

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing on the lips. They are lying on a bed with white, ruffled sheets. The man is on the left, shirtless, with dark, wavy hair. The woman is on the right, also shirtless, with dark, wavy hair. Her hand is resting on his shoulder, and his hand is resting on her hip. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white.

Moira Rogers

Temple of Luna 3

# SAVAGE LESSONS

Changeling Press

# **Temple of Luna 3: Savage Lessons**

## **Moira Rogers**

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Born into poverty and obscurity, Lexa worked harder than most to earn a place as a novice at the Savage Temple, where women trained in the art of pleasure heal the souls of battle-weary warriors. While others might be content to enjoy the luxury and prestige due a priestess of Luna, Lexa aspires to something greater -- the honor of wearing the silver robes and the security that comes with being one of their world's most powerful women. But first she must prove herself worthy by testing her strength against the Temple's most infamous trainer, a near-feral wolf whose job it is to educate women in the art of controlling a warrior through submission.

Dejan doesn't deal with novices. Time spent as a prisoner of the humans left his soul fractured and his beast far too close to the surface, making him dangerous but useful. When he accepts Lexa as his pupil he has no way of knowing the novice has the power to bring him to his knees. Their passion doesn't fade when she's promoted to the Temple's elite circle, but the rules allow no involvement between a trainer and priestess. Caught between ambition and need, it's only a matter of time before their forbidden affair threatens the lives they've fought to build.

## Chapter One

Lexa kept her stance relaxed and tried not to let her excitement and nerves show as she faced the Temple's high priestess. "I'm ready, Celine. Now. Today."

"So you say." Celine's fingers tapped an absent rhythm against the arm of her chair. "So your teachers say. You've worked hard."

She'd busted her ass. Most of the other acolytes came from privileged families, and had been guided since birth toward the service of Luna. Were it not for the patronage of the queen mother, Lexa wouldn't have made it through the door of the Temple. "I've tried my best because I wish, more than anything, to serve."

"As did I, when I was your age. But I also knew where I wanted to be in ten years, and twenty. Do you?"

Most priestesses were gone by thirty, advantageously married off to soldiers returning from the war. Lexa didn't plan on being one of them, but she also wasn't ready to bare her soul to Celine. "I haven't decided, but I am giving the matter no small amount of consideration."

Celine nodded. "You're strong, and so is your magic. Strong enough to give you a chance at silver robes someday."

The words soothed the desperate longing inside her. "Kweku said he has nothing more to teach me. I checked the files, and there's only one high-level trainer unoccupied at the moment." The one she'd wanted all along. The best.

"Dejan." The high priestess's expression was unreadable. "If you've been checking files, my dear, you know that Dejan rarely works with novices. In fact, I believe that's common knowledge throughout the Temple."

"I could convince him to make an exception."

"You're assuming *he's* the one you'd have to convince."

Of course he was. Celine's expression was skeptical, but... "We wouldn't be having this conversation if you weren't considering it, and you wouldn't be considering it if it wasn't the best step for me."

Silence stretched out between them, broken only by the soft click of Celine's nails against the arm of her chair as she resumed her slow tapping. After several tense seconds, she smiled. "Looking at you is like looking into the past. In the ten years since I became high priestess, Lexa, not one other girl with your fire has passed through these halls."

"I would say you flatter me, Celine, but that didn't sound like a compliment." Curious, she smiled and tilted her head. "I remind you of yourself?"

"Very much so." Celine gestured to her opulent surroundings. "There are worse lives to live. I serve my Goddess and my King. I receive the respect and deference of men and women born to privilege I couldn't have imagined as a child. Is this what you aspire to?"

It was tempting, seductive, and beyond comprehension. "Even the life of an acolyte has been more luxurious than anything I'd experienced before coming to the Temple, Celine. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't want respect and security."

"I didn't rise this far by being born into wealth or gently reared. But think hard about where you want to be before you take this step. Respect is already yours as a novice of the Temple. And security can be found as easily in the arms of a man who loves you. Dejan teaches only the best of the best, the women who aren't interested in a comfortable life as a warrior's mate."

Lexa had seen the sort of fleeting security one found in a man's arms. She'd watched her mother flit from warrior to warrior, with no thought of tomorrow, much less forever. "I want him for my teacher. I wouldn't let you down."

The high priestess nodded, but Lexa couldn't tell if the look in the older woman's dark eyes was regret or satisfaction. "Then you'll have him tonight. And in the morning we'll discuss your future at the Temple."

Promising words, indeed. Lexa smiled and bowed. "Thank you, Celine. Shall I contact Dejan, or will you make the arrangements?"

Celine laughed. "For tonight, be like any other novice and let me do my job. I'll send a message when everything's finalized and let you know when to meet him."

She bowed again and turned for the door, her heart pounding. It was the coup she'd hardly hoped to manage. If Dejan trained her, *approved* of her, she'd be that much closer to silver robes. To having everything.

She had to be perfect. Everything about this night had to be perfect.

\* \* \*

Dejan had known for three months that Lexa would be his student.

Discretion was a requirement in the Temple of Luna, but the trainers talked. They had to talk, if only to ensure the safety of the young women who served Luna by taking emotionally wounded warriors into their beds. No novice graduated to full priestess before the trainers were confident in her ability to handle a warrior's needs.

But even the trainers had specialties. Some were gentle, experienced in initiating a novice in the mysteries of sex. Some preferred to confine their attentions to the experienced novices, testing their readiness.

Dejan did neither. The women who came to him were almost exclusively priestesses in their own right -- strong, dangerous women who aspired to the silver robes, as well as the prestige and impressive stipend that came with them.

Almost exclusively. He'd been watching Lexa for a month now, ever since the morning Kweku had limped into the trainers' dining room and sworn he'd almost been bested by a virgin. Kweku was still young for a werewolf, thirty-eight and newly returned from the front lines, but over the course of the last month, Lexa had very nearly eaten him alive.

Anticipation had licked at Dejan then, but nothing compared to this afternoon, when Celine had finally summoned him. *Test her*, was all the high priestess had said, but Dejan had known her long enough to read between those terse words. Lexa was her choice for her successor.

And it was his job to train her.

Dejan surveyed the large bed and tried not to imagine what it would look like when she was stretched out on it, her dark hair spilling across the sheets and her deceptively sweet face staring up at him. Lexa had the wide-eyed charm of an innocent, but he wasn't fool enough to underestimate her like Kweku had.

A panel by the door chimed softly, and he forced himself to relax back in his chair, both legs sprawled out in front of him. Appealing as she was, Dejan was no eager puppy. He was the most respected trainer at the Savage Temple.

The door slid open, and Lexa walked in. Her robes clung to her legs as she moved, and she stopped before him with a small bow. "Thank you for having me."

She was sturdy. Sinful. Wicked curves and sleek flesh, tempting in a way the fragile, petite women weren't. His cock hardened, but he did nothing more than smile and gesture to the plush cushions at his feet. "Sit."

Her answering smile was soft and sweet. When she sank down to the cushions, she arranged herself in what seemed at first to be a modest position. But from his vantage point, he could see down the front of her filmy robe, and her face was mere inches from the inside of his knee. If she tilted her head the slightest bit, she'd be resting her cheek on his leg, the very picture of ready, eager submission.

No wonder Kweku couldn't handle her.

Dejan dropped his hand to his knee and tugged at one strand of her long, unbound hair. "You've studied a great deal, haven't you?"

"Of course. How else could I hope to serve Luna and her warriors to the best of my ability?"

"Some novices take their time."

"Mmm." She flashed him a knowing grin. "I took the time I needed."

He curled that strand of hair around his finger and returned her smile with just a hint of a bite. "Such a confident little kitten. Maybe the novices don't gossip about me like they used to."



"I don't listen to gossip." Lexa shifted to kneel. "What would the novices know of you anyway? Not a single one has darkened your door in ages."

"Until you." Having her on her knees between his legs made it too easy to forget why he was here. "Women come to me to learn how to deal with the wild warriors. The feral warriors. To learn when to submit quietly and when to give as good as they get."

She nodded. "How would you like to start?"

He leaned forward and released her hair so he could trace his thumb along her jaw. "Tell me what you've learned about your own pleasures. What makes you ache with need?" A dangerous question, since he'd have to imagine another man touching her, but his possessive nature made him good at his job.

"Kissing." She licked her lips. "I'm fond of exploring. And I like... extremes." Her eyes darkened, and she inhaled sharply. "So slow it takes all night, or -- or fast and hot. Intense. Those are the things that make me come."

"Mmm." The perfect words, delivered in a breathy little whisper with a huskiness meant to make a man hard. It was easy to picture her in front of the mirror, practicing how to find just the right mix of invitation and hesitation.

*She's too good at sex to be great at sex.* Kweku's words made perfect sense now. They also made him sad. He slid his hand around the back of her neck and fisted his fingers in her hair, urging her head back until she was staring up at him. "You're trying too hard. Sex is not a chore or a job within the Temple. If you don't celebrate it, you don't belong here."

The seductive invitation faded, replaced by a hint of defiance. Determination. "I belong here."

Defiance was good. "Do you? You won't impress me by seducing me, kitten."

Lexa licked her lips again, the gesture nervous this time. "Is this training or a test?"

"You know as well as I do that all training *is* a test." He lifted his free hand and rubbed his thumb along her full lower lip. "Other trainers are testing you to see if you can handle men. I'm testing you to see if you love doing it."

Her teeth closed on his thumb, and he felt a quick, teasing flick of her tongue before she released him. "There's only one way to find out, isn't there?"

With her body between his legs it was easy to trap her, pinning her arms against her sides. Another tug arched her head back, and he moved his hand and claimed her mouth with a soft growl.

She met him with a moan, her own mouth open and inviting. He could hear her heart thudding, could smell her arousal. Both gave lie to the tales he'd heard of her detachment and distraction. Both aroused him.

He slanted his mouth over hers but didn't accept her invitation to deepen the kiss. The beast inside him already paced with hungry impatience, desperate to break free and flood him with base instinct, with the need that made him so dangerous and so very, very good at his job.

