavens Kit finally found himself a nice girl!” she cries, squeezing me tightly. “I’ve prayed for this day. Alisha would be so happy.”

“Grandmother never seemed to offer strong opinions either way, on anything I ever did,” Kit replies dryly. “I don’t imagine she’d throw a party for me.”

“Most likely not, young master, but she’d have been happy all the same,” Susan states. “I knew her well, waited on her personally, and she told me a great many things she never told anyone else.”

I see Kit’s eyes darken a little, but he doesn’t say anything. He just gathers up all our bags and gestures for Susan and me to go in ahead of him.

The hallway is wide and long, with incredibly high ceilings. I take slow steps as I follow Kit, looking around in wonder at the paintings, tapestries, and statues that decorate the area.

“I’ll leave our stuff in the library,” Kit says. “Did you want to stay in one of the guest rooms or in one of the suites?”

“Take me for a tour,” I suggest. “And then let’s decide.”

Kit leaves me standing in the foyer, where two separate staircases sweep up in different directions. After a few seconds, he emerges from the entrance to the library and takes my hand.

“I’ll be in the kitchen,” Susan says. “I’ll have a nice dinner ready for you when you get back.”

“Very kind of you, Susan,” Kit says. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it, young master. Off you go.”

Kit squeezes my hand and gestures at the staircases. “North or south?”

“Ah... north, I guess.”

“The royal suite. Let’s go.”

I keep my hand firmly wrapped around Kit’s as we head up the stairs. The size of the place has me feeling a little intimidated, and it feels good to have him close.

Kit leads me up past the first landing to the second level. The suite is massive, with its own parlor, living room, bathroom, and a gigantic bedroom. Standing at the massive window on the east side, I have an incredible view of the lake and the mountains beyond it.

“This place is amazing, Kit,” I gush.

“Yeah. The suites are incredibly luxurious. At the other end of the floor is a section of guest rooms, and the top level is an attic. It’s jammed wall to wall with junk that’s been stored for the last hundred or so years. It would take decades to go through it.”

“The view is beautiful.”

“It is. Grandmother loved it.”

There is a hint of anger in his voice, though, and I turn around to see a dark look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I’m sorry. I was just remembering things from when I was a kid. My grandparents never appreciated the beauty of this place. The views, the architecture—they were completely oblivious to it.”

I frown. “That sucks.”

He shrugs. “It’s what they were like. Did you want to stay up here?”

I turn and look out the window again, a little shiver trickling down my spine. “It’s... nice. But I don’t think I could sleep in here. It’s so big, I kinda feel like a bug on a picnic blanket.”

Kit laughs softly. “I know what you mean. I usually sleep in the study or the library.”

“Let’s go check those out,” I suggest, going over to take his hand. “I think that sounds like a great idea.”

Kit leads me back to the landing and down the stairs. To the left of the main staircase is a wide archway where Kit disappeared with our bags earlier. We go through it.

I pause so suddenly in the doorway, Kit drops my hand. I look up and around, my jaw hanging open as I stare like a struck deer in a snowstorm.

“I’ve never seen so many fucking books!” I exclaim, gazing at the stacks and stacks of shelves, all of them stretching almost to the ceiling.

“Yeah,” he chuckles. “It’s my favorite room, although the study is high on my list, too. Did you want to have a look?”

“I’m not much of a reader,” I admit. “It might be why I’m so overwhelmed by this.”

Kit chuckles softly. “Don’t worry. There’s a TV in the study.”

“Good. I can’t survive without my action flicks.”

“Did you want to take a walk outside?”

“Sure,” I answer, following Kit back down the hallway. He’s picked up his pace a little, and I have to trot to keep up.

“Do you get visitors out here?” I ask. “Like, does much of the town know where it is?”

“Not really,” Kit mutters. “Why do you ask?”

“Just curious,” I reply. “I might want to grab my phone in a sec, just to tell the others where I am. We left kind of suddenly.”

“I texted the council members,” he says, his voice tense. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Maybe not, but I’d still like to tell Misha and Kate personally.”

As we go through the front door, Kit walks out into the main drive and spins in a little circle, his nose high.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Just checking for any strange scent. The manor was purposefully built here so it could be easily defended.”

“So, your ancestors were worried about being attacked?”

“The Range wasn’t always peaceful, Lexa.”

I hadn’t known that—I don’t know much history at all—but the way he’s looking at me, it’s as if I should know exactly what he’s talking about.

Why is he getting weird?

He keeps staring at me. I stare back, frowning at him.

“Should we go over to the dock?” I ask, gesturing towards it.

He nods. I reach for his hand, but he ignores me.

“The deck has a complete view of the surrounding area,” he says. “Only the north and east slopes have thick cover, and the lake separates us from them. No one can get to the manor without being seen.”

Kit gives me another hard, searching look, and a spark of nervousness flares in my guts. I’m not sure if I want to shrink away from him or angrily confront him, but I know if he doesn’t cool off, I’m going to explode, one way or the other.

What the hell is going on? We both felt so comfortable when we first got here. Now I say I want my phone so I can text the girls, and he’s getting pissed with me?

We walk up the dock, a cold wind whipping across the lake to stroke me with freezing cold claws. I keep my arms wrapped around myself, feeling more miserable by the second.

I was ready to tell him everything—again—and beg for his help, but now I’m even more scared than I was before.

I wonder if I can disappear into the manor and live there without anyone ever finding me. The place is certainly big enough.

It's preferable to try to run into the mountains, only to freeze to death.

Kit stops at the end of the dock, his head high. He has his nose to the wind again, and his eyes search every horizon.

"Can we get back soon?" I ask. "It's getting cloudy and super cold."

"Want to get your phone, do you?" he asks softly.

"Well, yeah. That and a few other things. I could use a warm drink, too."

Kit turns around to look at me, his lips twisted downwards as if he's fighting against a torrent of words. His eyes are hard, and he slowly clenches his fists. I take a very slow step back.

"Kit, what's wrong?" I ask.

He shakes his head, and his face crumples a little.

"Okay," I say. "I'm going back to the car to get my phone. If you want to stay out here, then—"

"You have to text your lover, don't you?" he snaps. "Why did you even agree to come out here if you need him so much? Were you really going to hook up with him behind my back, right here at the manor?"

I gape at him for a moment. "What?" I finally demand, shaking my head. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

“Oh, come on,” Kit scoffs. “You keep pulling back from me when I’m trying to connect, as if someone has your heart already. You’re so confident in bed now, so you’ve obviously had experience.”

“Excuse me?” I shout, my voice roaring out of my throat. “I haven’t fucked anyone since you. After my night with you, I was too fucking scared to!”

Kit sighs. “Look, Lexa, I saw you, okay?”

“What? Saw me when?”

“In town, yesterday,” he says slowly. “I was coming to find you after the meeting, and I saw you go down that side alley. There was a guy following you.”

“What?” I choke on the word, my chest locked up tight. “What are you saying?”

“I knew it,” he grumbles, shaking his head. “I can tell by your face you already know. Just tell me the truth.”

“Kit,” I whisper, my voice dying in my throat. I step forward and grab his upper arms, forcing him to look at me. “Are you serious that you actually saw someone following me?”

“Yes,” he says. “I saw it, Lexa. You don’t have to lie anymore.”

A horrible feeling rises through my guts and up into my chest. It’s a sick, twisted bubble of tension, with claws of absolute terror that start to rake at my throat as I struggle to breathe.

“Was he tall and wiry, with black hair pulled back into a ponytail?”

“So you do know him,” Kit says bitterly. “That was definitely the guy.”

“No,” I moan, clinging to Kit as tears pour down my cheeks. “Oh my fucking God, no. He found me... he fucking found me!”

Confusion clouds Kit’s eyes as he watches my face. He doesn’t say anything, but I can tell by the shock on his face that this wasn’t the reaction he was expecting.

“Kit,” I say, wiping tears from my cheeks. “That wasn’t my lover, you goddamn fucking fool. It was my father .”

Her father?

“I thought your father was dead?” I snap, saying the first words that come into my mind.

Lexa grips my arms tighter, looking up into my face with tear-filled eyes. “Mom told people that. She thought we were far enough away that he could never find us, but he did. He’s a monster. Mom got me away from him. I didn’t remember much about it. But then—”

She crumples in my arms, as if all the strength has been sucked out of her body. I get my arms around her before she can fall and try to hold her up so I can walk her back to the house. After a few steps with her sagging in my arms, I give up and just hold her, cuddling her close to my chest.

What the fuck is going on?

All the questions and suspicions I had before have been replaced by new ones. I’m so confused, I can’t think straight, and now I’m truly worried about Lexa.

She’s completely still in my arms, her eyes open but dull, fixed on nothing. Her fingers twitch a little, but other than that, she just lies limply against my chest.

I’m still not convinced that she’s only ever been with me. There had to have been someone else at that time.

But I’ve definitely got more important things to worry about at the moment.

By the time we return to the house, Lexa has begun to make small, whimpery sounds, and she's still melted against my chest as if there is no strength left in her.

I hurry into the study and breathe a sigh of relief when I see that Susan has left a tray of cake, cookies, and tea.

There's even a bottle of black-label brandy and a warm fire crackling in the hearth.

I put Lexa down on one of the huge, soft couches, wrapping her in a blanket. I pour a tiny nip of brandy and put the glass in her hand, forcing her fingers to tighten around it.

"Drink this," I say, pushing it towards her lips.

Something flickers in her eyes, and she seems to notice the glass for the first time. She takes the glass from me and tosses her head back to swallow the brandy.

I pour a mug of tea and cut a big slice of Susan's vanilla and strawberry tea cake, bringing it straight over to Lexa. Her eyes are clearer, and color has returned to her cheeks, but her hands are trembling.

"Here," I say, holding out the tea and cake. "Eat something. You'll feel better."

She takes a small bite of the cake, and I see her eyes widen in surprise. "Wow, this is really good."

"Yeah, Susan bakes well."

