The Red King Awake

by KL Morgan

Summary

"He's dreaming now," said Tweedledee: "and what do you think he's dreaming about?"
Alice said, "Nobody can guess that."
"Why, about you!" Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly.
"And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?"
"Where I am now, of course," said Alice.

Klark wakes up.

Notes

This story follows two timelines:

1. Two years before the events of "The White Queen Running."
2. The events immediately after.
“It’s impressive when you think about it.” Klark cranes her head to look past where the cave empties out into sheer cliff face, the startling drop below. “Any of you could have slipped and fallen on the way up. But everyone made it in one piece. Good job.”

She turns back to the three children who are huddled together in the back of the cave, wary and wide-eyed. It’s two older girls, and a boy sandwiched between them, partly out of consideration for his age and partly for the sake of the tattered nest he’s cradling in his lap. The whitebird chicks inside it are still making soft peep-peep noises.

“You made it up okay,” one of the girls says.

“I’m really tough,” Klark says. “I’m bigger, too. So it’s not as impressive.”

“I don’t think our families will see it that way,” the other girl says. “I think they’re going to be really angry, and they’re going to yell a lot.”

Klark shrugs. It was worth a try. “You can’t stay up here forever.”

“But maybe if we stay a little longer,” the first girl says, sounding hopeful, “they’ll get tired of being angry by the time we go down.”

“... yeah, I’m pretty sure it doesn’t work like that.”

“Are you the new queen?” the boy pipes up suddenly. It’s the first time he’s spoken since Klark heaved herself up and into the shallow cave. He’s barely blinked since then, staring at her, and Klark tries to look unintimidating when she smiles back.

“Not yet. I will be after the coronation ceremony.”
“You’re why the Commander came,” terribly solemn.

“I guess so,” Klark says slowly. “But you don’t have to be scared of her. I know she brought a lot of warriors, but she isn’t here to fight us. Not anymore.”

“What does she want?” one of the girls asks in a whisper, and the three children draw together even tighter.

“To be friends,” Klark says, trying to soothe. “To help protect us, and ask us to protect other clans, too. Everything is going to be different from now on, I promise. I know you’ve heard awful stories about her, but she’s not that bad. She’s just a girl. Like me.”

And she’s lying through her teeth, but what is she supposed to say? That Genai’s presence at her back was the only thing keeping her calm at the welcoming ceremony? That watching the boats emerge from the soft fog -- there’d been an agreement, via emissaries, that perhaps breaching the border was not the best start to relations between their clans, and so the Commander had landed on the far shores -- with the ramrod straight figure standing at the helm had made Klark’s head pound with a rage she’d been afraid everyone could hear?

Abi couldn’t have warned her about the Coalition, it hadn’t even existed when she left the Ice Court. Still, Klark is a little resentful she had to discover all on her own that deposing Nia would only be the first step in a much more complicated and unfortunately diplomatic process to peace. She’d expected to rule. It was galling to discover not even the throne of the Ice Nation allowed for unchecked power. Not anymore.

Of course, Klark could always decide they wouldn’t join the new Coalition. The Commander hadn’t questioned it, but she also had to know the option was open until the moment Klark was formally crowned and then swore her fealty -- or not. She had to know that, she was just ignoring it. An extended bluff as they both played at perfect accord and harmony in the meantime.

Maybe harmony wasn’t the right word. When Klark thinks of the impassive expression the Commander wore, the fog licking at the edges of her fur-lined coat as she stepped onto shore, harmony doesn’t spring to mind. The coolness of the Commander’s tone, the extra force of her squeeze as Klark gripped her forearm in greeting, didn’t encourage that impression either.

“She’s not a girl, she’s the Commander,” one of the children protests. The other two glare like Klark tried to play a trick on them.
“Alright, that’s true.” She settles so that she’s up on her knees, sitting on her heels with her hands on her thighs. “But I am Queen. Or I will be,” as the little boy opens his mouth. “And, and – you heard about me.” Genai would laugh until she was sick to see Klark play on this, especially as she’s spent the past few weeks trying to diffuse the rampant superstition and fear her appearance inspired, but she won’t hesitate now. Not if there’s an actual use for it. “I’m the girl who walked out of the storm. The barrens couldn’t kill me. Nia couldn’t kill me. I killed her. With this hand,” she says when struck with inspiration, and leans forward to hold it in front of them.