Soon enough, the beast would feast on her pleasure. But not until the man had pushed her to the edge and learned her boundaries. So he licked and teased, scraped his teeth against her lower lip and encouraged her with the fist in her hair. But he didn't give her more.

She bit him back, taking as much control as she could, and her tongue sought his as she leaned up. It must have pulled her hair, but she only moaned again and kissed him harder.

She was eager, and it turned him on. He bit her lip again, harder, and chased her tongue back into her mouth with his own.

Lexa pulled her mouth from his with a muffled, helpless noise of pleasure. "I want to be naked. I want you naked."

At least the words were honest, not rehearsed. Dejan dropped his hand and shifted his leg to free her. "Stand up. I want to watch you take your robes off."

She rose in a steady, fluid movement, but her hands were trembling as she lifted them to free the knotted belt of her robe. It slid from her shoulders to reveal a white chemise so thin and filmy he could see through it.

The fact that she wasn't wearing anything under that damn transparent slip made him want to groan.

He dragged in a deep breath and lifted his gaze to her face again. "Do you always fumble with the knot of your belt, or am I making you nervous?"

Her chest rose and fell rapidly, and her nipples were hard under the thin silk. "Maybe if I weren't enjoying myself so much, my coordination would be better."

Dejan smiled slowly. "And you think that's desirable? That you prove to a man you're not enjoying yourself with coordination?"

But something in her eyes hardened. "I apologize for my clumsiness."

He recognized that mask. He saw it on Celine's face every time he met with her. Worse, he could remember a time when she hadn't worn it, when she'd been open and passionate. A broken heart had given Celine her mask, but she'd been older. High priestess already. Seeing that wary guardedness in a novice stirred something protective inside him.

Dejan came to his feet and circled slowly around her to give himself time to regain his balance. When he stood at her back, he lifted the heavy mass of her hair and brushed his fingertips along the side of her neck. She shivered. "Never apologize to me for feeling enjoyment. It's the only thing I want from you."

Her head fell forward, and she shivered again. "Are you good enough to take it?"

"I'm good enough to *give* it," he corrected, dropping his mouth to the soft skin under her ear. "Are you secure enough to accept it?"

Lexa hesitated. It was everything she'd heard from her first day in the Temple. The need that built in the warriors could only be soothed by the pleasure of a priestess - penance to Luna for the violence visited outside the Temple walls, or maybe just a celebration, a reminder of life.

Some men needed to be led in the proper direction, shown how to touch. Dejan wouldn't, she knew that much. All she needed to do with him was let go.

She turned her face toward his. "I accept you."

Warm lips brushed over her skin, tracing the line of her jaw. "Tell me again what pleases you. Don't think about what I want to hear, just talk."

A blush heated her cheeks. "I do like those things. I'm not foolish enough to mislead a man just because the words are pretty." Though a little exaggeration never hurt, or the right combination of innocence and seduction.

"Then you're wiser than your fellow novices." The hand in her hair twisted, fisted in the strands and pulled her head back. "Do you know why I'm the best?"

Her breath caught. The other trainers she'd worked with had been attractive, but none of them had possessed the sheer sexual magnetism of the man behind her. A shocking desire coursed through her. "No, I don't."

His free hand came up to splay across her belly, the danger in its size and strength undercut by the gentle way he touched her. "Fifteen years ago, I came to this Temple feral. I'd been that way for four weeks."

Lexa had never heard of a warrior losing himself for so long and remaining intact. "Why?"

"I was a prisoner of the humans. Locked away in one of their lifeless steel cages. By the time I escaped, I'd been nine months away from the Temple." His mouth closed on the tender skin of her neck in a soft, quick nip. "The beast had taken over. They thought me lost, but Celine brought me to heel. But she couldn't give back everything I was."

Lexa couldn't even picture Dejan in a cage. Everything about him screamed confidence and freedom. Magic welled in her suddenly, the soft magic meant to soothe a wounded warrior, and she lifted her hand to his head. "That must have been horrible. I'm sorry."

He caught one of her fingers between his teeth, and his tongue stroked along it, hot and sinful. It sparked an even hotter fire in her, and she would have fallen if he hadn't been holding her against his body. "There's something else I like," she whispered.

His hand gathered her thin chemise. "What?"

"I assume you take great satisfaction in a woman's pleasure. So do I. I mean, in your pleasure. A man's," she clarified, her blush returning in full force. She didn't usually stammer. "Tell me what *you* enjoy, Dejan."

He chuckled and released her hair. His hands fell away from her, and he stepped back. "In good time, kitten. Undress me."

He wore the traditional attire of a visiting warrior -- loose linen pants and a light robe. She laid her hand on his chest, bare where his robe gaped. Her gaze was drawn lower, to the prominent swell of his cock through the linen.

Lexa swallowed hard and lifted her gaze to his as she pushed the robe from his strong shoulders. His muscles tensed and flexed under her touch, and she trailed the tips of her fingers down his chest and stomach, all the way to the tie at his waistband.

His hand rose again, strong, blunt fingers catching her chin and tilting her head back. He caught her gaze, his eyes dark. "This first time is play. I like to learn a woman, learn her limits and her body. Because I need to know before I let the beast free."

It sounded like heaven, and this time Lexa didn't try to calculate what would earn her the most intense reaction. She just bit her lip and untied his pants. "Play with me. I want to know too."

"You will."

## Chapter Two

Dejan caught both of her wrists, something dangerous flashing behind that dark gaze. "Finish undressing yourself first."

Instinct almost drove her to refuse. The silks worn under a priestess's robes were meant to be torn, ripped away in a symbolic claim. She'd presented herself to him already. Now it was his turn to take her.

*Except he isn't claiming you,* she reminded herself as she reached for the high hem of her diaphanous slip. She could still see him as she drew the chemise over her head, and she watched his face while it fluttered to the floor.

The corner of his mouth curved up, as if he could read her thoughts. But then his gaze dropped from hers, sliding down her body. His smile faded, replaced with a flattering heat. "Stunning."

"And naked." She stood, bare except for the leather cuffs around her wrists and ankles. "Now what will you have me do?"

He raised his gaze to hers again and held it as he loosened his pants and let them fall to the ground. "Give me your wrists."

It didn't occur to her not to obey. The small metal circlets on the cuffs clinked as she held out her arms.

His fingers encircled them easily, wrapping around her wrists and the cuffs alike. He held them in front of her and smiled. "If you truly enjoy a man's pleasure... take mine."

He held her wrists as she knelt on the pillows. He stood at attention, hard and thick, and she licked her lips. She stroked her tongue slowly along his shaft and then sucked the head of his cock between her lips.

He rewarded her at once with a low, rumbling moan. "You like to tease, don't you?"

"Mmm." Lexa released him and traced the tip of her tongue over him in small circles, enjoying the texture of velvet skin over his rigid length. "You're not going to let me make you come right now anyway, so I might as well."

He pulled her wrists together and caught them both in one hand. His freed hand fell to her hair. "You don't know what I'll do, sweetheart."

She didn't, and the realization intensified the wet ache in her cunt. She stared up at him in challenge and opened her mouth. This time, she kept her lips slowly sliding down his cock until he bumped the back of her throat. His fingers tightened in her hair, and he hissed out a breath. "You *have* been practicing."

She moaned and sucked hard as she pulled back slowly. "Again?"

"You decide, kitten." His rough voice cut through her careful submission, sending a pulse of raw pleasure through her. "You said you like a man's pleasure. If you want me to come, make it so hot I can't help myself."

He was too composed, and Lexa was already shaking in his grasp. It made her angry to feel so vulnerable, and she growled softly. He might be jaded as hell, but he'd never had *her* before. "As you wish," she whispered, and lowered her mouth to him again.

She took her time, slicking her tongue over every inch of him before giving him her mouth again. It was impossible to hide her excitement, so she didn't try, just moaned around him when his grip in her hair tightened and he groaned, long and low.

His hips jerked, just a tiny bit, and he controlled the movement so quickly she knew he hadn't intended it. He wasn't as unaffected as he liked to pretend, and the knowledge sent another spiral of satisfied arousal shooting through her. More than that, it bolstered her confidence, and she looked up at him and intensified her efforts.

She kept it slow, gradual, but moved faster and longer until she was fucking him with her mouth. His gorgeous hazel eyes stayed fixed on her face as his breathing sped until he was panting harshly.

He growled the next time she took him, his fingers clenching for a heartbeat, and he came with a roar that sounded pleased and shocked at the same time.

Lexa kept him deep in her mouth while she eased him through his orgasm, then finally pulled away to lick her lips once more. "You don't know what I'll do either, Dejan."

"I suppose not." He released her wrists and smiled down at her, slow and lazy. "Get on the bed."

Her knees were weak, but she forced herself to her feet anyway. She reached it in steady steps, crawled onto it on her hands and knees and stopped to look back at him. "On my back?"

His eyes flared, and he crossed the space between them in two long strides. His large hands landed on her hips, his grip harsh. "Do you know what you do to a warrior when you taunt him like this? What you invite him to do to you?"

"Yes." Rough. Wild. Her breath caught, and she arched under his touch. "I know."

"You've never had a feral man take you." His fingertips trailed down her ass to graze her cunt. "Don't taunt a man unless you already ache for him."

Lexa almost rocked back against his hand, anything to ease the need. Instead, she rolled to her back and parted her legs. "I'll remember that."

His eyebrows climbed nearly to his hairline, the look in his eyes wild. "And you think this is less tempting?"

The expression made her bold, and she teased her toes up his thigh. "When did we establish *not* tempting you as a goal?"

He moved fast, snatching her ankle and flipping her over. She landed on her stomach, his body stretched out over hers. "If that's how you'd like to play..."

It *was* what she wanted, and the realization shocked Lexa too much for her to hide it. "I want to arouse you so much you can only think of me."

His lips brushed her ear. "Lift your hands above your head."



She stretched her arms out on the bed and clenched her fingers in the soft coverlet. "I wasn't taunting you. Well, maybe a little."

"A little is all it takes." His teeth closed on her earlobe, hard enough to warn, to show dominance and danger.

It sent pleasure shivering through her, and she arched up against him. "Warriors don't taunt. They take, don't they?"