"Like, I'm getting goosebumps and everything."

"That's the low blood sugar," I say. "From the shock."

Lexa carefully puts her cake back on the napkin in her lap and takes a sip of tea before putting the mug on the table beside her. She breaks off small pieces of cake and puts them into her mouth, staring down and not looking up at me.

“Lexa, you have to tell me,” I say.

She sighs, and I see her eyes glitter as they fill with tears. She looks so pale and fragile, but red spots burn on her cheeks.

“This is going to get ugly, Kit,” she warns, finally looking up at me. “And not just for you to hear. You’ll have to do some soul-searching, too.”

“Okay,” I reply, not worrying about it because I don’t have a clue what she means. “I’m ready to hear it, though.”

She nods, looking away and eating a bit more cake before she takes a deep breath and starts to talk.

“I don’t remember much from before my mom and I came here,” she says, staring into her lap.

“Mom got us out of there before my father’s abuse could spread to me.

I knew he was a bad guy and that things weren’t nice there, but I didn’t really remember anything else.

When Mom started saying he was dead, I just went along with it. ”

Lexa keeps her eyes fixed on her lap, not looking up at me. It doesn’t unnerve me at all, because I understand it.

Some things are just too painful to say out loud at all, let alone to another person. If you don't make eye contact, it's like you can pretend they aren't there.

"Go on," I prod gently.

"There isn't much further to go," she says, sniffing miserably as she finally looks up at me. "This is where it gets really sticky, Kit."

"Okay," I answer, feeling a flicker of fear deep inside me. My heart seems to skip a beat as I realize it might be time for my secrets to come out, too.

"You want to know where I was the last few years?" Lexa says.

"I was my father's prisoner. I lived in his shitty, falling-down cabin.

I cooked and cleaned for him. I worked in the fucking plastic factory, getting my lungs burned out day after day.

I tried to escape more than once, and I was beaten and chained up for it. "

Her words get caught on a sob, and she looks away again.

"How did you get away?" I ask numbly.

She shakes her head miserably, tears running down her cheeks.

"He promised me to his beta, Vince. I couldn't stand the thought of Vince touching me, so I made a run for it.

I went straight through the hills, until I ended up in Gryphon Eyrie.

I stopped for a break when I overheard Winnie and Krista in the bar, talking about Galen's match. "

"Krista is the alpha's daughter," I say. "Roderick Brent. He's the oldest alpha in the Range."

She nods. "She and Winnie have been friends since they were little. I shouldn't have been surprised to see Winnie there. But they mentioned the Porter's brides-for-hire service, and I thought..."

"You thought if you were married, it would save you from your father," I finish. "He can't take you if you're legally wedded, especially to an alpha. His entire clan would be forfeit."

"Yes," she mumbles. "But now he's here. He doesn't care. He's going to take me, anyway."

"I will not let him have you!" I say fiercely, grabbing her shoulders. "Do you hear me? I will never let him take you!"

She stays calm and still in my grip, tears still running down her cheeks. "You did absolute fuck-all last time, Kit," she finally says.

"What?" I mumble, shocked.

She stares at me, slumped in my arms as if she has no strength left. "I slept with you at the party. It was the best night of my life. Did you know I'd been crushing on you for years?"

"No," I say honestly, my voice coming out as a harsh whisper.

Did you know that I was watching you, too, Lexa?

“When I woke up and you were gone, I thought you’d been called away by official duties, that you didn’t mean to leave me alone. So, I went to your house—”

Her resolve deserts her, and she buries her face in her hands to cry. The napkin falls to the floor, leaving a trail of cake crumbs.

“Shh,” I whisper, hugging her and rubbing her back. “I’m sorry for that. I’m so, so sorry. But there was a reason. I have to tell you—”

My throat closes as the time comes to reveal my guilt. I actually gasp for air, as if my mouth can’t force the words to come out.

“It doesn’t matter,” she hisses. “Not in the grand scheme of things. Because I went home to cry, and he found me. I was only there a matter of minutes before he busted in, grabbed me, and dragged me into the woods. That’s when I saw—I saw—”

The sobs really come now, shaking her whole body, almost ripping her chest apart. She moans as she wraps her arms around her knees and rocks back and forth.

“I saw my mother. Broken, bloodied, dead, discarded in the woods like a piece of garbage. He said he killed her, and the wild animals could have her and tear her apart. I was so scared—”

“He killed her?” I cut in. “Your father killed her?”

Lexa’s tears don’t stop, but when she turns to look at me, her face is frozen with icy calm.

“So he said,” she answers. “But what do you know about it?”

The pain in my chest intensifies, and I know the only way to get through it is to let it out. My breath hisses through my teeth as I try to stay calm, keeping my eyes down just like Lexa did before.

“I was ordered to—I was ordered—”

I collapse forward onto the couch, trying desperately to get my breath back. I can feel Lexa trembling underneath me as she wrestles with her own pain.

Finally, I sit up and look into her eyes. Her tears are drying on her cheeks, and even though her eyes are still shimmering with grief, she looks much calmer now.

“I was ordered to kill your mother,” I say in a raspy voice. “And you.”

Her beautiful, pale gray eyes widen, and her face goes slack with shock.

“By your grandfather?” she asks.

“Yes. I humiliated you in front of the family, but it wasn’t enough. He couldn’t stand the idea that I might be interested in you. He ordered me to kill you both.”

“And you agreed?” she gasps.

“I had no choice! I went out to your house and found it busted up. I followed your trail, and I found your mother’s body.

I had no idea what happened. I didn’t know if you had left or if you were dead, too.

The fact that your scent cut off at the stream meant you were probably alive, but I didn’t know if you left willingly or... got chased by the kill squad.”

Lexa stares at me, her eyes wide. She reaches out to stroke my cheek.

“You found Mom?” she asks. “You found her and brought her back?”

“Yes,” I answer. “Grandfather was not happy about it—he wanted your bodies thrown over a cliff. I insisted that she have a proper funeral. Grandfather was in such a hurry to go on his special mission, he didn’t fight me too much over it.

He also insisted we find evidence that you were dead and have it for him by the time he returned. ”

“But then he was killed,” Lexa murmurs.

“And I lost my chance to find out all the details he gave the kill squad,” I say. “Wick, Bolton, and Slade. They still live out in the woods—they’re very old now. I questioned them, of course, but I couldn’t get much out of them. I was sure they killed your mother, and probably you, too.”

Lexa wipes her face, sniffing a little. “I was so sure that it was Father until I got back here. Then I started to think maybe it was your grandfather, or at least done on his order...”

Her voice trails off, and she won’t look at me. I blink hard, trying to move past the great weight in my chest.

“You suspected me,” I say.

She looks up, locking her eyes on mine. “Yes,” she admits in a whisper. “I did.”

“Lexa.” I reach out and cup her cheek with my hand. “When I saw you standing next to that fountain, it was the best moment of my life. I searched so hard for you—and

found nothing—for so many years. I really did think that you were dead and that I would never know what happened to you.”

All the tension goes out of her body, and she seems to shrink in front of me. Her lip trembles, and she blinks back more tears.

“I spent all this time thinking that no one loved me, that I had no one in this world,” she says, her voice shaking. “And my mother’s body was left in the forest for the wild animals to tear apart.”

“I was heartbroken when I found her,” I say. “I was trying to get to both of you in time. I didn’t know exactly what I was going to do, but I had to keep you safe. When I found Laura and lost your scent... it ripped me in two.”

My voice catches in my throat, and my hand slips off her cheek. I’ve let out so much of my pain that I feel hollow. As if now that it’s gone, there’s nothing left inside me.

I feel Lexa’s hand on my cheek and look up into her eyes. To my surprise, she’s smiling.

“Thank you,” she says. “Thank you for finding her, taking care of her... and looking for me.”

“But I didn’t find you!” I cry, grabbing her shoulders. “Horrible things happened to you, and I let it happen! It’s my fault!”

“No, baby, no,” she whispers, shaking her head. “It’s not your fault.”

She leans forward and presses her lips to mine. I wrap my arms around her and pull her close to me, as if I’m trying to convince myself she’s real. Lexa writhes in my arms, squirming off the couch until she practically falls into my lap.

We fall on the floor, tumbling against each other. Lexa laughs and rolls over, flipping herself on top of me.

“No, Lexa,” I whisper. “I don’t deserve this. I don’t deserve you.”

“That might be true,” she says with just a hint of humor. “But do you really think I’m going to let you get away now?”

She leans down and kisses me, pressing my shoulders into the floor with both hands. The kiss deepens, and my body comes alive, snapping tight like an electric wire.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

She pauses to give me a nod. “I thought I had nothing, and no one,” she says. “Now I know you were always there, caring for me, looking for me. I always had a safe place. I just didn’t know where it was.”

The moment stretches out between us, and a new emotion swells inside me, filling up all the space left behind after my confession.

“Lexa, I love you,” I say.

She smiles, stroking my hair and looking into my eyes.

“I love you, too, Kit,” she says.

When her lips meet mine again, there is an urgency in her, a growing need, as if all her inhibitions are finally coming completely undone. As her walls come crashing down, passion ignites in me, more than mere lust or desire.

For the first time, we are truly together, with no lies or secrets between us.

Now, we are truly one.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

Kit squirms on the floor, pinned between my knees. I grip his shoulders with my hands and lean into the kiss, punishing his lips with mine.

I feel loose, and maybe a bit crazy. The last twenty minutes have contained more revelations than the entirety of my life. It feels like falling down a flight of stairs and standing up completely unscathed.

I'm not, though. I'm covered in scars.

All these wounds I have to carry in my heart still hurt me, but being here in Kit's arms makes all of them fade. I've had years to work through my loss, and the greatest regret I had about my mother is that her body would lie out in the woods, discarded and forgotten.

And it was Kit who found her.

The relief pouring through my body is intoxicating, filling my chest with a warm rush. Every single fear that has held me back over the past few years has vanished.