The children lean in to peer at it. Her left hand is covered in all kinds of scars, since Abi never pretended she didn’t know which was Klark’s dominant in their sparring sessions. Klark used to complain that no one else would guess it, not if she kept her weapon in her right most of the time. “Not out here,” Abi had said. “But once you’re queen, word will spread. That’s when the worst fights will occur, and I want you to be prepared.”

Her mother had never doubted Klark would become queen. Klark never knew if she loved Abi for that, or hated her. Sometimes it changed from day to day.

“This is the hand that protects you, now,” she tells the three children. “Against raiders from other clans. Against rogue warriors of this Nation. Even against the Commander herself, if she tries to hurt you.”

“Queen Nia wasn’t like that,” one of the girls says softly.

“Nia was a bad queen.” The other little girl’s eyes are shining. “Everybody says so. Things are different now.”

Klark smiles at her, and it’s as if her heart, which has felt for the past weeks as though it’s been frozen with grief, or maybe that damn blizzard, thaws a little. This is why she’s here. This is why she’s still alive, even when Abi isn’t.

It helps to remember that.

“What about our parents?” the boy asks. “Will you protect us against them?”
Klark hesitates, drawing her hand back. “If they try to hurt you, yes.” She levels the three of them with a look. “But I think you know the difference between when adults are frightening, and when they’re frightened for you.” That’s a lesson she learned the first time she was attacked, alone on a hunt. She finished the warrior off easily -- she might have only been a child, but he was exhausted and unused to the barrens -- and returned home to Abi with only a small cut on her hand, a bruise spreading under her chin. Abi had panicked as if she’d come home beaten within an inch of her life, thin-lipped and anxious as she checked Klark’s injuries again and again, quizzed her on the details of the attack. Eventually Abi decided it was happenstance enough, and far enough away from the caves where they were hidden, that they shouldn’t move just yet. But Klark woke up in the middle of the night for the next handful of days to find her mother awake and keeping watch, her fear almost as tangible as the frozen winds that howled across the wastelands that kept them safe.

That was when Klark realized the endless drills and sparring, the constant lectures on clan histories and politics -- it was all for Klark. Maybe she mostly hated it, and maybe Abi even knew that, but it didn’t matter. Abi thought it would one day keep Klark alive.

Klark just wishes that had made the years that followed any easier.

“So,” she tells the children, stern, “if you come to me and ask for my protection, I will give it.” She meets each of their eyes in turn before adding: “But I am trusting you not to abuse my service to you, as my people. And a true warrior knows to take responsibility for their actions.”

That’s what gets through to them in the end, and she convinces them to let her carry them all back down the cliff face. There’s no way she’s letting them climb down, of course, but even all three combined (she puts each girl on one hip and the boy at her front, uses her slingshot as a makeshift sling) isn’t a weight that troubles her. She’s going _down_, after all. And they’re still light compared to the meat she’d carry back to her mother after a successful hunt. She couldn’t hunt too close to their caves or risk drawing enemies back to them. Over the distance the meat would freeze, until it felt like she was carrying a solid block of ice and bone together over endless stretches of wasteland, the wind howling like an animal itself. Compared to that, scaling down a cliff face with three underfed children, their arms wrapped around her neck, is easy.

Except she never came back to the caves to find Genai looking at her the way she is once Klark puts both feet, and then the children, back on solid ground.

“Two hours,” the older woman says. Her arms are folded tightly. “You were up there for two hours.”

“They took some convincing.” She throws a look over her shoulder to see the families rushing to pick up each of the three children, scolding and hugging them by turns. The kids appear resigned.
“You had an audience scheduled,” Genai reminds her through gritted teeth. “She waited for you. For two hours.”

... oh. Oh.

There’s no need to specify who “she” is; Genai has yet to refer to the Commander by her title since she stepped onto Ice Nation land. Genai can barely look at her without a faint scowl on her face, either. Klark is surprised -- Genai had been full of the Commander’s praises before her arrival, talking at length about the workings of the Coalition. She made no secret that she considered joining it to be in their clan’s best interests, though of course she wouldn’t gainsay whatever decision her would-be Queen eventually made. But Genai made no bones about the Commander’s tactical intelligence, her prowess as a fighter, and Klark might find herself up against these things if she said "no."