"They're not mutually exclusive." His mouth jumped to the back of her shoulder to deliver another bite, a quick sting of teeth followed by a leisurely exploration with his tongue. "Any taunt you deliver to a warrior you'll get back a dozen times. They'll play with your body, learn what makes you beg and glut themselves on your pleasure."

His tongue on her skin made speaking difficult, and his earlier words came back to her. *This first time is play.*

She could fight it, try to keep the upper hand and control him... or she could give in. Let him show her. Let him have his play, learn her body, and see how far beyond the edge her pleasure would take him.

Lexa shuddered and relaxed. "I'm at your mercy, warrior."

The words almost undid him. Dejan hissed in a breath and dug his fingers into the covers, his entire body tense and trembling. And hard -- Goddess, he was so hard. Unacceptable, even for a man with his incredible stamina. He wasn't a youth anymore, wasn't a twenty-year-old who would thrust into the heat of a woman's body and spend himself before she realized he was there.

Except he had. She'd nearly made a fool of him with her mouth and here he was, hard again and ready to sate himself in fast, furious fucking just because she whispered the words that unleashed the wildness inside him.

He bit her shoulder again, hard this time. "Don't say that again. Those words have power, and I'm not ready to give in to them. You're not ready, either."

She stiffened under him. "You chastise me when I act, yet you do the same when I give in. What do you want from me?"

*Fuck. Pull it together.* He kissed her ravaged skin. "I'm sorry. That's something I should have told you at the beginning. My fault, kitten, not yours."

Lexa wiggled under him, her hip rubbing his cock as she rolled to her back again. Then she stared up at him, eyes soft, lips parted. "Tell me what to do."

"Give in," he whispered. His hips were cradled against hers, so perfect, so *easy*. He could slide into her and find paradise. "Everything but those words."

Her hands skated down his sides to clutch his back, and she moved until the head of his cock just nudged her entrance. "Take me."

He couldn't. He hadn't pushed her, hadn't learned her limits or tested her reactions. He hadn't done his *job*, and taking her now would be a selfishness that could hurt her later on.

He couldn't take her... but he could pleasure her. He bit the side of her jaw and growled softly. "Put your hands above your head, novice, or I'll chain them there."

Again, she raised her arms to rest above her head.

A smile curved his lips, and he ground down against her and claimed her mouth in a deep, hot kiss, savoring the taste of her lips before he drove between them to find her tongue.

Lexa met him with the same enthusiasm she'd shown earlier, her hips arching off the bed as she opened to his kiss -- hungry, not a hint of calculation. She was good like this, magical and fucking intoxicating, and in that moment he knew she'd be the best. Even Celine had never completely let go, holding back part of her the way all strong women had to. But when Lexa gave in...

If he could teach her to fuck with the same freedom he tasted in her kiss, men would crawl over broken glass to have her. And he'd want to kill every one of them.

He dragged his mouth from hers and kissed her cheek, then dropped a line of kisses down the slender curve of her throat. "You're magnificent."

She moaned. "That's what I was thinking."

"You thought right." He skipped to her breast and caught the tip of her nipple between his teeth, giving it just enough of a teasing tug to gauge her reaction.

"Fuck." Her back arched, and she almost rose off the bed. She blinked, her gaze hazy and unfocused. "I lied earlier."

Dejan lifted his head. "About what?"

"I listened to the initiates gossip. The older priestesses too. None of them even came close to describing you."

A nice boost for his ego, but he didn't need it with the scent of her desire thick in the air. "Perhaps you inspire me."

She smiled slowly. "Flatterer."

He bit her nipple again. She cried out and dropped her hands to his shoulders, then snatched them away quickly. "You'll have to chain me. I can't not touch you."

It took only moments to urge her hands up. Chains dangled from the headboard already, and he smoothed a hand along her skin as he fastened them to the silver loops on her cuffs. As he chained her.

Her skin flushed, and her breathing quickened. "What are you going to do?"

"Learn you." He retreated to her breast again. "Learn how hard I need to bite before you squirm... and how hard I have to bite before you scream."

Lexa choked back a moan. "Does this process involve orgasms?"

So many she'd sleep for a day. "Without a doubt."

"Bite me," she whispered, her eyes glazed. "Please."

He licked her instead, dragging his tongue over the tight bud of her nipple before sucking it between his lips. Only when she was writhing under him did he shift his mouth to the swell of her breast and close his teeth on it in a sharp, slow bite.

She began to pant. "None of the other trainers are *nearly* this evil."

He didn't like the thought of other trainers, and certainly didn't like her bringing them up. The beast inside him snarled, and he fought a quick, dirty battle to keep from allowing it to rise to the surface and claim her. Instead he slid lower, nipping at her stomach. "None of the other trainers is me."

"The understatement of an age." Her legs parted again, and her hips bucked up. "I've never had quite so much faith in a man's promises to make me scream."

"Too much talk of other men." He closed his hands around her thighs and pushed them wide before staring up at her face. "Never do that in bed with a warrior. A trainer can accept it --" *Or he should be able to.* "-- but a warrior will turn viciously possessive."

"I know that." She stared back at him. "But you're not claiming me. This is training. A test."

He didn't want to hear logic, so he silenced her by sweeping his thumb across her cunt, hiding a groan at the slick heat of her. "I'll claim you soon enough, and in ways you can barely imagine."

Lexa laughed, low and husky. "Try me, Dejan."

"Later. For now..." He slicked his thumb through her folds, teasing over her clit with the barest of touches. "I want to see you come."

She shuddered, and her entire body strained toward his touch. "Harder."

For once he obeyed, more interested in watching her pleasure rise than reasserting dominance. He stroked her more firmly. "That's right."

"Yes." She rocked up, finding a smooth, maddening rhythm despite the chains that bound her. It was intoxicating, the way her body moved, bound yet so free.

His beast craved, wanted her pleasure. Wanted to claim her. The latter would have to wait, but the former... He slid two fingers inside her and fucked her with them, his breath coming in panting growls as she writhed for him.

She cursed and clenched tight around him, gripping his fingers, and the slow flush of orgasm stole up her chest. "More, don't -- don't stop --" Her words dissolved into a scream, and she shivered and shook under his hands.

By the Goddess, she was beautiful when she came.

Dejan coaxed her to the peak of pleasure, then eased a third finger into her as she trembled with the aftershocks. Before they could fade completely, he crooked his fingers, searching for the spot that would send her wild again.

She shrieked when he found it, her hips coming off the bed. The chains rattled furiously, nearly obscuring the soft, desperate whimpers that followed her screams -- demands, pleas.

His name.

She came with utter abandon, and his cock ached from watching. He wanted to bury himself in her body and ride her, to feel that clenching heat around something other than his fingers.

But he had to test her. Push her. See how many times her body would rise to climax before she shook with exhaustion.

But Lexa shivered and twisted her body away from his hands. "It's my turn again."

A challenge, and as quickly as that the beast snapped the leash.

Lexa gasped as Dejan surged over her, but she didn't get a chance to speak before he wound a hand in her hair and kissed her. She tried to kiss him back, but he plundered her mouth, seemingly intent on dominating her. Owning her.

It almost made her come again.

Power thundered through the room, an overwhelming press of wild, feral magic. When he lifted his head, something dangerous glinted in his dark eyes. "You don't get a turn."

"Don't I?" The challenging words were useless. His power had awakened something primal inside her, and even as she spoke she relaxed and bared her throat.

He took it this time, closed his teeth over her pulse with a loud growl and marked her.

Her head was swimming, and her skin throbbed with his mark. She'd never been this wanton or out of control, and she expected it to frighten her. Instead, she found herself whispering Dejan's name in a quiet plea. "Take me."

Another growl, and he leaned up and pulled at the chains, dragging her hands toward the center of the bed but keeping them bound. A soft *click*, and he reared back

and closed his hands on her hips before flipping her body. She landed on her stomach, the cuffs holding her wrists crossed above her head.

His breath fell hot against her ear. "Say it again."

She knew that, once she spoke the words again, he *would* take her -- hard, fast. Rough. Lexa barely managed to stifle a whimper. "*Take me.*"

He thrust into her with one powerful movement, driving into her body and snarling his satisfaction against her ear.

The remnants of pleasure still simmering in her flared, and she jerked under him. "Dejan! Goddess..."

Large hands dragged down her shoulders and back as he rose to his knees behind her. He grasped her hips and dragged her up, but he didn't give her a chance to settle her knees on the bed. Instead he held her where she had no leverage to move and began a slow, taunting grind.

It was exactly why she'd wanted him as her teacher. No other trainer in the recent history of the Temple had the same reputation for satisfaction and instruction. It explained how he could command her body so easily, draw such exhaustive pleasure from her.

What it didn't explain was why she wanted him to mark her again, and why she wanted to press her own teeth to the strong, tanned column of his throat.

"That's right..." His voice was a rough, rasping whisper in the silence of the room. "I can feel it when you give in, feel the power of submission."

"I'm --" She bit her lip to stop the traditional words. *Give in*, he'd said. *Everything but those words.* "I'm glad."

"And obedient." One powerful thrust, a tease of what was yet to come, and he resumed the torturous rocking. "It's too late, novice. You're at my mercy now."

It felt heavenly, better than bringing any of the other trainers to their knees. "What are you going to do with me?"

His fingers dug into her hips, hard enough to leave bruises. "What do you think?"

He'd ride her to exhaustion, make her come until she begged him to stop... and she wanted him to say it. "I don't know. Tell me."

"No." A sharp jerk, yanking her to her knees to free his hands. One rubbed over her ass, rough fingers first then the bite of nails. "No warning for you, little novice. No control." He slapped her ass with his open hand.

She cried out as the sudden, stinging contact shook her. There was nowhere to go, no way to escape, even if she'd wanted to, which she didn't. "No control," she repeated in a whisper.

A pleased rumble, and the wet heat of his mouth against her shoulder. Fingers tangled in her hair, pulled her head back. "You're hot around me. Wet. So eager."

"Don't make me wait." She tried to put force behind the words, turn them into a demand, but they came out as a hoarse plea. *Fuck it. Give in.* "Please. Please."