I run my hands up Kit's shoulders, stroking his neck and cheeks, reaching up to play with his hair. A light giggle escapes my lips as I flick my tongue out against his, diving back down to kiss him hard and deep.

My body is trembling, and it's not all from lust or shock. I have all the things I ever wanted—right here, right now—and it was all served up to me in a matter of minutes.

"I'm still not sure all of this is real," I whisper.

“Neither am I,” Kit answers.

I giggle softly. “That’s not the reassurance I was hoping for,” I laugh.

He shrugs. “It’s the best I’ve got. I spent years thinking I’d never see you again... then the past week thinking I’d never be able to get close to you because of all the lies I had to tell.”

I put my fingers over his lips. “I understand... not completely. But mostly, I do. I can tell there is much more about your grandfather—”

“I killed for him,” Kit says through gritted teeth. “He terrorized the entire pack, and I think Loretta and the others were in on it. He bloodied me before I was fifteen years old. He could force anyone to do what he wanted. I did horrible things—”

“Shh,” I whisper, stroking his face. “It’s okay. You don’t have to tell me everything.”

“I want to,” he says. “But maybe not right now.”

He smiles and reaches up to put his hands around my waist. I lean forward, letting him kiss me. I fall against his chest, and he wraps his arms tightly around me, crushing me to his chest.

“Lexa,” he whispers.

“Yes?” I mumble, wondering what other secrets could possibly be left to tell.

“Can I go down on you?”

It takes a moment for the question to sink in, and when it does, my cheeks burn. Kit grins and runs his fingers down my face.

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes,” I answer, smiling.

He rolls us over in one quick movement, bracing his arms on the floor so he doesn't crush me. He bends down, kissing my lips briefly before running his hands down the front of my body.

Kit closes his eyes, gently trailing his fingers down my legs, then back up to my hips. He teases my skin around the waistband of my leggings, then slowly pulls them down my thighs.

I feel incredibly exposed and vulnerable, but it only enhances my arousal when I see the hungry look in Kit's eyes as he looks at me.

I lean back, letting him slip off my shoes and pull my leggings down. My skin prickles all over as he hovers above me, running his eyes up and down my body as he lowers his mouth.

When his lips brush against my pussy, he lets out a soft groan of pleasure and pauses as he sinks lower, flicking with his tongue. Heat rushes through me, pounding in my nipples and aching deep inside me. Kit groans again, hooks his arms around my thighs, and shoves his tongue deep into my pussy.

A shriek pours out of my throat, and I cover my face with both hands as Kit moans, lashing his tongue through the slick lower lips of my pussy and pressing his lips to my clit.

I squirm under him, and he tightens his arms around my thighs to pull me closer and hold me still as he plunges his mouth in even deeper.

Every pulse of my inner muscles brings another slick wave, and Kit meets each one with his tongue and enthusiastic gasps. He laps at my pussy as I get wetter and more slippery, exploring every single fold and crease.

There is no tension left in me, and my entire body relaxes on the floor, my thighs falling far apart as my hips loosen. Kit runs his tongue from my deep inner folds up to my clit, then wraps his lips around it and sucks, gently pressing it with the tip of his tongue at the same time.

The orgasm explodes through my clit and my pussy at the same time, pounding heat cresting in waves that throb through my legs and belly, even seeming to reach my fingers.

Kit moans in excitement, gripping my thighs as he reaches deeper with his tongue, making me come again.

I writhe and gasp on the floor, my hands over my eyes. Pleasure wrecks through my every cell, leaving me gasping and shivering as the waves of lust crash through me.

I feel Kit's tongue flick out and tease my clit a little before he sits up and strokes my face. I move my hands so I can look up at him, and his big blue eyes are shimmering with a warmth I've never seen before.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers, and his tone is so genuine, I feel another rush of desire flooding through me, making my clit pound and my pussy ache.

I reach down and grab the bottom of my sweater, pulling it over my head. Kit gasps as my breasts bounce free. He immediately brings his mouth to them, licking and sucking my nipples and squeezing my tits in his big, warm hands.

The ache between my legs grows, becoming fierce, almost sharp. I writhe under Kit,

finally grabbing his hair and pulling his head up to make him look at me.

“Fuck me, Kit,” I whisper. “Fuck me now!”

He smiles, sitting back a bit to rip his shirt over his head and open his pants. He’s bigger and more muscular than he was in high school, but even then, he had shoulders like a bull and arms as thick and strong as steel cords.

Kit lays back down, holding on to one of my hips as he rubs his hard cock against me. I’m so wet, he slides up and down easily, teasing my inner folds with pressure. The ache inside me becomes a burn, and I grab his shoulders, grinding my hips against him.

“Fuck me! Fuck me, please!” I pant.

Kit leans down and kisses me gently. Then, keeping his eyes on mine, he pushes forward with his hips and joins us together with one hard thrust.

My body bends, tension streaking through me as if every single muscle in my body is trying to wrap itself around Kit, the sensation radiating from where his hard cock is buried in my tight, wet pussy. I can’t do anything except gasp and tremble, helpless in his arms.

He keeps looking into my eyes. Slowly, the tension releases, and I relax into him, my legs loosening from his hips as my fingers let go of his shoulders. I’m still wrapped around him, but not in a vice-like death grip.

Kit moves his hips back and forth in small, slow strokes. I can feel how hard he is, the long, thick shaft driving deep into me, the friction building from his calculated movements.

The next orgasm takes me by surprise, a warm rush that explodes deep inside, making my pussy clench and spasm around his cock as my clit pounds. I dig my fingers into his arms and scream, locking my legs around his waist again as I thrash and writhe.

Kit waits for it to subside, holding himself still above me with his arms braced against the floor. I open my eyes again slowly, looking up at him with a smile on my lips as the waves of pleasure echo through me.

He bends down and kisses me, igniting the fire deep inside me all over again. My desire is a living thing beyond my control, a flame that consumes me and remakes me again and again.

As his tongue searches inside my mouth, he starts to thrust into me in long, hard strokes. We keep our mouths together until the force of his movements forces us to break apart, but he keeps his eyes on mine.

I wrap my hands around his forearms and cling to him with my thighs as he thrusts harder and faster, pinning me to the floor. The deepest reaches of my body open up to him as his cock gets harder and thicker, swelling inside me.

I start to cry out and writhe under him, but he keeps holding on to me and doesn't look away.

The feeling of being completely open to him, my soul and my body at the same time, triggers a powerful spasm inside me.

I feel my pussy wrap around his cock so hard that it hurts—for a couple of seconds, the ache throbs, both of us held in perfect tension—then his cock shudders and jerks deep inside me as my inner muscles clench and pump against him, leaving me breathless and shaking.

Kit falls against me, rolling to the side to cradle me in his arms. I collapse against him, pressing my cheek to his sweaty chest. He reaches up briefly to grab the blanket, flicking it over us as we curl up in front of the fire.

We look into each other's eyes, both feeling no need for words. With gentle touches and small smiles, we say everything that needs to be said until both of us start to succumb to sleep.

For quite some time, all I knew was warmth, safety, and the sensation of Kit's arms wrapped around me. Even though I fall into a deep sleep, I can still feel him, and I know our bodies are still tangled together.

Sometime later, a sense of cold invades my comfort. My eyelids flicker a little, and I notice the room is almost completely dark.

The fire is going out.

I slip out of Kit's arms, trying not to disturb him. There is some small wood next to the fire, and I toss in a few pieces, waiting for the flames to catch.

Warmth begins to fill the room, but I know we'll need a few big logs to get us through the night. I wrap myself up in a long jacket and get the wood basket, looking down on Kit before I go.

Back soon, my love.

I walk through the dark halls to the back entrance where the woodpile is. With no care in the world, I cross the yard to fill up the basket with logs.

Somewhere nearby, a twig breaks with a distinctive snap.

I freeze, not daring to move. I keep my head down, my hand still on the log and my other on the handle of the basket.

Maybe it was just an animal—

No such luck. My nose isn't picking up anything big enough to make that sound. It's downwind, but if it were a moose or something like that, I'd know.

The only thing that could hide from me like this is another wolf.

Fear bleeds through me, banishing all the good feelings as if they never existed, and tears start to run down my cheeks.

No, God. Please, God, no. Not again. I was finally safe!

I hear a very faint crunch of stones at the edge of the courtyard, like the step of a heavy foot. I hold my breath, still bent over as if I'm getting logs for the fire.

I'm going to count to three, then I'm going to turn around, throw this basket in the direction of the noise, then run like hell back to the house, screaming for Kit.

I close my eyes, listening for any other sounds. The night is silent except for the faint howl of wind, and I can't detect any scent.

Ready.

I spin around, hurling the basket. Somewhere in the dark, there is a grunt and a muffled thump. I leap towards the house, my mouth open to scream from the bottom of my lungs.

Powerful arms grab me from behind, squeezing me until all the breath is forced out of

my body. A hand is clamped over my mouth, and even though I try to struggle, heavy darkness sweeps through my vision, taking all my strength—and hope—with it.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

A chill invades the soft, comforting warmth of my deep sleep. The only thing I'm aware of is a faint feeling of annoyance that I have to leave this perfect place to come back to reality.

Eyes still closed, I reach for Lexa... and find nothing but empty floor.

Immediately, I'm shocked, wide awake, flipping onto all fours as I look desperately around the room.

Not here... she's not here!

Fear rolls through my chest, the icy waves crashing against the heat breaking out across my skin. It's pure panic—an emotion I've never truly felt before.

I leap up in one movement, grabbing my pants and yanking them on. With my confused, barely awake brain, the only conclusion I can come to is that she left me. Slipped away while I was sleeping to run from me. From this beauty that we only just found.

Did she feel it, too? Was I dreaming this? Why else would she go somewhere and not wake me up?

The pain of losing her hits me like a warhammer. My breath is knocked out of me, and my knees tremble so hard, I have to grab a nearby table to keep myself standing.

I can't live without her!

I'll find her. Wherever she's gone, I'll find her.