Something has changed in the past few days. Klark’s not sure what caused it, but Genai has become... wary of the Commander. She watches the Woods Clan leader from the corner of her eye, and there’s the faintest curl to her lip whenever the Commander addresses Klark. Klark has pestered her about it, demanded to know what she’s so bothered by, but Genai has been atypically reticent with her opinions. Klark has washed her hands of it: she has enough to worry about elsewhere, what with all the preparations and meetings leading up to the coronation, and it’s not like she’s spends much time with the Commander anyway. She doesn’t think they’ve seen each other, except in passing. Not since the welcome feast.

That was the point of the audience, now that she thinks of it. The Commander requested some time out of Klark’s packed schedule to discuss... well, probably the Ice Nation’s entry into the Coalition. And Klark has just blown it off.

Whoops.

“We’ll reschedule,” she tells Genai with a shrug. “I wasn’t going to leave them up there. Not even for the Commander.”

“You could have sent someone else,” Genai says with exaggerated patience, as if speaking to a small child. “You have your own personal guard to do things like this, now. When will you remember to act like a queen?”

Klark opens her mouth to say something like whose example do I follow, Nia’s? or however I act is
how a queen acts, that’s how it works when she sees the little boy pointing in her direction, and on
the edge of tears. “Hold on,” she tells Genai, jogging across to him and his parents. “What’s wrong?”

“He says you promised to bring down the birds as well,” one of the warriors tells her reluctantly. She
has her hand on the boy’s back, protective, as if she’s afraid Klark will become angry. Klark doesn’t
know her name, or the name of the other woman, who’s holding the boy in her arms. They both bear
Nia’s scars on their faces.

“I said...” She promised the birds would be safe, and she knew they would be, now that the children
had rescued the nest from its too-precarious perch on an outcropping and placed it in the cave.
Apparently the little boy thought that meant safe with them, though. She takes another look at his
anguished expression, the guarded looks on his parents’ faces, and sighs. “I’ll be right back.”

She practically throws herself up the cliff face, climbing quicker than she has in her life to keep
Genai from catching her and dragging her back down. She’s halfway up before her bodyguard
notices what she’s doing and starts to yell, but the winds break up Genai’s voice and fling the pieces
around so that Klark only hears “please, your Maj-” and “still waiting.” She ignores it all,
concentrates on clinging to the rough rock with her toes and fingertips, the way the winds whip at
her cheeks with a cold so fierce it almost burns.

Klark is back up in the cave in minutes. It’s getting back down, she realizes, which is going to be
difficult. The three children were heavy but they clung to her, leaving her arms and legs free. The
nest of chicks -- who are now huddled together in a frightened, feathery lump -- needs to be cradled
in one arm and held in the shelter of her body so the wind can’t snatch them away. She can manage
it, though. She thinks she can manage it.

She almost manages it. She’s firm on that whenever Genai tries to throw it in her face, afterward.
Genai is just as firm that it doesn’t count when your climbing hand slips and you’re still two lengths
of your own body off the ground.

When Klark slips she feels it all along her side, and her first thought is that Genai will be livid. Biting
back against the urge to cry out in pain is second nature at this point; she always had to stay secret,
stay silent, out in the barrens. That doesn’t stop her knees from buckling, and then the side of her
boot is scraping against the rock without purchase, and then she’s falling.

Someone shouts “catch her” but Klark doesn’t recognize the voice. She feels that too-familiar drop
in her stomach as she goes, wonders how many bones she’ll break this time. Wonders who will set
them now that her mother is dead.
She knows better than to brace herself for a hard landing, but she’s surprised when it’s a soft one. Or, softer than expected -- she collides into a body, and someone’s arms go around her with an *oomph*. For a split second Klark thinks they’ll stay like that, she’s caught, but then the person holding her tips backwards and they both fall awkwardly together into the snow.

Klark’s mind goes blank for several moments after that, overwhelmed with the relief of *still alive* and *not hurting* (much). Her head snaps up when she remembers the whitechicks’ nest -- but she lets out a sigh when she sees they’re fine. The nest smashed on the way down but the drop didn’t hurt the chicks themselves, and the three kids are now cupping one each in their hands, all smiles.

There’s a hard expulsion of breath right by her ear, and Klark finally turns to her rescuer.

It’s the Commander.

Klark scrambles back onto her hands and knees, heedless of the pain in her side. At least she’s mindful enough about it that she doesn’t knee anything soft, or put her hands anywhere they shouldn’t be. She’s pretty sure.

“Sorry,” she gasps. No, but wait. “You didn’t have to -- I would have been fine. I’m fine.”

The Commander remains on her back for a long moment, and Klark gets the impression she’s cataloguing the various aches and bruises she’s acquired. She sits up gingerly, resting back on her elbows. “You’re welcome.”