He traced his hands over her, molding her body with strong fingers, tweaking her nipples and caressing her hips. He touched her everywhere, stroked and teased and demanded, all the while working into her with tight, short thrusts, fucking her like he wanted it to last forever.

Every one of those thrusts hit her G-spot, and she tried not to collapse under him. Nothing had ever felt so good, but she didn't want it to end. "More, Dejan."

"Come." A snarled command, steely and firm, and she couldn't resist.

Pleasure churned deep inside her, tightening into a knot of heat that made her shake. He thrust one more time and the knot exploded, sending the heat rippling through her, head to toe. Lexa clutched the chains and screamed.

She faintly felt the sting of his teeth, digging into her shoulder as he snarled. Warm, rough fingers centered on her clit, rubbed slow, deliberate circles that twisted pleasure higher.

She rode the inconceivable swell of pleasure for what seemed like forever, orgasm after orgasm, and Dejan through it all, whispering and growling and taking her...

Something inside her snapped, the final tiny piece of herself that she'd kept hidden. She *accepted* him, wolf and woman, and a burst of inviting magic rose between them.

"Yes." He slammed into her, then dragged her up to his chest with a snarl of triumph. His arms locked around her, and he buried his face against her neck. His teeth bit into her skin, and she shuddered as he jerked inside her and groaned her name, his release evidencing itself in a hot, satisfied rush of dominant magic.

Warmth spread through her, and her muscles wouldn't hold her anymore. She went lax in Dejan's arms, the chains binding her wrists clinking. "Oh."

"Mmm." He eased her back to the bed, and she felt the brush of his fingers as he freed her from her bindings. His hand stroked over her arm, down her back and along her side. "Rest."

"Rest." Lexa tucked her cheek against one of the plush pillows and sighed. Her brain had gone fuzzy, and she could barely move. "That's a good idea."

He moved off the bed, but she didn't stir. Surely he'd come back, and she could curl up in his arms and sleep.



## Chapter Three

He didn't even have the courage to report to Celine in person.

Dejan sent a message -- text instead of video -- and fled to the wing of the Temple devoted to the trainers' living space. Forty minutes under the pounding spray of the shower and another twenty spent pacing the confines of the trainers' garden gave Celine plenty of time to send a message if she chose.

She didn't, which could mean Lexa was in worse shape than he'd feared -- terrified or injured or --

"Thought you'd be tied up all night." Hektor, one of the other trainers, sat down on a bench nearby. "Kweku said you'd been tapped to take over with Lexa."

Dejan considered snarling, but Hektor wouldn't be intimidated. "Are you gossiping like a novice now?"

Hektor raised both eyebrows and stared at him. "Just making conversation. What's eating you?"

"She's a *novice*. Celine has lost her mind, sending me a novice."

The older man shrugged. "She's not just any novice. She's going straight to the silver robes. Everyone knows it."

No one went straight to silver robes, not even Celine. "That's absurd. She's too young for that."

"Don't think age figures into it. Not this time."

If Celine shoved Lexa into silver robes, it would be a disaster. His loss of control was his own responsibility, but Lexa had wormed her way under his skin, prodded him with the perfect mix of challenge and submission.

*Wouldn't that make Hektor's words true?* a tiny, reasonable voice asked. She'd wrenched away his control with singular skill. If anyone deserved a silver robe, it was Lexa.

Assuming he hadn't hurt her when he'd taken her.

Dejan closed his eyes and sank to the ground. "I let her push more than she should have."

Hektor said nothing for a moment. "Good Goddess, Dej, what happened?"

He'd lost his head. Lost control. Taken her like a man crazed for touch instead of a teacher testing a student. "I don't know. Celine is with her now."

"I don't understand."

Of course he wouldn't. Dejan scrubbed a hand across his face and wondered how many showers he'd have to take before the scent of her skin faded completely. "I *don't know*."

"Shit." Hektor rose, his boots thumping on the walk. "Do -- Do you want me to go check?"

"No. Celine will summon me when she's good and ready." And probably make him wait in misery as punishment.

His colleague looked skeptical. "Can I do anything?"

"No."

Hektor backed away at his surly response. "Then I'll be on my way."

It meant brooding on his own, but Dejan preferred that. He didn't bother to apologize as Hektor took his leave, too intent on the tablet he'd dumped on the grass next to him. It would chime soon, indicating a message from Celine. It would.

It *had* to, because he wouldn't survive if his carelessness had damaged the brilliant power in Lexa's body.

\* \* \*

When Lexa woke, the room was dark. She could barely make out the outline of someone sitting in a chair by the bed, but her senses told her it was Celine, not Dejan.

She sat up, clutching the sheets to her chest. "What are you doing here?"

Celine glanced up from the tablet in her hands, her expression guarded. "How do you feel?"

Her muscles were a little sore, but she mostly felt tired. "I'm fine, Celine. Is this part of my test?" There had to be a reason Dejan had left without a word.

The high priestess's tension eased, but only marginally. "No. I'm not sure if I should commend you or turn you over my knee right now. Do you understand what you did?"

Lexa trembled as she swung her legs off the edge of the bed. "Something wrong, I take it?"

"Something inadvisable for a novice." Celine tapped her tablet and held it out. "I'd like you to read the message I received from Dejan."

The message was terse and heartbreaking. *Snapped. Lexa seems physically unharmed but there could be damage. You were out of your mind to trust me with a novice, and I'm never going to forgive either of us for it.*

Lexa bit her lip. Her pride had pushed her to push *him*, and what she'd given him was a far cry from the comfort a priestess was supposed to provide.

Something inside her protested the harsh judgment, whispered that what she'd offered hadn't felt wrong or calculated. It had felt like freedom.

But his words were unmistakable. She felt lighter than she had in years, but Dejan was in torment, damning himself for what he'd taken at her request. It was unforgivably selfish, to take pleasure and deliver pain in return.

She handed the tablet back to Celine. "I have no excuse."

Celine's smile was gentle. "You need no excuse. You did the job of a priestess, even though you're yet a novice. Dejan's suffering is the result of a colossal ego and the delusion that no woman can ever be his equal, much less best him."

That wasn't quite true, but Lexa only nodded. "What do we do now?"

"Leave Dejan to me. You're going to be busy packing your things."

*Packing.* She panicked until she realized what Celine must mean. She'd be moving to other quarters, out of the wing housing the novices and initiates. "No more tests or training?"

"You set a test I never would have given you." Celine rose and tucked the tablet into her belt. "And you passed beyond any expectation. You should be proud."

Yes, she should have been. But the expected surge of triumph didn't come. Instead, she felt oddly empty. "The announcement will be made at dinner?"

"Mmm. Unless you're not feeling up to it...?"

"No, that's fine." She had to accept her ceremonial goblet in front of the Temple, before she could receive her robes. "I look forward to it."

Celine started toward the door, but paused after a few steps and turned. "You *are* all right, aren't you?"

Lexa forced a smile. "I'm fine. This is a big achievement, that's all."

"Of course. I'll let Dejan know that you're fine. And I promise you he'll be fine too."

She sounded confident, and Lexa only wished she shared the feeling.

\* \* \*

By the time Celine motioned for Lexa to approach the head table, the place of honor reserved for the most elite priestesses of the Temple, people had already begun to talk.

Dejan's gaze followed her, intense enough to feel like a hot caress. He sat with the other trainers at their table in the corner, a lone circle of masculinity in the sea of women.

Most everyone had kept their comments and speculation out of earshot, but Lexa knew they could only be saying one thing. Dejan's stare was too blatant, too obvious to allow for too much interpretation.

She held her head high as she walked to the front table and knelt before it. "Thank you for the invitation, Celine."

“Lexa.” The high priestess gestured with one graceful hand. “A silver-robed priestess kneels only before her King and her Goddess. Come and sit with us.”

The hush in the dining hall was deafening, and Lexa fought the blush that rose as she took an empty seat at the end of the table.

It left her with a clear line of sight to Dejan, who hesitated for an endless moment as silence turned to whispers, whispers to scattered applause. Someone shouted a congratulations, someone else laughed in delight. Dejan inclined his head, a slow, graceful nod that gave respect even as lust burned in his eyes.

A shudder took her. She still wanted him and, this time, it had nothing to do with her ambition. It had everything to do with the way he’d touched her, and the way he watched her now.

Sudden, savage anger rocked her. She’d finished her training now, and dalliances between priestesses and trainers were forbidden. She could never have him again, and he’d deprived her of the few slow, lazy minutes she could have spent with him still inside her, his skin against hers.

He’d cheated her.

Lexa lifted her chin and glared at him.

His jaw clenched. The strong, dangerous hands he’d stroked over her body fisted on the table, but he met her challenge and returned it, the cocky tilt of one eyebrow comment enough.

If she knew what was good for her, she’d ignore him. Forget he even existed. Instead, she lifted her new silver goblet and licked the rim before taking a delicate sip of wine.

The look he gave her could have singed the clothes off her back.

The woman to her left cleared her throat, and the sound jolted Lexa into looking away. She’d have to watch herself, or everyone at the Temple would think there was something going on between her and Dejan.

And there wasn’t. There couldn’t be.

There *wouldn’t* be.

\* \* \*

By the time the evening meal ended, Dejan didn't know if he wanted to kill himself or Celine. All he knew for certain was that Lexa gazed on him like a woman torn between rage and lust, and his body ached with the possibilities.

She was furious, and he didn't blame her. He'd earned her ire a hundred times over, but when she gazed at him in pure, feminine challenge, the beast inside refused to back down. He'd snapped. He'd claimed.

Now he *needed*. And could not have.

Or *should* not have. The rules of the Temple were important, but rules were nothing when weighed against the feral hunger inside him. Not just the need to possess, but to comfort. To reassure himself that he hadn't hurt her, body or mind.

He might not be sure if he wanted to kill Celine, but Celine would almost certainly murder him if she discovered him lurking in an alcove, waiting for the newest priestess of Luna.

He smelled her before he saw her -- the clean, floral scent of her perfume, the soft musk of her skin. And, underneath it all, the traces of *him*. Proof she'd accepted his claim, at least a little, because outright rejection would have purged the lingering feel of his magic twined with hers.