As my panic begins to subside, it's followed by a far worse feeling. A heavy numbness that affects all my muscles until I'm standing there as tense as a stone statue.

What if she doesn't want me to find her?

My breath starts to burn in my throat, and panic rises again. I take two frantic steps forward, and my head spins. Slowly, my brain is waking up, but my thoughts are still a chaotic mess.

That's when I notice the fire is dead and cold, and the wood basket is gone.

The relief that hits me then is more powerful than the fear. I gasp for air, reassuring myself that everything is alright, she didn't leave me, and soon I'll have her back in my arms again.

I stride towards the door, purpose giving me strength. In my mind, I can see myself walking out the back door, looking across the yard to see her standing at the woodpile, waving happily to me with a big smile on her face.

Desperate to make the dream a reality, I run down the hall, flinging the door open.

The completely empty yard refuses to register. I can imagine her there so strongly, I have to blink my eyes several times to convince myself she really isn't there.

Then I see the wood basket sitting in the corner of the yard, discarded on its side.

As if someone dropped it... or threw it.

I hurry towards it, but I only take a couple of steps before I smell the blood. I trace the scent straight to the woodpile, seeing the smallest splatter of red blood across the white stones in front of it.

I know it's Lexa's, but I have to get a better smell of it to be sure. When I bend down and touch it with my fingers, it's cold, almost frozen. Barely even sticky.

Shit... this happened hours ago!

I bring my fingers up to my nose, and I know with complete certainty it is Lexa's blood.

"Master Kit?" a questioning voice calls from the cottage. "What is it?"

I whirl around to face Joe, standing at the door of the cottage. I can see Susan standing behind him.

"Lexa's gone!" I roar, losing my composure. "There's blood here—did you—I mean—is there—"

Words fail me, and I fight the hopelessness with the only thing I have in me that's stronger.

Rage.

"Master Kit?" Joe asks, coming across the yard. "What do you mean, blood?"

The light gray dullness of the yard is suddenly cut by a bright beam of sunlight coming over the mountain to the east, on the other side of the lake. It hits the front of the house and lights the courtyard with a shimmering orange glow.

What a beautiful sunrise. This could have been a perfect day.

As the chaotic thoughts crash through my mind, shattering against each other in an endless fall, one clear one shines through.

I'm cracking up.

"Did you hear anything?" I yell, crossing the yard to face down with Joe. "Did you see anything? Anything at all?"

"We've been soundly tucked in since sundown, sir. We woke up about half an hour ago. We were just having breakfast when we saw you come out."

Susan follows Joe hesitantly into the yard, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. She looks at the red splash on the ground with wide, terrified eyes.

"I was just coming to start cooking for you," she says. "My God, is that blood?"

"It's blood," I confirm. "Lexa's blood. We're wasting time!"

I turn away from them, tearing off my pants so I can shift and charge towards the lake. There are the tiniest drops of blood scattered far apart, almost undetectable, but enough for me to follow.

I keep my nose down and swiftly chase the trail. Behind me, I hear the others calling, but I don't stop. I just keep running into the trees.

As I run, a terrible bloodlust rises in me. I remember many chases just like this, hunting on Grandfather's order.

"Criminals," he'd say to me. "Fiends. They don't deserve our mercy. They threaten

the peace of the pack. Kill them!”

The very first time I went out, at fifteen, I hesitated. Our prey was a young boy, a little younger than me. I can’t remember what crime grandfather accused him of—or if there even was one. I was the fastest one, the best tracker, and I brought him down.

The shock took him out of his wolf form, and he looked up at me with huge, fear-filled eyes. I leapt back, shocked by his fear and something far worse—confusion.

Does he know why we’re after him?

After many years under Grandfather’s iron paw, I’ve come to believe that the boy probably didn’t.

The others caught up to me, and Grandfather wanted to know why I hesitated.

“Take the kill! Immediately, you goddamn weakling!”

But I couldn’t move. I stood frozen, staring at the boy.

And Grandfather ordered the kill squad to finish the job.

They took their time. The three big, experienced hunters toyed with him, chased him around the clearing, sometimes almost letting him get away before leaping in front of him and shoving him back into the circle.

They started with nonlethal hits, grabbing an ankle or a wrist, slowly tearing chunks out of him until he was bloodied and broken, staggering between them.

Finally, he fell. There was nothing left in him, and the kill squad looked furious that their toy was now broken. Wick, the biggest and the meanest, fell on him and ripped

his throat out.

Grandfather told me that if I'd had the strength to kill that boy, none of it would have happened. So, I learned to kill. Swiftly, cleanly, and with mercy.

As I charge through the woods, my paws drumming on the soil and the fresh mountain air searing my lungs, the bloodlust and rage rise in me, swallowing all my doubt.

I know I can take on ten wolves the size of Wick. I have experience and power—and the ability to kill in milliseconds with no conscience or care.

Thank you, Grandfather, for this gift.

Finally, I have a use for it.

Suddenly, I realize I've been running up the mountain for a long time, and I can't detect Lexa's scent. Cursing myself for a goddamn fucking fool, I turn back down the mountain, desperately searching for it again. The trail was faint to start with, and now it's impossible to find.

Back to the lake. Start again. I can't afford to waste this time—they could be killing her right now!

Even though that's my worst fear, I don't think it's likely. I know they'll want her alive, even if it means bringing the entirety of Cyan Lock down on their heads.

Those fuckers have no idea what's coming for them.

As I trot back towards the house, I hear raised voices, and the tang of lots of pissed-off wolves reaches my nose. I shift mid-run and hurry into the courtyard to find it full

of people.

“Kit!” Kate yells, throwing her arms around me. “Thank God you’re back. Where is Lexa?”

“Not with me, obviously,” I snap. “I lost the trail.”

“We’ll help,” Cade offers, emerging from the crowd. “Everyone’s here. We got you, bro. Just tell us where to start.”

I look around and see Mabel, Xavier, and Cass. Lexa’s other friend, Misha, is here. Even Derrik and Jones step forward, ready to fight.

“I called everyone I could think of,” Susan says, standing at the edge of the crowd. “And they all came.”

The sudden sound of tires spitting stones out on the drive makes us all run. We come charging into the circular front garden to see Galen’s truck pulling up out front.

“Kit,” he says, jumping out and grabbing my hand. “We’re here. What can we do?”

Clara jumps out of the truck, and so does Galen’s sister Winnie and a couple of others from his council. I’m so overwhelmed for a moment, I don’t know what to say.

Then, there is a high, mad laugh from the far trees. I turn around slowly to see a wiry old wolf standing at the edge of the forest, coughing on its own mirth like a hyena.

“Tell me where she is, you mad fuck!” I scream, taking long, slow steps towards the old wolf. “I will snap you to pieces like old twigs if you don’t tell me where she is!”

“Oh, I’ll tell ya,” the old man chuckles, shifting to reveal his skeletal, ancient human

shape. “But only you, Alpha Kit. Not the others.”

Growls break out all around me as my friends show him exactly what they think of that idea.

He shrugs. “He comes alone, or she dies. That’s the rules.”

“What’s going to stop us from following you?” Cass asks, her voice firm as if she’s talking to a toddler.

He cackles. “These hills are full of eyes, sweet thing. We’ll know. We’ve been setting this up for some time. Did you really think our alpha would let his princess get away?”

A shudder runs through me as I remember Lexa telling me not to call her that.

“Okay!” I shout over the rising rabble. “I agree, it’s fine. Let’s go.”

“The hell it is!” Galen yells, grabbing my arm. Cade quickly grabs the other.

“You aren’t going alone, bro,” Cade says. “No fucking way.”

“It’s a trap,” Galen adds.

“Of course it is,” I answer. “I’m still going.”

“No,” Galen tightens his grip, and Cade shakes me.

Rage builds in my blood, heating me from within. Every death I dealt in Grandfather’s rule plays out inside me, and the growl that spills from my throat echoes through the crowd like thunder. My friends step back in a hurry.

“Stay here,” I command, glaring at them. “All of you, stay here!” I yell, making sure everyone can hear me. “Nobody follows me!” I shout, looking around at their faces.

All of them look upset, some of them scared, and Galen and Cade just plain fucking mad.

I give them a final glare, then turn to walk towards the old man.

“Let’s go, asshole,” I bark. “She better be alive.”

He cackles. “Oh, of course she is. The princess is a tasty sweet, and she belongs to the beta. I assume he’s claiming her right now.”

The demon I tried for so long to tame rises its ugly head inside me, and instead of fighting it, I let it consume me.

“I will kill you,” I say in a low voice. “And I will enjoy it. If you’re very lucky, it will be quick and in the heat of battle. If you’re unlucky, it may take days.”

“My luck always holds fairly well,” he chuckles. “Let’s be off, then. Wouldn’t want you to miss the show!”

I refuse to respond to his taunt, and he turns away from me, shifting into his wolf form and running into the forest. Even though he’s old, the wily wolf is still fast, and I have to race to keep up.

Good. Get me there as fast as possible, old man. That way, I can kill you and all your kind that much quicker.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

The soft chirping of a bird traces across my consciousness, bringing me out of the darkness. At first, I don't know where I am. The first thing I expect to see is Kit.

Then I hear rough voices around me, and pain lances through my skull, making my stomach lurch. I try to force myself back into the comforting darkness, but a sharp blow to my guts stuns me and makes my eyes snap open.

“Wakey, wakey, princess.”

“If you do that again,” I gasp, “I’m gonna barf.”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Father says, leaning over to glare into my eyes. “But by all means, do what you gotta do.”

As I look up into his pale, silvery eyes, it strikes me that our eyes are exactly the same color but absolutely nothing alike.

I glare right back at him, my lips pressed together to stop myself from screaming. I know he thrives on fear, and I refuse to give it to him.

“Going quiet, hey?” he says. “I don’t much care. I didn’t miss your whining a single bit.”

I know he’s baiting me, so I still don’t speak. He grins down at me, and I keep my face impassive, determined to keep my cool.