Annoyance warms all the parts of her that went cold when she felt herself fall. “I just told you --”

“I heard.” The Commander leverages herself to her feet, surprisingly limber for someone who was just fallen on. Klark herself doesn’t quite feel up to the task, but better than than remaining on her knees in front of --

“Oof.” It’s a small sound, purely unconscious, and so soft Klark doubts she would hear it if she wasn’t pressed up against the Commander where the other girl caught her before Klark toppled over. They’re almost the same height, and Klark is struck with the thought that it would be so very easy, so very comfortable, to put her forehead on the Commander’s shoulder and let her weight be carried by someone else.
“Your Majesty?”

Klark blinks the spots out of her vision. The Commander’s hands are on either side of her face, holding her head up. She has no idea when that happened.

The Commander frowns at her. She does that a lot, if Klark is being honest -- her face, around Klark, seems locked into some degree of displeasure. It’s infuriating. She’s not that much older, so Klark doesn’t understand where she gets off acting so... Acting like she’s in a position to approve or disapprove.

Or maybe she’s like this with everyone. Supposedly she has a lover back home, amid fabled green lands that hardly ever see snow. (Genai didn’t tell her that. She probably wouldn’t be as adamant that Klark eat every few days with the younger warriors without supervision, if she knew what kind of gossip they talked, though.) Maybe the Commander even scowls when she kisses.

When Klark’s eyes focus again the Commander is searching her face, eyes darting. “Are you hurt anywhere in particular?” she asks, quiet and intense. “Your color is bad. No, hold still,” although Klark had no intention of moving. The Commander holds her steady with one and and pats her down with light, quick touches with the other. Klark is about to summon up all the imperiousness she’s learned in the last weeks to demand to know what she is doing when something gets touched flares up hot and bright with pain, and Klark hisses.

The Commander draws her hand back. The tips of her fingers are speckled with red.

Klark reaches for the edge of her quilted overshirt and pulls it up. She’s wearing several layers of soft shirts underneath, but the drag against the rock face has caused them to tear and fray, revealing a bloody scrape that covers half her ribs.

The Commander’s eyes go wide.

Klark lets loose a long, heartfelt groan. The Commander’s grip on her arm tightens.

“Genai’s going to throw a fit,” Klark whines.

The Commander’s shoulders relax even as she scowls. “You took a stupid risk. You have no right to put yourself in that kind of danger. Not now.”
Klark knows that. She knows that, she didn’t spend her life dodging Nia’s agents without learning the value of playing it safe. She can’t name a successor until she’s Queen; the entire Ice Nation is balanced on the knife’s edge between rule and unrest until she’s crowned.

She also knows what it’s like to believe there is someone in the world who carries its weight, who keeps the ground steady beneath your feet. What it’s like to realize that person is actually just as fallible, as frail, as you are.

That little boy can’t be more than six. Klark will fall off another cliff face or two if it means he gets to keep his illusions of how much adults are capable of, at least for a while longer.

“I guess that’s where we’re different,” she says instead. “I’m not afraid of a little blood if it helps me achieve my ends. Maybe if you felt the same, I wouldn’t have had to take care of Nia for you.”

Maybe Abi would be alive.

The Commander’s eyes narrow, her mouth thinning at the unsubtle challenge. She yanks Klark by the elbow and marches her back to her bodyguard. Klark is not about to be manhandled -- not by anyone who isn’t Genai, anyway -- and she’s about to give the Commander a piece of her mind. Soon as things stop spinning.

They reach the others before that happens, and the Commander practically shoves Klark into Genai’s arms. “She needs a healer,” she says, bordering on a snarl. “Our meeting can wait for another time.”

“Thank you, Commander. Your patience is appre--”

The Commander jerks her chin up and Genai stops mid-word. Klark has to learn that trick. Yesterday.

“Just see that’s she’s tended to. And soon, before she tries to provoke any other clan leaders.” The Commander stalks off in the opposite direction.

Klark’s wobbling a little bit on her feet, so when Genai looks at her it feels as if she’s doing it from a great height. “Do you have a death wish?” the older woman demands. “Is that our problem? Without
the threat of execution hanging over your head do you feel the need to fall off cliffs, or taunt one of the greatest warriors alive? Are you bored?"

“No,” Klark says sulkily. Then, a little smaller: “I really do need a healer.”