She stopped short and took a half step back. "Dejan," she murmured, her voice husky and low.

It was so easy to reach out and tug her into the alcove. The hallway was private, but not private enough to eliminate the risk. She was a priestess, now. Off limits to a trainer.

When she lifted her face and met his eyes, all traces of her anger had vanished. She looked wary instead. Cautious.

He lifted a hand and traced the curve of her cheek, reveling in the soft skin under his fingertips. "I'm sorry."

The firm line of her mouth softened. "You have nothing to apologize for."

"No?" He let his hand fall away. "I would disagree."

Lexa turned her head, averting her gaze and leaving him staring at the bare, tempting line of her throat. "You did your job."

"No. I did not." He caught her chin and urged her to look at him. "If I'd done my job, I would have spent a week learning you. Maybe more. I wouldn't have lost my grip on sanity and forced you to do the job of a priestess while you were yet a novice."

Her breath caught. "It doesn't matter. The end result is the same."

Not for them. His craving for her continued unabated. So many things he'd never done, so many ways he hadn't gotten a chance to touch her. He slid his thumb over her full lower lip and inhaled the heady scent of her. "No. It's not."

The anger she was taking such obvious pains to hide broke through. "Then perhaps you shouldn't have run from the training room as soon as you were done with me."

He deserved it, but he hadn't expected her pain to tear at him quite so much. "It wasn't like that, but I'm apologizing for that too."

"Celine showed me your message."

Celine was a meddlesome bitch. "It wasn't my finest moment. I was worried."

"You wouldn't have had to be if you'd *stayed*."

"You could have been hurt. Or scared. Celine would have thrown me from the Temple if I took chances with your welfare."

Lexa stepped away, into the hallway. "So you left? That seems like a bizarre way to make sure someone's all right."

He winced, because it sounded callous. "There are protocols in place that I hope you never understand."

She seemed to consider that. "Fair enough." She took another step. "I accept your apology."

"And you run."

She didn't bother to argue. "I run."

"From a half-feral wolf." Surely she knew what instincts she'd rouse, what torture it would be to keep himself from giving chase.

Her eyes flashed anger again, though she quickly lowered her lashes to disguise it. "I have no choice."



## Chapter Four

Footsteps echoed down the hallway, and he dragged her deeper into the alcove, tucking them both tight into the shadows. She gripped his shoulders, her nails sharp through his clothing, and finally opened her eyes when the intruding footsteps faded.

She was breathing fast and shallow, her full breasts outlined under thin white robes, and a shudder ran through her. "This is impossible."

"Impossible," he agreed, pressing her back into the wall, pressing his body to hers. "This is impossible."

Lexa trembled. Then she moaned, buried her face against his neck and bit him. Hard.

Pleasure swelled, intense and exhilarating, and strong enough to overcome reason. He fisted his hand in the thick strands of her hair and snarled as he wondered how long her mark would linger.

When she released him, it was only to drag him down for a fierce kiss. She tilted her head to fit her mouth to his, her body softening, eager for touch.

Too eager for an unprotected hallway. Not nearly eager enough for the need that throbbed inside him. He needed to reclaim sanity, reclaim his hard-won control, but the beast rode hard and close to the surface, hungry for the woman he'd only been allowed to taste.

"Not here." Her hands opened and closed on the back of his shirt, kneading like a cat. "They gave me a -- a new room. Do you know where?"

If he was caught going in or out of it she'd suffer, lose what status she'd fought so hard to gain. "Not your room. The gardens. Meet me tonight."

She licked her lips. "What time?"

"The third chime." Late enough that no one would be about but servants bringing meals and wine to priestesses and the warriors they entertained.

"Yes." Lexa kissed him one last time and jerked away to hurry down the hall.

Celine was going to *murder* him, and the beast was too pleased to care.

\* \* \*

Lexa held her breath as she ducked around a corner to avoid two gossiping servants. The path to the trainers' gardens had been anything but clear, and every near miss ratcheted up the tension inside her.

*Now I know why people always find illicit things so delicious.* Her body throbbed with anticipation already, and she refused to believe that all of that unbearable arousal was due to the fact that Dejan waited for her.

He couldn't affect her that much, because she couldn't afford to lose herself in him.

*Of course not. That's why you're jeopardizing everything you've worked for just to touch him again.*

Lexa cursed and hurried through the door to the gardens.

A hand caught hers at once, but when she turned Dejan held a finger to his lips, his face barely visible in the shimmering light from the moon. He tugged her deeper into the gardens, past a burbling fountain and a bench surrounded by gently swaying wind chimes that filled the night with soft music.

"Here," he said finally, dragging her between two tall, twisting trees. Their branches met overhead, but just beyond them lay a lush circle of grass bathed in silvered light. The tall stone wall that ringed the trainers' garden sat beyond it, softened by ivy climbing subtle wooden trellises.

Her heart pounded. She gripped his hand tighter. "Are you certain, Dejan? That you want this?"

"That I want you?" A sharp tug brought her body tight against his, his chest to her back, and she felt the hot, unyielding press of his erection.

Desire left her weak, her tongue thick, but she forced out the words anyway. "No, that you want me like this. It's dangerous."

"And yet you're here."

"Did you really think I could stay away?" She caught his hand and pulled it down, closer to where wet heat gathered between her thighs.

His hoarse chuckle rasped out of his throat, stirring the hair at her temple. "You ask my question, and yet you don't know the answer."

There was only one answer, only one thing that mattered, and it was easy to confess in the dark solitude of the garden. "I need you, Dejan."

He gathered the fabric of her robes, somehow managed to let it tease over her skin as he lifted it. "How badly?"

Guilt and lust burned through her in equal measure. "I ache. Does that appease your ego?"

"My ego doesn't need appeasing." His foot nudged the inside of her ankle, widening her stance. "The beast inside me does."

"So badly you couldn't find another woman who would suffice?"

"So badly no other woman *could* suffice." He bit her earlobe as his hands worked her robes above her thighs.

The cool night air caressed her skin, but even that couldn't lessen the heat that rocketed through her. "You flatter me."

His fingers smoothed over her leg. "Close your eyes. Use your power. Feel what I need, and tell me it's flattery."

What radiated from him and flooded her was nothing short of hunger, and she yearned to satisfy it. "I don't want to talk."

"I'm not done yet." His touch drifted higher teasing across her abdomen. "I'm considering how to take you. On the ground. Against the wall. Standing, maybe?"

Lexa had to clear her throat to speak. "Does it matter?"

"It shouldn't." A groan, and the world spun dizzily as he whipped her around, dragging her against his body. "I want to give you what you need."

What she craved was *his* pleasure. She pushed him down to the grass and followed, climbing astride his thighs.

His hands spanned her hips, then slid up, dragging her robes with them. "Take this off. I want to see you."

Again, she wanted him to tear the fabric from her body. And again, it wasn't part of what they had, this clandestine encounter. Lexa pulled both robes over her head at once, leaving her completely bare.

Glazed pleasure and appreciation filled his eyes as he smoothed his hands up to cup her breasts. "You're beautiful. Wicked."

"Wicked?" She tugged his shirt up and spread her hand across his stomach. "Why, because I tempt you?"

His thumbs brushed over her nipples, plying them with teasing gentleness. "You tempt me more than is rational."

"Temptation isn't about rational thought." She leaned forward and bit her lip when his strong hands cradled her breasts more fully. "It's about need."

A smile curled his lips before he caught her nipple and tugged it. "Tell me what you need. What makes you ache?"

"You." She loosened his pants, impatient to have him inside her again. "The way you watch me. Want me."

"Need you?" He hissed out a breath. "I can't think about anything but having you around my cock again."

"I know." And she did. If he'd been able to walk away, he would have. There was no reason to sneak around and jeopardize both their positions unless the need clawing at them would allow no rest or respite.

His hand trailed down the center of her body until his fingers brushed between her legs, slicking close to her clit. Lexa couldn't concentrate on talking while she undressed him, so she lapsed into silence. There would be time for words later, if they found themselves with anything to say.

She stripped off his shirt, but only eased his pants down until she could close her hand around his erection. She longed to taste him again, feel him in her mouth, but there wasn't *time*.

There would never be time.

Lexa crawled up to kiss him, grinding her hips down so that his shaft nestled between the wet lips of her cunt. "Take me again," she whispered.

"Under me." He nipped her lips and rolled, bringing her body to the soft grass. A low, rumbling growl worked its way up out of his chest as he kissed her hard enough to intensify the ache inside her with only that contact. One thrust and he was inside her, hot and large, pressing down until their hips met and he groaned against her mouth.

She bit his shoulder to hold back the sharp cry that rose and then dug her nails into his back as she panted. "Dejan."

"Tell me." It was half command, half plea. "I need to hear it. I need to *know*."

She could barely breathe the words through her moans, but she'd never before meant them so completely. So utterly. "I'm at your mercy, warrior."

He bit her throat and rolled them again, bringing her on top of him in a surge of muscle. "Sit up. I want to see you."

Lexa obeyed. She trembled and swayed and finally braced her hands on his chest. "What do you see?"

"A woman." A roll of his hips lifted her knees from the grass and drove him deeper inside her. "Not a priestess. A beautiful, hungry woman."

Her lip bled where she'd bitten it, and still a too-loud moan escaped. "You have no idea how hungry I am." Her body clasped him tight as she began to move, rolling her hips eagerly over his.

"Yes I do." His thumb dipped lower, found her clit and rubbed in slow, maddening counter-point. "As hungry as I am. Almost."

Fire blazed up inside her, and Lexa caught his hand. "I'll scream if you keep doing that."

"Then muffle it." His hand continued to move, as if the weight of her grip was no hindrance at all. "I plan to see you come again and again."

"*Dejan.*" She bent and closed her teeth on his jaw. "I'm already trying to be quiet."

His body tensed underneath her, the only warning before he spilled her onto the grass. Large, strong hands dragged her up to her knees, and his cock pressed against her ass. "You put yourself at my mercy, didn't you?"

"I did." She shook with wanting him. "At your mercy, Dejan. Everything in me is yours."