That’s when someone touches me from behind. To my shock, I realize I’m not

restrained, and I try to leap up from my feet so I can run. The person behind me grabs my shoulders and yanks me back to the ground.

“Hey, baby,” a rough voice growls in my ear. “I missed you, honey.”

“Vince,” I hiss, struggling against him. He grips my upper arms, digging his fingers painfully into my flesh. Panic floods through me, destroying my resolve to stay calm. I thrash against him, kicking wildly, but he holds me down with ease.

Kneeling behind me, he tugs me closer and puts his chin on my shoulder to whisper against my neck.

“Even though it hurt me real bad that you ran away, it just made me hungrier. I’ve got a powerful need now, pretty thing, and I’m going to rip you up. I’m practically in a frenzy already.”

He licks my neck, making me squirm. I hear his soft chuckle as he runs his lips up and down my shoulder, biting me gently.

“This is just the preshow, babe. I can’t wait to sink my teeth in.”

“You can’t!” I gasp, struggling uselessly. “I’m married to an alpha! If you try to claim me, it will be an insult to the whole pack. He’ll kill you all.”

“I’m aware of the law,” Father says, looking down at me with a cruel smile. “I could argue a case that you ran from a previous commitment and have to face your punishment with us. That won’t be necessary, though.”

“Why?” I cry, still struggling against Vince as he licks my neck and nibbles on my earlobe.

“Because you’re fair game if you’re a widow,” he says with amusement. “Anyone can claim you.”

My body goes completely numb and still as I stare up at him, trying to process his words. The fear that rises in me then is a terrible thing, worse than any terror he’s ever visited on me before.

“Hmm, good, you’re going to stay still for a while,” Vince mutters. “I like it when you take it with grace. Don’t worry, though, I’ve got some moves that’ll make you fucking scream for me.”

I try as hard as I can to keep them down, but sobs burst out of me, making my chest heave. Vince and Father have a good laugh about it, and Vince yanks me back against him so he can wrap an arm around me to squeeze my breast.

“Don’t worry, darlin’,” he mutters. “I’ll keep you occupied when your pretty boy is gone. You won’t have a spare second to think about him, I promise.”

Vince runs his hands down further, trying to get under my coat. His hands on my naked skin disgust me, and I don’t know if my stomach is lurching from the head injury or the thought of what he’s going to do to me.

Both.

“I can smell him all over you,” Vince says, taking a deep breath. “It’s going to be fun covering that scent with mine. I’m going to fuck you until our sweat blends, coating both our bodies, and my seed washes his right out of you.”

His words bring a new wave of terror, and I struggle against him, thrashing and kicking, desperate to get free. Father and his pack of wolves all laugh at me, forming a close ring around us.

I really can't get away!

"So, what happens next?" I mutter, forcing the words through my tears. "Are you going to drag me through the woods back to Grace's Fall?"

It's a long way, and I'll probably have to shift to make the distance. I might be able to get away.

"We're just going to stand here a while and wait for your pretty boy to show up," Father drawls.

"Then we're going to take him out and leave his body here for the pack to find.

They'll know we reclaimed our property, and there's no sense in coming after us.

I think they'll be too busy choosing a new alpha to worry about us. "

An icy shard of fear pierces through me as I realize he's absolutely right. The Cyan Lock pack doesn't care about me; they want me gone. Without Kit, they can choose a new alpha and luna and forget about me.

And Kit, my love, you're walking straight into a trap!

I know for certain that he will come after me. I don't doubt it for a second, and the worst thing is, he'll know it's a trap, and he'll still do it, not realizing that the odds are so stacked against him.

He'll be expecting a few wolves, top henchmen only. Not twenty of the meanest damn wolves to ever walk the earth.

Tears trickle down my cheeks, and my body goes so numb, I can barely feel Vince

touching me. Their laughter and bullying don't even register as I think about Kit walking straight into this and getting torn apart right in front of me.

He'll die without ever knowing how much I want him and that I'll be his forever. Even if he dies and Vince takes me, I'll never be his.

I'll always belong to Kit.

A thin, echoing howl sounds from a nearby ridge. Father looks up towards the tree line and waves.

"That's Earl," Father says. "Do a perimeter check, boys."

Three of his henchmen shift and run into the woods, and that's when I realize Father has pack members scattered through the woods to make sure Kit comes alone.

And to make sure he doesn't get out alive.

I hear the drumming of paws on the ground, and a wiry old wolf paces into the clearing with Kit right behind him.

I want to scream and tell him to run from this place, but I know he won't go. He'd rather die right here than leave me. Through my pain, I feel a glow in my heart, a sense of value that I've never really had before.

Knowing I'm worth fighting for, maybe even dying for, makes me want to fight for myself.

Kit paces into the circle of wolves, looking around at them with a relaxed expression. His eyes are calm, and he's not even showing his teeth.

What the fuck is he doing?

“Here he is!” Father yells like he’s announcing a test match. “The fabled alpha of Cyan Lock. I heard you were scary, young’un.”

Kit doesn’t bother to shift back so he can speak. He just keeps watching Father with a calm, steady gaze.

Father tries not to show it, but I can tell he’s unnerved.

Even though my fear is rising, there is a trickle of hope cutting through it.

Kit doesn’t look worried at all.

“Alright then, son, if you want to get down to it, then let’s go!” Father says. “I appreciate a wolf who doesn’t fuck around. Larry!”

Father gestures to the circle, and a big black wolf comes through the crowd. He carries his head low, teeth bared. A string of drool hangs from his bottom jaw. He paces back and forth in front of Kit. Kit barely moves, following him with his eyes.

Larry slows, growling at Kit. He feints to the left, then pounces back the other way, hurling himself at his opponent.

Kit barely moves. He bounces off the ground with his front paws, closes his jaws on Larry’s throat with a sharp snap, and hurls him to the ground.

The whole thing happens in less than a split second. There is a shocked silence from the surrounding wolves, and even Father takes a step back.

Kit cocks his head, growling low in his throat. He stands steadily on all fours, his

eyes sweeping each side of him as he waits for the next attack.

This time, two wolves jump at him from separate directions. He leaps away from one, shoving the other out of his way with a massive shoulder. He rolls low, grabbing the first one by a leg and wrenching him down, crunching his teeth through the wolf's paw.

While one howls and staggers away, Kit lunges at the other, getting caught in a vicious tangle of snapping jaws and flashing teeth. There is a horrible crack and a sharp cry, then Kit emerges victorious once more.

He returns to the middle of the circle, calmly staring at Father as he waits for the next attack.

For the first time in his life, Father looks anxious. I'm sure he wasn't expecting to lose so many pack members, especially so quickly.

My husband is a fucking machine.

Father whistles, and five wolves come racing from the forest, launching themselves at Kit. He goes down under them, and I can't see anything except flying fur and thrashing limbs.

The growls and yelps are terrifying to hear. When I hear bone crunching and smell the sharp tang of fresh blood, I struggle against Vince, desperate to get into the circle. Vince chuckles and yanks me back against him, still tightly holding on to my arms.

"It doesn't matter how tough he is," Vince murmurs. "They're just going to keep coming until he's done, then I'll finish him off."

"Coward," I hiss, gasping for breath as I keep struggling against him. "You're afraid

to take him on yourself!”

Vince laughs softly. “Call me a coward if you want, princess. I don’t much care what you think. The only thing that matters is that your husband dies today, and then I claim you.”

Even though he’s trying to sound confident, I can detect a hint of fear in his voice.

Vince might be scared to jump in with Kit even if Kit is half-dead.

There is a horrible wail from the pile of fighting wolves, and I struggle against Vince again. He laughs, enjoying the press of my body against his while I squirm.

“This is it!” Vince yells with glee. “There’s no way he survived that!”

Three more wolves lay dead in the circle, and I can see Kit still fighting the other two.

One is latched onto his ruff, the other has a firm grip on his haunches.

He struggles against them, growling and thrashing as he tries to get free.

I can see his flesh being torn open, and his blood splattering across the ground as he whips back and forth, trying to get out of their grip.

Suddenly, Kit collapses between them, going completely limp. The other two are so surprised that they let go, and Kit shifts back to his human form, reaching for the nearest wolf and grabbing its head. With a sharp movement of his hands, he snaps the wolf’s neck, then turns on the other.

It lunges at him, locking its jaws around his leg. I see the teeth pierce through his

skin, but Kit doesn't even cry out. He just pulls back his fist and punches down with all his strength, breaking the wolf's spine.

Kit returns to the center of the circle, glaring at my father. He's bleeding in several places and badly bruised, but his breathing is slow and purposeful, and his eyes are calm.

Father glares back. Even though I can still see tension in him, there is also triumph.

Kit might be magnificent, but even he can't fight forever. Sooner or later, they are going to kill him.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

I can barely feel my wounds. Blood trickles across my skin, turning cold in the early morning air, but in my veins, it still runs hot.

Breath rushes steadily through my lungs, and my heart pounds with a slow, steady beat. These guys might be vicious, but they really don't know how to fight.

Cool, calm, and collected. Grandfather taught me you can't do any real damage with unbridled rage. The only way to hurt people is with a direct purpose.

So far, these wolves are just running blindly at me, expecting their fangs and adrenaline to do the job. It's only when they come at me as a group that they manage to injure me.

And I'm still kicking their asses.

A low, pathetic whining is still whistling through the teeth of the wolf whose spine I broke. The noise seems to be unsettling the others, so I leave him there, suffering.

I glare at Lex's father, still not speaking a word. I clench my fists and nod slightly.

I won't leave this circle until we're all dead.

I don't have to live; I only have to stay alive long enough to kill Lexa's father and her promised husband. The Grace's Fall pack will immediately retreat and leave Lexa here once their alpha is dead and there is no one to claim her.

Lexa will find her way back, and her friends will care for her. She'll be fine. All I

have to do is kill that fucking bastard!

I let my eyes flick over to where the ugly younger guy is holding my woman. The second he meets my gaze, he feels her up, grinning as he puts his hand under the jacket to squeeze her breasts. Rage burns through me, making my vision waver.