Genai sighs long and loud. Then she slings Klark’s arm around her shoulder, injured side facing outward, and grabs her around the waist until she’s half-carrying her Queen’s weight. Walking like this back to the long lodges means Klark barely even stumbles.

“I’m sorry,” Klark says halfway there.

“It’s a small thing in the end. Patching you up will do fine for the ritual challenges tomorrow. And you made the children happy.”

“No, I meant... I’m not getting along with her. I know it’s important to try. I’ll try harder.”

Genai doesn’t have to ask her to clarify. “I know you will do what is best for all of us in the end.”

Ouch. “I will. I just -- I wish I liked her better.”

A few minutes later Genai sighs again. “Perhaps it’s better this way. Partnerships of this importance shouldn’t be clouded with... emotions.”

“Maybe.” But Klark can’t help swallowing back a little bit of bitter resentment at the fact that the only other person she knows who is close in age and position is so... cold. So clearly unimpressed by everything Klark is.

Not that Klark cares what she thinks.

Still, there are a few days left to the coronation ceremonies before she’s officially crowned. She makes up her mind there and then: before the Commander leaves for her homeland, Klark is going to make the other girl take her seriously.
Whether Klark joins this Coalition or not, she’s going to give Lexa of the Woods Clan a reason to remember her.

It’s an old ritual, an extension of the one that allowed Klark to challenge and kill Nia -- Queen’s Combat. Only now she’s the one defending the throne of the Ice Nation.

Of course there are no serious challengers. Participants were required to declare their intentions last night at yet another welcome feast, this time for the leader of the Shadow Valley Clan. (Klark is actually beginning to tire of the rich foods and elaborate dishes they serve at those feasts, and she never thought that would happen after so many years of the same kinds of game and vegetation available to the barrens.) Today Klark will only fight a handful of warriors, mostly the old guard who remember a time before Nia. They want to show their approval of their new queen by losing to her with a measure of grace. She and Genai have discussed at length that if there is anyone with actual ambition -- anyone who would dare -- to take her crown, they’ll attempt to advance by subtler means. Nia reigned through fear and intimidation, and those who learned from her aren’t the type to relish open combat.

Either way, Klark isn’t worried.

So she can’t help taunting the former prince as the warriors mark the circle of combat, breaking up the frozen ground with their belt knives: “Are you sure you don’t want to try and salvage your family’s honor, Roan? I could consider a late challenge. For your sake.”

It is her prerogative. She’s no longer obligated to accept any challenges after the night before combat, but that doesn’t mean she’s required to refuse them. It’s her little bit of salt to -- well, not so much rub as grind into Roan’s wounds, and from the flicker in his eyes he both knows and feels it.

Not that you could tell from his response. “Our new queen is magnanimous beyond belief,” he says smoothly, with just that touch of dryness to his tone. “But having seen her fight, I already know I am beaten. If you will excuse me,” and he sketches a bow before striding off.

Right. Klark keeps forgetting he was skulking in a corner when she slid her knife between his mother’s ribs. Well, maybe someday she’ll have the chance to do the same to him.
“I thought we talked about antagonizing him,” Genai says, at her shoulder.

“You talked. I listened. I didn’t make any promises.”

Genai sighs, pulling her heavy cloak tighter around her. It’s a bright, sunny day, but the wind puts the chill back into the air. “Don’t you think that problem requires a -- a softer touch, going forward? You did kill his only family.”

Sometimes she wakes up in the middle of the night from a dream of Abi stumbling back into their caves, knifed by one of Nia’s warriors. She wouldn’t stop talking, giving Klark last minute advice and instructions -- “I finished him but I didn’t have the strength to bury the body, you have at least two days before his companions find these caves but not more than four, there’s a storm coming, you need to find a new hiding place” -- while Klark searched for the wound. She’d known it was fatal even before she found it, deep and sucking just below Abi’s lungs, because she could see flashes of the blood on her mother’s teeth.

“His family started it,” she tells Genai. She shakes her head to preclude any response from her bodyguard and changes the subject: “Will you hold onto my skinning knife for me?”

Genai’s mouth snaps shut. “You’re only fighting with the one knife?”

“Do you think I need both?”

Genai, who was also there when she killed Nia, sighs again. She slips Klark’s skinning knife into her own belt.

The combat ends up being a little difficult. Just maybe not for the same reasons they’d be difficult for other people. Klark takes care to read the skill and speed of her opponents before matching it, doesn’t let each encounter last too long. She has to gauge when and where to take a hit, allowing her opponent their due, but not so hard or often as to affect her in later fights. She’s relieved when her final opponent concedes. Diplomacy, she reflects ruefully as she accepts another bow of concession, is a lot more difficult than the duel itself.