He covered her, chest to her back and arms on the ground on either side of hers. "Do you know your own power?" The words fell against her cheek in hot bursts of air as he rocked forward, eased his cock into her. "You give yourself... and own me."

"I only know what I feel." He was hard inside her, and so deep. He spoke of her owning him, but he was the one leaving his brand on her body and soul. Lexa turned her head and spoke against his lips. "Do you put yourself at my mercy? Do you trust me to give myself to you?"

Teeth caught her lower lip and dug in. "Yes."

"Hold me and don't move." Trusting him to do as she asked, she threaded her fingers through his hair and slid her other hand down her body to stroke her clit. "When I come, fuck me hard."

The arm wrapped around her body tightened, and his growl vibrated against her back. "Tell me how you're touching yourself. Slow? Rough?"

"Soft now. Slow. When I get close --" She shifted her hips a little and gasped sharply. "Rougher when I get close. Harder."

He turned his head and bit the inside of her wrist. "Will you like it just as much when it's my tongue?"

The thought made Lexa clench tight around him, and she moaned helplessly. "We can't, Dejan."

"Can we stop?"

They had to. Sooner or later, they'd be caught. Still... "I can't stop wanting you."

"So show me." One little bump of his hips, driving deeper into her. "Come, so I can fuck you."

Her vision swam. She muttered a curse and sped her movements, desperate for him to continue those tormenting thrusts. "Tell me."

"Tell you what?" The arm wrapped around her trembled. "That I'm *at your mercy?*"

It wasn't fitting for a warrior, much less a trainer, to feel such things for a priestess. But here, in the garden, they were only a man and a woman. "Yes, Dejan--*yes...*"

The world shook apart and took her with it. He hissed his pleasure and gave her the movement she'd needed, a hard, deep thrust followed by another, and another.

Lexa dropped her hands to the ground, fingers digging past grass and into the earth as she tried to anchor herself in something other than Dejan's body over hers, in hers.

It was no use. The way her body and her magic embraced him so completely could only mean one thing. No amount of fighting would change it.

She was *his*.

Dejan buried his face against her shoulder and closed his teeth on her skin, muffling the hoarse, desperate groan that accompanied his release. Power flooded her, demanded she come with him as his steady rhythm turned ragged.

His frantic pleasure sparked her own again. Lexa tried to hold back her scream but a keening wail escaped, and she bit her lip hard to quiet it. It was too loud even to her own ears, which still buzzed and roared in the aftermath of orgasm.

"Lexa." Her name rasped from his lips as he stilled above her. "Mine."

Too late for the word to bring anything but warm satisfaction, but Lexa was nothing if not stubborn. "We are allowed no claim on one another."

His nudged her hair out of the way and pressed a hot kiss to the back of her neck. "Tell me it's not the truth."

"That doesn't make it less likely to hurt us both."

"And hiding from it will?"

"No." She sighed. "Impossible, and I still can't walk away."

He whispered the word against the back of her neck a second time. "Mine."

Maybe they could handle this. All she knew was that they had to try. Lexa lifted a hand to his face. "Yes, yours."



## Chapter Five

The ball slammed past Dejan, and Hektor barked out a laugh. "You're not even paying attention."

He wasn't, and he knew it. Dejan ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head. "I'm too tired for games today. I didn't sleep well last night."

Hektor caught the small white ball as it rebounded. "So the rumors floating around the lounge are true."

Dejan shifted from exhausted to wary in a heartbeat. "There are rumors about my trouble sleeping?" He made his voice casual, but it wouldn't be enough. It *couldn't* be enough, not if people were starting to talk.

"Just that it's tough to get enough sleep with a woman under you."

His control snapped, and he had his hand around Hektor's throat and his friend's back against the wall before he remembered moving. "Is that what they talk about?"

"What the *hell* are you doing?" Confusion darkened Hektor's features, and he closed one iron hand around Dejan's wrist. "Whatever your problem is, it isn't with me, so I suggest you let me go."

*Hell.* Dejan loosened his grip but didn't step back. "Tell me what they say."

"The most popular rumors have linked you with any number of women employed by the Temple. Even a few influential wives from town."

Relief flooded him, so fast it took violence with it. Linking him to Temple employees or ladies from town could get him in trouble, but it wouldn't endanger Lexa. "Have the men turned into novices, then? To gossip like overly excited girls?"

Hektor didn't take the bait. Instead, he stared at Dejan and groaned. "You're *not*, Dej. For the love of all that's holy, tell me you're not mixed up with her."

"Bite your damn tongue, Hektor." Dejan dropped his hand and turned away. "You don't have a clue what you're talking about."

"Right. I don't hear you denying it."

Because Hektor would hear the lie, and they both knew it. Hektor would hear the lie, and he would know that Dejan had spent the last moon's worth of nights on top of Lexa more often than not. Frantic, furtive meetings in the beginning, but lately they'd shifted. He wasn't soothed by an hour slaking his need in her body anymore. Not if he couldn't spend another hour lying with her in the circle of his arms and listening to her quiet voice.

And perhaps that was what had doomed them. "She's a friend," he said finally, because it was the truth, if not all of it. "She's a strong, determined woman who needs a friend."

Hektor sighed wearily. "We've all had at least one who made it tough to let go, but you have to. The Temple is a place for service, not love."

Love. A word neither of them had dared utter. It would be insanity in any case -- who could be in love after a month of stolen moments? But the power and need twisting inside him was so much deeper, so much more desperate than the polite confines of love.

Dejan could tell by the look in Hektor's eyes that he could see it too. With a sigh, he gave up pretense. "Does everyone know?"

"No, but they'll figure it out if you try to strangle them for teasing you about your conquests."

"Damn it." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "I can't *stop*. It's instinct. It's... feral."

"I wish I had an easy answer."

Dejan wished he had an answer at all. "Who was she? The one who made it hard for you to let go?"

Hektor's lips twisted into a bittersweet smile. "Tatiana. You may not remember her. She barely made it out of her novice robes before some noble returning from the war snatched her away."

The name called to mind the image of a tall, blonde woman, quiet and quietly pretty, but not remarkable in any way. Nothing like the flashy, vibrant women Hektor seemed to favor. "What got to you?"

His friend stared at the ground, lost in memories. "I have no idea. It could have been everything, or just a single moment I can't even remember. But I loved her."

"And you let her go." Dejan closed his eyes. "I've tried. I've *tried*, damn it. The parts of me that are broken used to be an asset. Now they're taking over everything."

Hektor snorted. "I didn't let Tatiana go. She carefully considered all of her options and decided it wasn't practical for us to remain together. She dumped my ass."

Dejan froze. "And if she hadn't?"

"I had asked her to leave with me. To become my wife." He shrugged. "She broke my heart, but she also did me a favor. It would have been a disastrous mistake once the infatuation faded."

Asking Lexa to leave the Temple would be a greater betrayal than leaving her. If the need twisting inside her was anything like the instinctive hunger that plagued him, it might be enough to override sense -- for a time. Until she realized she'd given up her dreams for a broken man who couldn't offer her anything more than a quiet life of obscurity.

An insult to the woman who would undoubtedly rule the Savage Temple as its high priestess one day soon.

"I'm sorry." Hektor looked truly sympathetic. "These things are impossible to avoid, but best ended quickly."

"Perhaps you're right." If nothing else he could broach the matter with Lexa. A cooling off period, perhaps, to protect her until the gossip settled down. If she truly needed him, if it *wasn't* just the mystique of his position...

*If*. The word had never terrified him quite so much.

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Lexa clenched her hands to hide their shaking and faced Celine, her shoulders shaking. "I don't know what happened. Everything was fine, and then..."

"Sit." Celine's voice sounded strained, but her hand was steady as she gestured to the chair behind Lexa. "I haven't received the healer's report yet. Are you physically well?"

"I'm fine. I had the situation under control. He didn't harm me at all."

Celine didn't look as if she quite believed her. "The situation should not have been one that required control. Your warrior was young and recently gentled. Was his level of need misdiagnosed?"

"I..." There was no way she could tell Celine the truth, that the frightened young man had sensed Dejan's claim on her and reacted with instinctive, angry violence. "As I said, I don't know what happened."

"Then you'd best start considering the possibilities, Lexa." Celine leaned forward, her face fierce. "You will not meet another warrior until I'm sure you will be safe. If that had been a feral wolf, you would be dead."

She bit her lip. Normally, she'd argue with a full removal from service, but the truth was that she'd spent more stolen nights with Dejan over the last month than she had entertaining warriors in need. "I understand."

"You're taking this with surprising aplomb, priestess."

She bristled. "What would you have me do, cry? Something went wrong, but no one was harmed. It isn't the end of the world."

"No, it's not. Not for most priestesses." Celine settled back in her chair. "I thought you were not most priestesses. Perhaps I was mistaken."

Only a few short weeks earlier, this sort of failure would have been unacceptable. Lexa wouldn't have eaten or slept until she figured out what had gone wrong. "No, you... I'm sorry. I'm angry with myself." That much, at least, was true.

"If something were happening, if something had changed... I should hope you would understand you could talk to me."

The words meant nothing, not when the truth of her confession would leave her demoted, and Dejan banned from the Temple entirely. Lexa fixed her face into a calm, serene mask. "I understand, Celine."

Silence stretched out, measured by the gentle sounds of the fountain in Celine's courtyard and the gentle music of wind chimes usually too soft to notice. Finally the high priestess sighed. "You're dismissed. I expect you to have an additional meeting with the healers in the morning, just as a precaution."

The boy hadn't touched her beyond a too-tight grip on her shoulder, but she didn't argue. "I'll see them just after breakfast." Lexa didn't wait for Celine to comment. She turned on one heel and hurried out of the courtyard, into the corridor.

The quickest way to her room was to cut through the main gardens. She stumbled through the door and leaned against the wall, thankful for the fresh air and quiet. She needed a moment to compose herself, to wrap her mind around the fact that Celine had been right.

Then the wind shifted, and it carried his scent. Her body reacted immediately, but the warmth that filled her was more than arousal.

She opened her eyes. "Dejan."

"Lexa." He stood a few feet away, fingers curled into fists and his body fairly trembling with tension, but he didn't move closer. Instead his gaze roved over her face and body, frantic and worried. "Are you hurt?"