"Careful, careful... anger clouds the mind. "Never hurt people accidentally. Do it on purpose."

To some people, that line might mean mercy, but to sadists like my grandfather, it means you can cause much more pain when you are calm and collected.

Lexa's father whistles again, and seven more wolves come from the trees.

They don't rush in, though. Every wolf here has to be feeling at least a bit scared now after watching so many of their friends get slaughtered. I stay still, carefully monitoring their position as they stalk towards me.

They coordinate their moves well, and three come at me from the front while four circle from behind. I drop and roll, but they sail over me and twist back around, all of them fanning out in a half-circle as they stalk me again.

Shit... they knew I was trying to make them crash into each other. This is going to be a bit tougher.

Even though it will make me vulnerable for a few seconds, I shift back into my wolf form. I have to drop and roll the second I change forms, as all seven of them try to latch on while I can't defend myself. I barely make it out of the kill ring and back away from them, trying to plan my next move.

They flank me, two coming at me from either side while three spread out in front.

The circle closes behind me, and I know I'm trapped.

Growling, I plant my paws, letting my hackles rise.

Come on, then.

Two wolves from either side leap, as well as one from the front.

I try to dodge, but all of them anticipate and come down on top of me.

They hold me down as the others dart in, biting and clawing.

I feel my skin being ripped apart in dozens of small wounds, and a howl of pain spirals out of my throat.

I can hear Lexa screaming, and it gives me strength. I put all my effort into a massive shake, twisting and snapping wildly. They latch onto me, biting and ripping at my fur, but I don't stop, hearing yelps and howls all around as I give back twice what I get.

After a few frenzied moments, I stagger backwards to survey the damage. Two of the wolves are dead, while the others are so injured they can't rise. I walk back towards the head of the circle, my eyes focused on Lexa's father.

"Looks like it might be your turn, Vince," he says coolly. "The boy is done."

I'm nowhere near done, you fucking bastard!

My lips peel back from my teeth as a deep growl rumbles through me. Even though I'm bleeding from multiple wounds and I can barely stand, I will kill this fucker as my last act on this earth.

He will not have you, Lexa. This, I swear.

Then Lexa's father gestures to one of the others, who goes over to hold Lexa as Vince lets her go. Lexa's father shifts to come into the circle with Vince.

Fine, then. I'll kill you both at once.

Vince lets out a weird, coughing little laugh as he approaches, baring his teeth. Lexa's father stalks me carefully, paying attention to how I move.

He's a wily old fuck, and clearly enjoys killing. I have to be careful.

Suddenly, Vince leaps towards me as Lexa's father swiftly moves around to flank me from behind. Vince lands on top of me, pressing me into the ground and snapping at my face. I twist under him like a snake, going for his throat.

Strong jaws clamp around one of my hind legs, and I feel teeth digging into me.

In seconds, he'll snap my leg in two. I'll overreact to the pain, crumple to the ground, and wait for them to come in.

It's a good bet that their confidence would be high enough at that point, I could lure them close enough to take them out. Once that's done, I can collapse where I stand, knowing that Lexa is safe.

I wait for the pain, but it never comes. Vince stops snapping at me, still holding me down with his paws, but looking up into the hills with his ears pricked.

Then I hear a faraway howl.

Galen!

Even though I told them not to follow, I can't be angry. Their timing is perfect, and maybe I won't have to die after all.

Lexa's father lets go of me to shift back to his human shape. He points at the man holding her and screams.

"Kill her!"

Vince yelps in dismay, leaping off me to run towards Lexa.

Well, holy fuck. We agree on something. He doesn't want her to die, either!

The world slips into slow motion as I launch myself at Lexa's father. He turns too slowly, his eyes widening in shock as he sees me coming for his throat. In his human shape, he's defenseless against my teeth.

As I wrap my jaws around his neck, he lets out a frantic scream that gurgles into silence as I slowly crush his throat. His blood tastes sweet on my tongue as he twitches feebly, flopping on the ground like a fish.

All around me, I can hear sharp screams and sudden yelps as my pack and Galen's sweep into the mountains, hunting down the enemy wolves. I turn towards Lexa.

The man ordered to kill her dropped her and turned to bolt into the forest. Vince is almost on her, and I charge, rushing towards them.

As Vince approaches, Lexa shifts, her wolf form pure white and glowing silver in the early morning sun. She leaps at Vince, tearing his face with her teeth. He staggers back, howling as he loses his footing and goes down.

Lexa keeps coming, but I jump on Vince before Lexa can get to him. Snarling, I got

for his throat, only to have him slither out from underneath me and try to run.

Even as my pack and Galen's come flowing out from the trees to surround us, Vince tries to keep running. My wolves part like waves, letting me run him down. When I finally leap forward to grab his tail, he howls as if his soul is being ripped out of his body.

That would be too good for you, motherfucker.

I tighten my jaws, shaking my head back and forth.

Bones pop and snap through Vince's tail, and still he tries to run.

I lean back on my paws, sinking down as I anchor my weight against Vince's momentum.

He starts to yelp and whine like a puppy as his claws drag through the dirt, slowly drawing him back towards me.

Finally, he collapses, all his effort spent.

When I leap on him, I see his wide, terrified eyes looking up at me briefly before I land on him and grab him by the ruff of his neck.

My teeth sink in, and I feel his spine under the skin.

With a growl of triumph, I close my jaws, hearing the satisfying snap as his bones shatter.

As he drops from my mouth, all the surrounding wolves begin to howl in triumph. There are far more in the hills than I expected. It looks like Galen brought in

reinforcements from his own pack before they came after us.

“Kit,” Galen says, shifting to his human form as he comes towards me. “Are you alright?”

The shift comes over me slowly, with difficulty. When my human form resets, I can barely stand. Slowly, I stagger towards Galen. He catches me before I can hit the ground.

“I told you not to come,” I growl.

“I know,” Galen answers. “But—”

“But I’m glad you did,” I finish breathlessly.

Galen laughs. “Any time, old friend.”

I hold on to his shoulder, trying not to fall to my knees. Then I see Lexa running at me, tears flowing down her face.

“Kit!” she screams, running into me so hard that we both hit the ground. “Oh my God, my love, I was so scared!”

“I’m here, it’s okay,” I say soothingly. “Everything’s okay.”

“No, it’s not, you fucking jerk!” she yells, looking like she wants to slap me. “How dare you charge in here like that? You almost got yourself killed!”

I lay on my back, looking at her sitting on top of me with wild, bright eyes and her face twisted into a scowl. I reach up and stroke her messy hair, shaking my head a little.

“Lexa, I love you.”

“What?”

“I love you—so much. Now and forever.”

Lexa stares at me, her face going blank as her lip trembles violently. She screws her eyes shut before slapping me lightly on the shoulder.

“I love you, too, you stupid fucking idiot.”

“You what?”

“I love you, too.”

“One more time?”

“You fucking prick,” she laughs, leaning down. “Don’t play me.”

She kisses me, and I try to lean into it. Then both of us pull back, wincing.

“Ow,” I mutter. “I don’t think I’m up for it tonight, darling. I’m just a little torn to shreds.”

She laughs. “Okay. I’ll let you off tonight, but I won’t have any more of your excuses from now on. I expect sex at least three times a day.”

“I can do that,” I say, pulling her down to me to kiss her again. Both of us jump back again.

“Well, that’s not going to work until we heal a bit,” she says, smiling.

“Sadly, I concur,” I agree. “Do you want to let me get up?”

“I don’t know. Are you ready to stop being a goddamn fucking fool and not risk your life again?”

“Well, do you promise not to get kidnapped and dragged off into the woods? What am I supposed to do if you keep getting yourself in peril?”

She giggles. “Okay, you have a fair point. I won’t get kidnapped, and you won’t risk your life. Deal?”

“It’s a deal,” I whisper, pulling her back down for a kiss. This time, our love is stronger than our pain, and it doesn’t hurt at all.

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As we get up off the ground, Kit tries to support me but buckles over, almost falling. Galen and Cade appear immediately, holding him up under his arms.

“I’m alright,” Kit protests. “Jesus. Leave me alone.”

“I wouldn’t forsake Jesus if I were you,” I say. “He saved your ass today.”

Kit laughs, shaking his head. “Are you daring to assign my awesomeness to a deity other than myself?”

“It’s a good thing I love you,” I shoot back. “Otherwise, I’d have to walk right out over that kind of pride.”

Kit reaches for me again, but winces even worse than before. My humor fades instantly, and I rush in, running my hands over his body.

Massive bruises are appearing all over him, darkening his skin with red blooms. His limbs are misshapen with bulgy swellings, and his face has turned a dull, sickly white.

“Kit,” I whisper. “You’re really hurt.”

“Well, I just battled... uh, how many wolves was it? Felt like at least twenty.”

“Twenty-five,” Cade answers. “Saw it with my own eyes.”

“I don’t agree,” Galen replies. “That’s a ridiculous number. It was clearly fifty.”

“Okay, shut up!” I shriek. “Kit has internal injuries. We have to do something!”

“Yes, we do,” Cade says a little crossly. “Like, get off this mountain. With all due respect, Lexa, could you get out of the way?”

I give Kit a quick kiss, then scuttle back so his friends can help him walk. Seeing Kit leaning heavily on them with every step fills me with worry.

I can’t lose him now...

“Lexa!”

I hear Kate’s voice from behind me and turn around to see her running out of the trees with Misha and Mabel.

“Are you alright?” Kate asks, hugging me. “My God, that’s an ugly bruise on your head.”

“Oh? Oh, yeah.” I reach up to touch my head, feeling my fingers come away sticky. “They hit me. I’ve probably got a concussion.”

“Fuck!” Misha cries, wrapping an arm around my waist and making me lean on her. “We need to get you back!”

“Kit’s hurt worse than me—”

“That may be so,” Kate interrupts, supporting my other side, “but it still means you need care. Let us help you.”