“Good work,” Genai murmurs as Klark walks back to her, out of the circle. She hands her a canteen of water and Klark drinks. Even with her arms stripped to the shoulders to allow for better movement, she worked up a sweat.
“Very good work,” another voice says, standing so close by Klark almost startles. “Or, a very good performance.”

Klark didn’t see the Commander among the spectators before the combat started. Maybe it was foolish of her to then assume the other girl wouldn’t appear at all -- this is Ice Nation business, though. Not the Coalition’s, not the Woods Clan’s. So she doesn’t tamper down the spark of annoyance at the Commander’s tone as she bites out: “If you want to say something, just say it.”

The Commander raises an eyebrow. “I hope your opponents enjoyed the dramatics as much as I did.”

Klark’s pretty sure they did. They all knew what she was doing; they might not be her match, but that didn’t mean they weren’t all good fighters who recognized a better one. The older warriors had almost been smiling when they bowed their defeat, and that last one -- a younger girl, closer to Klark’s age... Echo, that was her name -- had outright winked. They *like* that Klark is this good, and they also like that she sees the need for the... the observation of challenge. The ritual of it all. It’s important to have due process after decades of tyranny.

But again, this is Ice Nation business. Klark doesn’t expect an outsider to understand.

“You’re one to talk,” she says. “I heard you give speeches before riding into battle.”

The Commander’s eyes widen, the only sign Klark scored a hit before she says: “Didn’t you break Nia’s bone crown over your knee in front of the whole camp?”

Klark whirls on her, nearly dropping the canteen. “Not all of us have ballads already sung about our victories in love *and* war.”

The Commander stiffens. “I have never lied about who I am, or who I -- or what I feel. What I am capable of.”

“So what are you saying?” Klark challenges, forcing down the urge to step right up to her face.

“You’ve done the pageantry, and well. Now show them the truth. Fight someone who can match
Klark nearly rolls her eyes, contains herself at the last second. “The point of combat is to decide who rules the Ice Nation, you know.”

“So make it an informal fight. But they deserve to know exactly how good you are. Who you are.”

“There isn’t a warrior among my people who can match me,” Klark answers, throwing it in her face.

“No?”

*No, Klark doesn’t say, because none of them have eaten well for years, they were kept on the edge of starvation to sharpen their desperation and fervor. Not even: no, because if anyone became too good, Nia would arrange for them to die in a battle rather than risk a challenge. Definitely not: no, because although I have twice as many as your clan in numbers, my warriors have half the cohesion and training. If that.*

She’s had a lot of long nights discussing these things with Genai.

But that’s more of Ice Nation’s business and no one else’s. So she shakes her head.

The Commander hesitates. Her lips part, and Klark thinks she sees a flicker of tongue to wet them before she says: “So fight me.”

Genai has been standing just behind Klark, unobtrusive, this whole time. Klark can’t see her, but she can feel her bodyguard’s head snap up at this.

“You?” Klark flounders. If this is some underhanded attempt to sneak her throne out from under her, if this arrogant southerner thinks she can --

“Informal combat, as promised. Only as an exhibition of your capabilities.” Something in the other girl’s eyes, a hint of something at odds with her near-expressionless mask. “Nothing more.”
Klark considers it. “I’ve fought six opponents already, it’s my disadvantage.”

“Well, I haven’t warmed up. And,” the Commander turns her head to take in the impromptu arena, “I’m unfamiliar with the terrain and climate.”

“You think that makes it fair?”

“As fair as it can be.”

“Fine.” Klark gives her a tight-lipped smile. “Ready yourself. I’ll meet you in the circle.”

“This is a bad idea,” Genai says as the Commander walks away.

Klark, finishing off the water, stops mid-swallow. “You don’t think she’d --”

“No. She can’t take your throne, not while your entry to the Coalition is in debate, and not like this.” Not in front of so many witnesses, is what Genai means. That was another late-night discussion for the two of them, when Klark finally thought to ask why so many clan leaders were travelling all this way into the North to see her crowned, instead of sending representatives to freeze and give polite smiles in their place. Genai had explained the naked truth of all the posturing: the Ice Nation, even in decline, is the only one of eleven that might hold its own against the Woods Clan. And Nia’s reign, for all of its viciousness, had an unexpected benefit: because their former queen hadn’t wanted to give a rival leader any kind of power over her, the Ice Nation doesn’t depend on extensive trading and cooperative agreements. That means if Klark does reject the Coalition, the ten other clan leaders want to be on the scene. To see how the Commander deals with it, or to see if Klark is the one they will throw their support to, instead.