So he'd heard. "I'm fine. It was nothing."

"A young man turned violent on you, Lexa. It's not *nothing*."

"And we both know why it happened." She forced herself to meet and hold his gaze. "Please, Dejan. Don't admonish me. I can take it from anyone else, but not you."

"Admonish you?" It came out strangled, and he squeezed his eyes shut. "I should be whipped for it. I should be put down for the danger I've placed you in."

Lexa swallowed tears and clenched her hands in her robes to keep from reaching for him. "We're both to blame."

"We're both in need. But I know better, Lexa. As a trainer, I should have known I was leaving too much of myself on you. I should have been careful. And you paid the price for it, just as you paid the price for my lack of control before."

It hurt more than if he'd placed all the responsibility on her. "So I had nothing to do with it? Because I recall begging, Dejan -- *begging* you to take me, to make me yours."

"Because I already had." He opened his eyes and stared at her, longing and hunger plain in his face. "You don't understand what magic can do. Trainers are meant to hold back. Unleashing that sort of power, with that level of intimacy -- we can make you need us. If I'd given you time to clear your head..."

"Stop." A pain colder than anger but hotter than betrayal lanced through her. "I love you. Would you reduce that to an illusion? A silly fantasy?"

"You're everything to me," he whispered. "I care too much to risk you. Do you care enough to trust me? The trainers are talking. Being discovered now would put us both at risk."

A shiver took her, though Lexa barely felt it through the numb haze that enveloped her. "What trust shall I give you? What do you plan to do?"

"Stay away from you long enough for the rumors to subside." That was true enough, but she could read the lie in the words that followed. "And then I'll come back to you."

Only the wall behind her kept her from backing away in disbelief. "You claim that I'm everything, but still you lie to me?" Anger overrode her numbness, and she stepped close to Dejan, so close their faces were only inches apart. "End it if that's what you need to do, but don't *lie*. Don't you dare."

He moved fast, so fast her back had hit the wall before she saw him take a step. His hands closed on her wrists and slammed them against the wall too, trapping her between stone and the unyielding heat of his body. Something wild lived in his gaze, the beast that had broken free and wanted to claim her even now. "I can't be trusted with you."

Part of her wanted to struggle against his grasp, but she knew it would be useless. She refused to flinch away, to close her eyes against the tears that threatened, so she stared up at him.

He was breaking her heart, but it left him in agony, and she knew what she had to do. "I reject your claim," she whispered.

More than just words. She meant them, and the beasts inside them knew. The magic knew, too, pressure building until it snapped with a painful jerk, one she felt in her bones.

Misery painted Dejan's features as he stepped back, releasing her so abruptly she almost fell. The imprint of his fingers stood plainly on her wrists, and his gaze caught on the livid red marks. "I'm sorry for the pain I've caused you, priestess."

She rubbed her wrists and tried to pretend that was all he meant. "I've known worse pain than what you've visited on me." Her turn to lie.

His turn to be devastated by it.

The formal bow he managed was a hair short of obeisance, far too deep for a trainer to a priestess, even one who wore the silver robes. "By your leave, priestess."

He didn't wait for her to return or acknowledge the bow. He turned and practically ran from the gardens, leaving Lexa alone.

Her legs wouldn't hold her, and she slumped to the stone path. The pressure in her chest was unbearable, and intensifying with every choked breath she tried to draw. Finally, her gasps broke in a ragged sob, and she buried her face in her hands.

Dejan had spoken of knowing better, but the truth was that so had she. She'd worked for years, never resting and never veering from the path she'd set for herself. She would be a priestess, she would wear silver robes, and she would one day run the Temple herself.

All of that was in her grasp now, and all she had to do was not screw it up. Stay the course, and she'd have everything she'd ever dreamed of as a young girl of no wealth or family.

Victory had never seemed so hollow, so meaningless. The importance of her accomplishments couldn't ease the ache of a broken heart. It couldn't bring her off her knees or stop the flow of her tears.

Only time and sheer stubbornness could do either. Lexa wiped her face, rose, and set off on the quickest path to her room.

She would survive this loss just as she had survived everything else in her life -- because she had to.

\* \* \*

His ears were still ringing from the scathing lecture he'd endured from Celine two hours later.

Dejan shoved the rest of his tunics into a bag, heedless of how being balled up and crumpled might damage the expensive fabric. His relationship with Celine had always been one of friendship and easy camaraderie, but today she had made the full weight of her displeasure felt in a stark reminder of why she was Luna's most dangerous servant.

For now. The lash of angry power had been impressive indeed, but he'd felt pain almost as fierce when Lexa had rejected him. He'd let her sweet submission and eager hunger lull him into a false sense of control, all the while forgetting the very reason she'd been sent to him. Power rested in that supple frame, magic granted by the goddess herself. Her rejection of his claim had resonated in his bones, stripping him bare before her.

If anything, it was that which had decided his course of action. The woman who'd brought him to his knees deserved the freedom to realize her dreams. In ten years in the Temple he'd never met a priestess whose strength rivaled that of Celine. Not until Lexa.

A knock sounded at the door, but it opened before he could answer. Hektor stepped in. "Goddess spare us. You *are* leaving."

It seemed the gossips were at it again. "And what are they saying now?"



"That you've managed to successfully woo your rich conquest at last." Hektor crossed his arms over his chest. "Is she going with you?"

Dejan shot Hektor a look. "I turned myself over to the high priestess. I've been banished."

"What? Why would you do such a boneheaded thing?"

A snarl escaped him. "Because I am *not like you*. I was a prisoner of war, Hektor. A broken man. A feral fucking wolf. I'm only safe when chained by tradition, and I've obviously broken those chains."

His friend met his anger -- and matched it. "You think so? That you're the only man who ever felt this way, as if his beast wouldn't allow him to draw another breath until he'd reclaimed what was his? Are you that arrogant, Dejan?"

"I'm that scared! I'm that *terrified*."

"Of what? That you won't be able to control yourself, or that you won't *want* to when you have to watch the parade of warriors who actually get to touch her?"

He'd already struggled against the jealousy, bad enough when he knew she was his, that his magic embraced her and the beast inside him recognized home. Now... He growled and pushed a pair of pants into the bag. "I almost hurt her tonight. And she rejected me. As she should have."

"Before or after you offered to throw yourself on your sword? Don't try to tell me you didn't."

There was nothing to say to that, so he stayed silent.

It dissolved Hektor's anger. "Where will you go?"

Dejan hadn't even thought about it. "I don't know. It's not like I don't have money. My stipend's been piling up untouched for a decade. Maybe the hotel in town for a few days, and then..." And then he had to put as much of their country between him and Lexa as possible to keep himself from coming back for her.

"Do you --?" Hektor bit off the question, stepped forward, and offered his hand. "Until our paths cross again, Dejan."

The only kindness he was likely to see in days to come, and Dejan was too weak to deny it. He clasped his friend's hand with a strained smile. "Until that day."

The older man searched his face and finally sighed. "Tell Lexa yourself. Don't let her hear the whispers in one of the common rooms."

If only he could. "The high priestess is probably already with her."

"Does that change anything? She still deserves to hear this from you."

She did, but facing her wouldn't just be flying in the face of direct orders from Celine herself -- it would be testing his own resolve in the face of the one thing he wanted more than anything. "Maybe," he said finally, and it was the best he could offer.

But even as Hektor left him to his misery Dejan knew the truth. He'd try to see her one last time. He had to.

## Chapter Six

Lexa ignored the chime at her door and refilled her glass of wine. Whoever it was could return later or, even better, fuck off completely. "Go away."

A soft click as the lock disengaged, and the door slid open to reveal the high priestess. "No."

Celine was very nearly the last person she wanted to see, but showing that would be unacceptable -- and telling. Lexa placed her goblet on the table and straightened. "Is my presence required?"

Showing a complete disregard for the unspoken rules of privacy, Celine stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. "Dejan confessed everything. He's been banished."

So he'd confessed, and her painful rejection of him had been for nothing. "I see. So you've come to mete out *my* punishment." She drained her wine. "Do your worst, Celine. Demotion? Banishment? Nothing would hurt worse than what I've already suffered."

The high priestess moved to lean against Lexa's desk and crossed her arms over her chest. "First I suppose you'll have to tell me how much of his tortured self-recrimination is fact, and how much is a man under the delusion he's responsible for everything."

She snorted. "We had an affair. I was just as culpable as Dejan, perhaps even more so. I knew exactly what I was doing, and I would do it again. Take that under consideration when you make your decisions."

For the first time ever, Celine seemed completely taken aback. She stared at Lexa, her mouth slightly open, then blinked. "Do you want to be here at all?"

Did she? She glanced at her dressing table, where a fresh silver robe awaited her. "Since I was a little girl, all I ever wanted was your position. I wanted to be the highest priestess. I wanted the prestige, the power. The money. Now Luna has shown me what a prideful shit I've been. I didn't want to serve her. I wanted *her* to serve *me*."

"When you're angry, you get crude." An oddly sad little smile tugged at the corner of Celine's lips. "One of the hundreds of ways you remind me of myself. It's hard to be like the gently born when we're furious, isn't it? To remember to be flowery and obliquely insulting when what you want to do is tell them to shove their heads straight up their damn asses."

It *was*. Pretending to be gently bred, to fit in, had been a constant struggle. "I don't belong here, Celine. I have to go."

"I didn't belong here either, Lexa. I made my role fit me. The high priestess before me was a lady who smiled where I scowl and bowed where I rebel. I made this Temple independent, and I did it because I didn't belong here. I need you."

It was everything she'd ever wanted, and more -- permission to be herself instead of forcing herself into a strange mold. All her dreams fulfilled.

And, in the end, it would mean nothing next to what she'd lost. "I'm sorry, Celine. I'll be leaving with Dejan, if he'll have me."

Celine's eyes widened. "He means that much?"

*You're everything to me.* Dejan's words, and Lexa echoed them now. "He's everything. And if I let him go..." She shook her head. "I can't serve Luna if there's no love left in me."