“No protest from me,” I answer.

The walk down the mountain is a long, painful one. I watch Kit ahead of us, taking small steps as his brother wolves hold on to him. It sinks in that he didn't just risk his life for me—he actually intended to give it up.

He would have died... just to save me.

The thought seems insane to me that I could be so important to someone. But then I think about my mother, who died to protect me.

And it wasn't just Kit who came. It was both packs and all my friends.

I spent years thinking I had no value, but I had forgotten the whole time that there's a place I always belonged.

By the time we get to the estate, the sun is sinking behind the horizon, and the wind is sweeping down from the peaks, carrying an icy chill. When we get inside, Susan has the fire in the study blazing and couches laid out with pillows and blankets.

While Cade and Galen get Kit comfortable, Susan and the other girls make me lie down so they can have a look at me. The pack healer, Skylar, has been waiting for us, and she gives me a quick examination before going to tend to Kit.

Meanwhile, Joe starts bringing in plates of sandwiches, fried chicken, and ribs. All the pack members gather around the fire, sharing food, laughter, and nips of black-label brandy.

After a couple of hours, once the other men have recovered, Susan chases everyone out. Kit has begun to heal, but is still in a lot of pain. Skylar orders us both to rest, and I promise her I'll keep Kit in bed and relaxing.

"I don't know about that," Kit remarks, pulling me under the blanket with him. "If

you're keeping me in bed, it won't be restful."

"Hmm, I don't know," I dither. "I'm still pretty dizzy from the head wound, so I doubt it."

"Really?" he asks, concerned. "Are you sure you're okay? We can get Skylar back—"

"I'm okay," I reassure him. "I trust Susan to look after us both, but I am really feeling better. I just need to sleep."

"Me too," Kit says, sighing. "I can't believe so much has happened today, and we're right back where we started this morning."

"Almost," I say, chuckling. "We're not on the floor."

"And there's a full basket of wood," Kit says. "I made Joe get extra. Don't go walking around by yourself, please. For any reason."

"Okay," I reply, giggling. "I'll drag you to the bathroom every time I have to go."

Kit leans down and kisses me, but it's a feather-light, gentle touch of the lips. I realize that his eyes are closing, and his head is sinking into the pillow. He literally can't stay awake, so I wrap myself around him and let dreams claim us both.

Over the next couple of days, both of us recover, but slowly. Kit worries that he's missing the planning for the festival, but the others assure him they have it all under control and he shouldn't worry.

On the third day, we're sitting out on the dock, watching the lake, when Kit gets a message from Cass.

I just want you to know that Loretta got involved with the festival planning. There was nothing we could do to stop her. See you soon, guys.

“Oh no,” Kit mutters. “She’s taken this opportunity to get control of the pack. She’ll undo all our good work. The people in the West End won’t get to come.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “We can make it better next year, and there’s a lot we can do in the meantime.”

“That’s true,” Kit acknowledges. “I just feel bad, you know? We promised the whole town they could come.”

“We’ll do something else,” I reassure him. “All I have to do is live through the formal dinner.”

“Well, you survived your father,” Kit reminds me with a grin. “How hard could it be to endure a formal dinner with Loretta and her social rivals?”

We both look at each other and laugh. I try to give him a teasing poke in the ribs, but he winces and doubles over.

“Shit!” I cry. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he says. “They’re almost fully healed up. Don’t worry about it.”

“But I do worry about it.”

Kit hugs me close, stroking my hair. “Don’t be scared. Not ever,” he says. “I’ve got you, and I’ll never let you go.”

“I am scared,” I admit, sighing. “I’m scared I’ve got nothing to wear to the festival.”

“Didn’t you bring all your new clothes? Don’t you have something in there?”

“I might,” I answer, thinking. “Otherwise, I could just freak out.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Kit says. “There’s a lot of old clothes upstairs, too.”

“I’d rather not wear an antique.”

“I don’t know, it could make Loretta pretty jealous.”

“Only because she is one.”

Kit laughs, holding me close, and we stay on the dock until the cold wind chases us back inside to the fire.

A few days later, I’m getting ready for the festival, and, as if it was some kind of prophecy, freaking the fuck out.

“Are you alright, dear miss?” Susan asks, knocking on the bathroom door.

“Yeah,” I answer. “I mean—no... I don’t know.”

“Let me in, please.”

I open the door, looking at Susan with panic. “I’ve never had to get ready for anything like this before,” I moan. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“There now, settle yourself,” Susan says. “Did you choose a dress?”

I pull out the dark crimson alpaca wool I bought at the fancy shop in town. It has long bell sleeves, a simple neckline, and a tight waist that accentuates my curves without

being too revealing.

Susan nods her approval. “It doesn’t match the purple in your hair.”

“I didn’t even think of that!” I shriek.

“Calm, girl,” Susan says with a smile. “I’ll fix it.”

Over the next couple of hours, Susan gives me a full makeover. She dyes my purple streaks a dark, fiery red, gives me a facial, and does my nails. When I get dressed, she does my makeup as well, using light touches to enhance my features.

“Now this,” she says, offering me a dark crimson lipstick.

“I don’t know...” I say. “Isn’t it kind of slutty?”

“Not with that dress,” she says. “It’s a perfect match!”

“What shoes do I wear with this?”

“Oh, your long boots will be fine.”

I stare at her for a few seconds in disbelief. “My fuck-me boots?”

“Lord on high!” Susan gasps. “What did you say? Those knee-high, shiny black lace-ups are called... uh...”

“Forget I said it!” I say quickly. “I’m just shocked that my siren lipstick and fu—I mean, high boots—are appropriate for the ball.”

“If you think it looks cheap, it most certainly does not, especially with that dress,”

Susan says, moving me over to the mirror. When I see myself, my jaw drops. The only way I know for sure that the reflection is actually me is that Susan's jaw drops, too.

"Oh my God," I whisper. "I look—"

"Stunning," Susan says. "But not quite done yet."

"What did we forget?"

Susan comes up behind me and lifts her hands over my shoulders, settling a ruby pendant around my neck. It's exquisitely cut in the shape of a flame and set in pale white gold. As I look closer, I see chips of diamond around the edge, making the light catch and flicker.

"It's beautiful," I whisper.

"It was Alisa's," she says. "A lot of her things are still here. We must do an inventory, but enough of that. Let's get you to your ball, Cinderella."

I let Susan take my hand and lead me to the foyer, where Kit is waiting. He's wearing a black suit with a dark red shirt that almost perfectly matches my dress.

"Well, look at you," I say, going over to him. "You're looking fine—and color-coordinated."

"I had a little help," he laughs, nodding at Joe. "I think we'd fall apart if it wasn't for these two."

"Enough, young master," Susan says with a smile. "Off to your party."

The drive into town is a quiet one, but the silence between us is no longer awkward. I hold Kit's hand most of the way, and we talk about trivial things, as if both of us are trying to avoid talking about the ball.

When we arrive in town, the streets are practically empty.

"What's going on?" Kit mutters. "Shops are closed. There's no one around."

"Let's just head to the hall," I answer. "We'll need the others to investigate if something's wrong."

As we get closer to the hall, we pass groups of people. All of them are dressed in costumes, and some even have masks.

"What the fuck?" Kit mutters.

"I concur," I whisper.

The streets get so full that we have to leave the car and go on foot. When we get closer, the thick, rich scent of fried batter reaches my nose.

"Oh," I moan. "Kit, do you smell that?"

"I do," he agrees. "But what the fuck—"

As we come up the last rise to the hall, we see the Ferris wheel stretching high above our heads and the rides gathered around its base. There are games and food stalls. Kids are running crazy all over the place, laughing and screaming as if they're on a six-hour sugar high.

Most unbelievably of all, Loretta stands at the front gates, handing out balloons.

She's wearing an old pair of jeans and a flannel shirt smeared with paint.

"Loretta?" I ask in a hushed voice as we approach the gate.

She looks up and smiles, blinking shyly. "My alpha, my luna," she says, giving a slight curtsy. "How do you like the festival?"

"I like it very much," I answer. "But—"

"I was wrong to argue with you," Loretta says firmly. "I apologize. I am still... confronted by the changes, but I was shown some things that helped me get on board."

"And what was that?" Kit asks.

"Hungry children," Loretta says, looking at the crowds of happy kids galloping around the fair. "Cass took me to the West End. I even heard some stories—oh, God, Kit, I'm so sorry! I didn't really know what Leopold was doing—"

"It's okay," he says, waving a hand. "It's enough to see you getting involved. You don't have to worry about any of that, okay?"

"Okay," she says, smiling. "Now, if you don't mind, Alpha, I've got some ice cream to hand out."

The kids charge her, screaming "ice cream!" in a great communal cry. Kit takes my hand and smiles at me, gesturing to the party.

"Are you ready, my love?" he asks, and I know he's not just talking about the party.

He means the rest of our lives. Every day from now on—together.

“Yes, my love,” I answer, squeezing his hand. “I’m ready. Let’s go!”

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:22 am

Sitting on the dock while night rolls in, I rock little baby Lauren in my arms and count my blessings. For the first time in my life, there are too many, and I have to give up.

The sound of carnival music drifts to me, and I turn to look at the festival sprawled out across the gardens of the estate.

The old manor practically gleams in the late afternoon light. All the windows are sparkling clean. The stone statues are mold and dust-free, back to their shimmering, pale gray luster.

One of Lexa's first orders as luna was to open up the manor and estate to the homeless from the West End. Every room was filled within a week, and suddenly, Susan and Joe had more help than they knew what to do with.

The entire place was cleaned from top to bottom, then separated into sections for emergency housing, clinics, and educational groups.

Our elders had always feared charity, thinking that the poor would only take advantage of it, but they saw for themselves that when people had their basic needs met, they were gracious and generous in return.

And it's the rich who hoard and scheme, looking for more, even though they already have too much.

"That being said, our upper class has learned their lesson, haven't they, Lauren?"