It’s not just about Ice Nation’s entry to the Coalition. If Klark refrains, it may dissolve the Coalition itself.

“You think she wants to make an example of me?” It doesn’t sound like anything Genai has told her about the Commander; a show of brute force, a bloody beating, in response to resistance sounds more like Nia, of all people. Not that Klark is worried it might happen. A grin pulls at the side of her mouth. “Good luck to her.”

“You shouldn’t underestimate --” Genai stops mid-scold to scowl. “But no, that’s not it, either.”
“Then what?” Klark watches the older woman chew at her lip, deep in thought. “Genai, if you think I should, I’ll call it off.”

Genai stews for a moment longer before shaking her head. “Be careful.”

“Of what?” she asks, truly curious.

But Genai only shakes her head again. “Just... be careful.” Her gaze darkens, and Klark follows her line of sight to where Lexa is with her own bodyguard, a bearded mountain of a man whose glare Klark has felt more than once since their arrival. Currently that glare is directed at the Commander as she tries a few turns with her sword, working out the flex of her wrist. He says something to her -- Klark can see his mouth move, although she’s too far to hear -- but the young woman raises a hand in dismissal. She stops for a moment with one hand going to her neck. Gustus opens his mouth again, but quickly shuts it as the Commander unfastens her heavy cloak and tosses it in his direction. Her turns are easier after that, more fluid, but her bodyguard’s face is a stormcloud.

Klark looks back to Genai. Genai’s eyebrows are drawn tight together, pinching the skin between. “This is a bad idea,” she mutters again.

Klark turns to go before Genai can see her roll her eyes.

The Commander stands waiting for her in the circle of combat, stance loose and ready. The wind picks up, ruffling the fur at the collar and cuffs of her outfit and bringing color to her cheeks.

“Do you need a moment?” she calls across the space when she sees Klark watching. It draws the attention of the spectators, most of them in the middle of leaving. A murmur picks up as they realize what’s about to happen, and they flow back in like the tide.

“Do you?” Klark throws back. It’s a weak reply, she knows it, but she feels the eyes on her and needs to show no fear. She takes up her space at the opposite point in the circle, her striking knife in her right hand.

“Begin,” Genai calls from outside the circle, and they’re fighting.
The Commander is good.

Klark expected that, but... she’s very good.

Abi taught Klark to handle a sword -- her sword -- but it never felt natural. Not like the knives. Abi gave them to her when she was eight, a birthday present: “These were your father’s.” Klark has worn them every minute of every day since. She brought down her first big game with them barely a year later, killed her first of Nia’s warriors a year after that. She has cut herself on them, more than once and sometimes badly, but they’ve never felt like anything less than an extension of herself.

She likes using them, in tandem or alone, in a fight. She likes the way they help her opponent to underestimate her -- she can always see it, the moment they take in her height and her weapon, the curl of their lip of the slight look of satisfaction on their face. She loves to watch it morph into shock, and then anger, and finally fear, as she shows them just how stupid they were to think that skill lies in having the bigger blade.

The Commander isn’t doing that.

She’s testing Klark. She started off strong, of course, but now she’s escalating, bit by bit. Moving a little faster. Throwing a bit more weight into her blows. Making more and more of an honest effort to get past Klark’s guard.

Klark matches her each time. It’s an interesting challenge, watching for the shift in the Commander’s gaze and the movements of her shoulders, figuring out when she’s about to go harder. Being ready, being there and waiting for her attacks half a breath before they happen.

It’s not like Abi’s training sessions where, once she was even better than her mother, Klark fought as much against whatever disadvantage Abi dreamed up (blindfold, one arm tied up, one arm and one leg tied up) as the woman herself. It’s even different from the previous contenders today, who had been borderline deferential in their fights. This is like a conversation. An interrogation, and an argument, and then a retreat.

It’s almost. Fun.

Apparently the Commander doesn’t feel the same way, because she stops -- pulling back and dropping her guard so abruptly Klark stumbles to correct her lunge and refrain from accidentally beheading the leader of the Coalition.
Klark settles back, weight on the balls of her feet in readiness. The Commander is taking no such precaution. She’s out of range, but she’s out of stance. And she’s frowning.