"Yes, you can." The high priestess's voice broke, and she cleared her throat. "You can," she repeated. "I've done it for the last decade. But I suppose I should hardly expect you to do the same."

So there was regret in Celine's past, truth to the rumors that sometimes arose. "I can't take the chance."

"And if you could have both?"

The question startled Lexa. "I can't serve warriors with Dejan's claim on me. I was lucky yesterday. A feral wolf could have killed me."

A wry smile twisted Celine's lips. "Odd, I seem to recall saying the exact same thing to you. I also remember telling you that you could talk to me. Perhaps if you had, you would have learned a great deal about the traditions of the Temple and how they change with each high priestess."

She hadn't clawed her way from nothing by being slow. "The high priestess can change her duties to suit her?"

"Administrating the Temple is a high priestess's job. Serving warriors..." A tiny shrug. "The priestess I replaced didn't find it a fitting use of her time. I had... personal reasons to make it part of my duty. Selfish reasons."

Shock and hope made it difficult to breathe, and Lexa had to swallow to speak past the lump in her throat. "If that's all it takes, anyone could do it. Why do you need me?"

"Because it's not about stupid little things like whether or not you go to bed with warriors. It's about being strong enough to face down the wildest man, or a king, or a high priestess..." Her eyes softened. "Or the man you love."

Lexa's gaze fell on the dressing table again -- and the silver robe draped there. "Will you help me, Celine? Teach me the administrative tasks, how to oversee things?"

"Six months. Three with you as my assistant, three with me as yours." Celine hesitated. "Dejan cannot become a trainer again. It would be within your right to make him one when you took over, but it would be reckless and dangerous."

"He may still wish to leave."

"I think that depends on if you ask him to stay."

If he remained, stripped of his position, the only thing holding him there would be her. "I need to speak to him before I decide."

Celine nodded and pushed off the desk. "Don't think for a moment this absolves you of what you did. I'm going to work you so hard you may wish you'd taken your chance to flee. But if you're willing..." She paused with a hand hovering over the door.

"I cut my heart out to serve Luna, and I did amazing things. I can only imagine what you might be able to do if your heart is whole."

When Celine had gone, Lexa stood and walked to her dressing table and stroked her fingers over the robe across the chair. The fabric was finer than silk, but she'd never wear it again if doing so meant losing Dejan.

She left the robe on the chair and went to dress.

\* \* \*

She checked his room last, and felt like an idiot when she found him sitting on the bed, staring blankly at the wall. He didn't even stir when she stepped through the open door, though his jaw tightened. "I've been fighting with myself for an hour. I should be gone already, but I can't make myself leave."

Lexa closed the door and crossed the room to sink to her knees at his feet. "What if you didn't have to?"

His gaze fell on her, fell on the plain clothing she'd donned, and his breath hissed out. "Tell me she didn't banish you too." He sounded stricken, lost. "By the Goddess, Lexa, I swear to you she promised you wouldn't be held responsible for my actions."

"Shh, no one's banished. Not me or you." She reached for his hand. "I'll leave with you, anyway. Tonight. I already told Celine I would, and she -- she gave me an option. A way for us to stay here *and* be together."

"I don't understand."

"She wants to train me as her replacement." Lexa climbed up to sit beside him on the bed. "It would be my job to run the Temple, I knew that. But I didn't know that each high priestess does that differently."

His eyebrows came together. "I thought -- well, no. I suppose Celine's been in charge longer than anyone else has been here, except maybe the servants. Priestesses never seem to stay for long before finding a warrior of their own."

"I assumed that Celine served warriors because it was tradition, but apparently not. And I -- I don't have to take on warriors personally to make certain they're healed,

Dejan." Lexa held her breath and silently willed him to understand what she was asking.

One large hand cupped her cheek and then slid into her hair. "You could be high priestess and have a mate?"

"As long as it doesn't conflict with the Temple's needs." She dared to let her hope show in her tremulous smile. "You couldn't be a trainer, that much wouldn't change. But you could be my consort, even my first guard."

His thumb swept her lips, the first hint of belief growing in him along with his own smile. "If it kept you safe and happy I'd scrub the floors and do the laundry."

"I'd rather you spent your time keeping your mate sane." She took his hand and pressed a kiss to his palm. "I meant what I said. I'd go with you and never look back."

"You'd look back, because you belong here. A man who loved you wouldn't take you away."

"A man who loved me wouldn't try to make me stay without him," she corrected.

"I won't." Dejan's fingers brushed her nape as he tilted her head back. "You stood up to the high priestess for me."

"I think that's exactly why Celine wanted me to stay, after all." Lexa leaned into his touch, giddy with relief. "Maybe it *does* mean I'm strong enough to do this."

"And maybe she wishes now that she'd made a different choice in her own life." His eyes turned serious. "The rumors are true, you know. Celine has been in love with the new King's cousin for thirty years."

The high priestess's regret and heartache had been plain. "She said something about how she had to cut out her heart to stay here at the Temple. It's... sad."

"It is," he agreed. "But her choices aren't yours. And I don't have the pride of royalty. I don't have any pride at all. I'd cut out my heart to give you what you want, but now I don't have to. We can have everything."

Sudden uncertainty intruded. "If I really can do it. I have six months to find out. If I'm not right for the position, we can still go."

Dejan kissed her, not the hot, desperate kiss of their frantic couplings, but a slow, deep kiss that rocked her to her core and left her clinging to him. "You'll be perfect. You'll be wonderful. And you'll be mine."

Only a few short days before, the knowledge had scared her. But that was before there had been a light at the end of the tunnel, a possible way for them to stay together without leaving their lives behind.

Now, for the first time, hearing the words brought a rush of joy. "I'll be yours," she agreed, and kissed him again.



## Epilogue

Lexa studied the tablet one last time before handing it off to her assistant. "Everything should be set for the banquet tonight. Tomorrow, I'll need to meet with Hana. She's ready for her white bands."

"Yes, my lady. And I believe you have a visitor awaiting you in the garden." A small smile curled her assistant's lips. "I'll be leaving for lunch now, if you don't need me?"

It had to be Dejan. "Take the afternoon off and rest up for the party. I'll see you there."

"Thank you." A short bow, and the young woman hurried from the room.

The wide door to the garden glided open under Lexa's hand, but she found Celine waiting for her, not Dejan. She'd never before seen the woman in anything but the expensive robes of her station, but Celine was dressed casually now. Not the rich dresses of the nobility or the finely cut fabrics of the upper class, but an unremarkable pair of linen pants and a plain shirt, with her long hair caught in a simple braid.

Lexa caught her hands and kissed her cheeks. "Don't tell me you're leaving before the banquet."

"I'm required elsewhere," Celine replied quietly. "The woman who took me in as a child has fallen ill. I meant to leave at the end of the week, but now... Well, I'm just glad I have the freedom to go."

The last five months had given Lexa the confidence to smile, albeit sadly, at Celine's words. "Things here will be fine. I hope your friend will be, as well."

"Thank you, Lexa." Celine's fingers tightened around hers. "I'm proud of you. You learned everything I had to teach, and taught me a lesson or two of my own."

Celine had been more than a mentor -- she'd been a friend. "I owe you so much. If you need anything, ever, Dejan and I are here for you."

"I know. I need to hurry, and I believe Dejan is waiting in the copse." Celine kissed her cheek again, then pulled back with a smile. "By your leave, high priestess?"

"Lexa," she said softly. "To you, Celine, I will always gladly be headstrong little Lexa."

"Yes, you will. Luna watch over you, child."

The door had barely slid shut behind Celine when Lexa heard soft footsteps behind her. "I helped her bring her things down to the transport already, but she wouldn't let me interrupt you."

Her heart jumped at the sound of Dejan's voice. "It wouldn't have mattered. The preparations are finished, and everything is ready for tonight."

Strong arms slid around her waist, and his lips found the spot behind her ear that always melted her insides. "I know. Are you nervous?"

She turned and flashed him a rueful smile. "I was, a month ago. Now I'm too busy to be nervous." And she loved it, every second.

"Good." His lips claimed hers, and she felt the scrape of his teeth before he pulled back. "Regardless, as the first guard, I respectfully suggest the high priestess consider returning to her quarters to rest up for the night ahead."

"Rest?" she teased, her hands wandering over his back -- and lower. "Is that what I'll be doing?"

He growled and nipped at her chin. "Is that what you *want* to be doing?"

Heat bloomed, and Lexa laughed. "Perhaps a relaxing bath?"

Dejan hooked his hands under her legs and dragged her up his body. "Whatever my lady wishes."

Her breath caught. "Your lady wishes to tell you how desperately she loves you."

"I don't think I'll ever grow tired of hearing that." His mouth found her jaw as he carried her across the garden, toward the entrance to their private rooms. "You gentled me with love."

"And I don't think I'll ever grow tired of hearing *that*."

"No?" A low chuckle. "I knew you were mine the first time you knelt at my feet. I didn't know you'd make me yours. Or how much I'd love you."

"And no wonder." She bit his neck gently. "Who would have thought a novice could tame the Temple's greatest trainer?"

"Anyone who'd ever met her."

"Flatterer." She reached back to open the door. "Just think, I was only going to avail myself of your considerable talents, and become the most skilled priestess I could be."

He grinned. "And how'd that work out for you, my ambitious little kitten?"

"Not so well. While your talents are considerable indeed, I find myself unaccountably distracted by your mind."

"Then maybe it worked out very well." He lowered her to the ground and spun her around to face the luscious, gorgeously appointed suite she'd inherited along with new robes and a new title. "How does it feel to have everything?"

She turned to face him, winding her arms around his neck. Everything, and all she could see was him. "It feels like home."

## **Moira Rogers**

How do you make a Moira Rogers? Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy. Toss in a dash of whimsy and a lot of caffeine, and enjoy with a side of chocolate by the light of the full moon.

By day, Bree and Donna are mild-mannered ladies who reside in the Deep South. At night, when their husbands and children are asleep, they combine forces to unleash the product of their fevered imaginations upon the page. To learn more about this romance writing, crime fighting duo, visit their webpage at [www.moirarogers.com](http://www.moirarogers.com). (Disclaimer: crime fighting abilities may appear only in the aforementioned fevered imaginations.)