I look down into my lap at the pale gray eyes of my baby girl. She giggles and raises her tiny hands at me, squirming as she tries to reach my face.

“There you are,” Cass says, hurrying up the dock. “Lexa’s looking for you. It’s almost time for the dance.”

“Of all the traditions she decides to uphold,” I mutter, standing up, “this is the one she chooses!”

Cass laughs, holding out her arms for Lauren. “You said you wanted her to get involved.”

“I did,” I agree. “I just didn’t expect to be publicly humiliated on a regular basis.”

Cass laughs even harder as she snuggles Lauren against her chest. “If you practiced your moves, then you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“I practiced until my feet bled.”

“Then you’ll be fine.”

“Except for not being able to dance because of the blisters.”

Cass sighs a little. “That may be an oversight.”

We stand at the edge of the dock for a few more minutes until Cass finally shoves me.

“You’re not getting out of this, Kit,” she says. “Get your butt over there.”

“Alright, alright,” I mutter, giving my daughter a kiss on the head before hurrying over to the back courtyard.

The place has been transformed into a magical grove, with fairy lights, decorative wreaths, and delicate flower arrangements. Soft music plays while Joe happily pours champagne at a small bar set up at the cottage.

Worst of all, the center of the courtyard is set up with a huge raised dance floor made out of smooth mahogany.

I'm wondering if I can slip back into the crowd when Lexa spots me and hurries around the dance floor to grab my hand.

"Oh, no, you don't," she warns. "I know what you were thinking."

I sigh. "You always know what I'm thinking."

"It's not hard. You're an open book."

"You look beautiful tonight."

"Don't change the subject!"

I can tell by her slight blush that she enjoys the compliment, though.

Her jet-black hair has grown out a little over the past year and is now streaked with vibrant ocean blue.

It almost perfectly matches the color of her silk dress, a stunning number with a low, square neckline, tight waist, and full, flowing skirt.

Since Lexa had Lauren, her curves have filled out even further. I can barely keep my hands off her on an ordinary day, let alone when she looks like this.

Apparently, there's some kind of stigma that men stop finding their wives attractive

after they've been pregnant, but if everyone is getting a fuller ass and bigger breasts, then who's complaining? Only the mad or the very stupid, I imagine.

Lexa squeezes my hand and tugs me towards the dance floor.

"Do we really have to?" I complain.

"Yes, we do," Lexa states.

"Why?"

"Because I want to."

A great sigh heaves through my chest as I resign myself to the situation.

"Okay. If it's something you really want, then I'm all in."

"Good," she mutters, pulling me into the center of the floor and kissing me gently on the lips.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Loretta's voice sounds through a loudspeaker. "I present to you Alpha Kit and Luna Lexa. They are here to perform the formal dance that renews their union each year—a celebration of their vows. Enjoy."

The crowd claps politely, and I hear a few irreverent cheers. Sweet strains of music float through the air, and I put my arms around Lexa and begin to move.

The dance is loosely based on a samba but has elements of a waltz as well.

The steps are complex, and I have to use considerable athletic ability to spin and twirl.

Some of the steps take me dangerously close to the edge of the floor, but I smoothly correct our course and spin Lexa back to the center.

Lexa moves with unbelievable grace, her every step smooth and fluid. She bends in my arms, dipping and twirling. As we dance, I can't help but notice how gorgeous she is as her breasts sway and her hips shimmy.

Okay, maybe this is the point of the dance—to make us super horny for each other.

It's fucking working.

The music increases in tempo, and so do our steps. The crowd starts to gasp and clap as the moves become more complex, and finally, we come together at the crescendo, finishing with a big dip. I pull Lexa back up into my arms. She laughs, breathless from the exertion.

"That was amazing!" she gasps. "I feel incredible. You looked great out there, babe."

"So do you," I murmur, my eyes glued to her chest.

She giggles. "I'm up here."

"I'm aware," I say, grinning. "But you're down here, too."

She presses herself against me, squeezing my hand as we leave the stage. Couples are coming up from the crowd, and new music is starting to play.

"It was good of you to bring back some of the formalities for Loretta," I say.

"Well, I didn't do it for just that reason," Lexa says. "I thought they sounded important, and kind of fun."

I chuckle. “Okay. You sold me on the fun. The dance was pretty great.”

We keep walking slowly towards the trees, leaving the party behind. Lexa looks at me and grins.

“Is Lauren in good hands?” she asks.

“I left her with Cass, so she’s probably surrounded by at least a dozen babysitters by now.”

“Wonderful,” Lexa says, leaning against me. “Let’s go and satisfy the rest of the tradition, then.”

“I’m sorry?”

“To make love in the forest, of course. It rejuvenates the land.”

I grin. “It’s rejuvenating me already.”

Lexa laughs, reaching down to the front of my pants and squeezing. “Wow. You’re ready to rock and roll.”

“I don’t know about that,” I say, frowning. “I’ve never been good with a guitar. But I am ready to fuck.”

Lexa giggles as she pulls me down into the soft grass, pushing my jacket off my shoulders. “Will you stop?” she asks.

“Never. Not even if you beg me.”

“Good.”

She covers my mouth with hers, pushing me back onto the ground with my arms trapped behind me. I struggle a bit, but her weight on my shoulders holds me down.

Lexa moans as she explores my mouth with her tongue. I open myself up to her, relaxing in her grip. I've learned that she needs this freedom, this control, and I've also learned that I love being restrained.

Why anyone would be threatened by the concept of lying helplessly in your lover's arms and having constant orgasms at their will is completely beyond me.

Lexa makes a sharp sound of frustration as she reaches down, fumbling with my zipper. She gets her fingers tangled and sits up, frowning.

"You want my cock so soon?" I ask, curious. "You don't want my tongue?"

"Oh, my honey," she says, biting her lip and looking at me with wide, hungry eyes. "You have the best ideas."

"That's why you married me."

"Okay," she says, slowly wriggling up my body. "We can go with that, if you like. I won't mention your fantastic tongue or incredible cock."

"Well, wait a minute," I say, struggling involuntarily as I try to gesture, remembering that my arms are trapped. "You can certainly mention them."

"Shut up," she says, straddling my face with her thighs. "Use your tongue for something else."

Lexa leans forward, stroking my hair with one hand as she sits on my face. I try to moan, only manage to mumble, and then give up, opening my mouth and lapping with my tongue.

She rocks back and forth slowly, teasing my scalp with one hand. Every now and then, I forget that I'm restrained and try to grab her ass or her thighs. Then I feel the cutting pressure of the jacket on my arms and fall limp again.

Being restrained just enhances the pleasure, especially like this...

Lexa cries out, thrusting her hips forward. She buries her hand in my hair, pulling on it gently. I lap at her pussy, trying to lick through every fold and crevice and tease every edge with my lips.

She shivers above me, twisting my hair briefly as she comes, grinding on my face as her climax ripples through her. She cries out and almost screams, but the sounds of the carnival nearby are full of such sounds, and I'm not worried anyone will hear us.

Even if they do, what difference does it make? We're probably not the only couple sneaking out here to bang.

Lexa tumbles off me, falling beside me onto her back. She wraps herself loosely around me, gasping and giggling as she shivers with pleasure.

I sit up, wrestling my jacket off me and rolling over to pin Lexa to the ground.

"Got you!"

"Oh, no," she moans. "What shall I do?"

"Lie back and enjoy yourself," I whisper, kissing her gently. She kisses me back, squirming against me as her hands pull my shirt up and stroke my sides.

I grab the edges of her blue dress and tug on it, making her breasts pop out.

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I bury my face between her huge, soft tits and

moan as I devour her, nibbling and kissing trails over her skin until I find her nipples with my lips and suck on them, one after the other.

Lexa writhes under me, gasping as she grabs the back of my head, urging me on. When my cock is so hard that I can't take another second, I reach down and yank my zipper down, wriggling to get my pants off as I run my hands up Lexa's thighs.

She thrusts her hips towards me, her breath coming fast as she looks into my eyes. I stroke her face with my left hand, reaching for my cock with the other and keeping my eyes locked right on hers.

As my cock slides into her, I see her eyes widen, and her whole body goes still. I lean my forehead against hers, enjoying the moment as our hearts begin to beat as one. I feel her slick, hot pussy tighten around me, and I thrust forward a little more, locking us together even further.

She squirms a little, moving me inside her, and wraps her legs around me.

I stay still, pinning her to the ground as she tries to thrust against me.

Her hands dig into my back, and her heels dig into my ass as she wrestles with my body.

Another orgasm explodes into her, making her gasp and scream.

She clings to me as the waves of pleasure crash through her.

When the tremors subside, I look into her face, seeing her eyes wide and all her inhibitions gone. I kiss her softly, then thrust into her, slowly at first, then harder and faster, until both of us are crying out, clinging together, my pleasure feeding off hers.

Suddenly, Lexa wraps herself around me even more tightly and throws her head back,

screaming at the sky. My cock swells inside her as moans rip from my throat, my entire body held on the edge until I feel her pussy spasming around me. My cock finally pumps and blows deep inside her.

Reality fades away, and there is only the chaotic sensation of our hearts beating wildly and our breathing heaving in and out. Lexa stays wrapped around me, her legs tightly squeezing me as her hands stroke my back.

“Never,” she whispers against my cheek. “Never let go, my love.”

“I won’t,” I whisper back. “If you don’t.”

She turns her face towards me, and I look into her beautiful eyes before pressing my lips to hers and falling into another deep, sensual kiss. She wriggles beneath me, encouraging me, and I feel my passion rising again already.

It will never fade. Not for this woman. Never.

“Never,” I whisper, and Lexa kisses my cheek again, clinging to me.

“Never,” she answers. “I’ll never let go.”

“Neither will I, my love. I will hold you in my arms forever.”

I wrap my arms around her, letting her scent surround me, immersing myself in her beauty and her love. Knowing that no matter what comes, my words are true, and my future is set.

THE END

Hi! I hope you liked reading “Bullied Alpha Bride”.