“You’re holding back,” she says.

“You’re holding back,” Klark blurts out. She didn’t think in those terms until just now, but -- yes. That’s happening.

The Commander’s frown deepens. “Fine,” she says, as if to herself. “Fine,” she says again, turning on her heel and stalking off to meet her bodyguard, who hovers at the edge of the combat circle. Somehow Klark knows her intentions even before seeing her gesture for the sword on his back, and Klark herself is halfway to Genai.

“Give me the skinning knife,” she says. She can hear how breathless she sounds. She feels it. She’s not sure why, the fight so far isn’t demanding.

Genai arms remain folded. “What did I tell you before? What did I say?”

“Oh, hush,” Klark snaps. She knows she’ll have to apologize later from the affronted look on the older woman’s face. But she can barely wait, she’s fumbling with excitement when she wrenches the second knife from her bodyguard’s grasp. Even in her impatience she’s almost too slow to put up her guard for the Commander, who throws herself across the intervening space with a roar.

There’s no more testing. Certainly no more of tentativeness.

It’s like fighting the storm itself. Klark still has nights where her dreams are filled with it. Her whole body remembers: the ache of its howling in her ears, the winds buffeting her on all sides. Fighting the Commander is like facing that same storm, now contained in -- or maybe surrounding -- the body of the other girl. Klark has fought opponents older, bigger, stronger. She’s fought to the death. But now, somehow, she’s struggling: caught on her back foot, raising her blade to defend. She pushes forward, striking when she can, first with concealed intent and then with growing recklessness, taking more risks each time.

At least Klark can hold her own. She’s used to fighting against a warrior with a sword, she knows how to work the weapon’s length into a disadvantage, cumbersome to wield at the necessary angle to strike at her. She can also use the sword’s weight against its wielder, directing its center of gravity
with one knife while the other seeks to do real damage.

The Commander sees her coming and twists away. Their shoulders slam together, arms outstretched as each endeavors to keep the other from bringing their weapon in close. They’re locked like that for a long moment, perfectly matched in the struggle.

The Commander huffs a breath. Klark can feel the warmth of it along her cheek -- they’re that close.

Klark risks the splintering of her focus, brings her eyes up to the Commander’s face. The other girl meets them, and there’s a look there that is --

Klark becomes aware the warriors surrounding them are cheering, full-throated whoops and yells of approval, their excitement echoing against the empty sky. Klark wonders when they last saw a fight like this -- when was the last time two leaders of their clans met like this on the field and neither one was doomed for it.

Klark grins. The Commander doesn’t return it, but the corner of her mouth twitches a second before they break apart.

And with that, it’s a game.

All the weight lifts, her unnamed anxieties flung out into the blue horizon. She has a sense of her screaming muscles, the cold beginning to enter her bones, but it’s burned away by the hot excitement in meeting each of the Commander’s blows. They circle each other like twin stars, coming together and then apart, and it’s nothing like fighting Abi. It’s nothing like fighting for her life: against warriors twice her size sent to kill her, against Nia. Their differences make Klark and the Commander almost perfectly matched. What the Commander has in height and reach, Klark makes up in muscle. Where Klark looks to overwhelm her with the solid strength of each strike, their sheer quickness, the Commander eels out of her disadvantage with a cleverness Klark has never seen, an appraisal and calculation of Klark’s style which keeps her just out of reach.

And from watching her, Klark is learning. She can begin to see how the Commander does it, and tries it for herself, tries to think of the Commander not only as an opponent but a person with likes, and dislikes, a mindset Klark can just begin to grasp --

The next thing she knows she’s flat on her back on the hard ground, the sky stretching into infinity above her. She still has a knife in her right hand but her left is numb to the wrist, and as she heaves
herself up and onto her elbows, she sees the Commander retiring one sword into a back sheath and using her free hand to pick up the knife she knocked away from Klark. When she sees Klark looking she stills, every line of her body tense as she readies herself for continuing battle.

Klark throws her head back to laugh.

She feels... good. She’s sore and winded and a little bit sour at being beaten in front of everyone, but... the way her heart is beating. She feels good. Maybe better than she ever has.

She’s alive. Others are not, but she is, and for the first time in a long time, she feels it.

When Klark catches her breath the Commander is standing over her, her stance relaxed and her guard completely down. “Do you concede?” she asks. She’s fighting to keep that same corner of her mouth from lifting.

“I suppose.” Klark crosses her legs at the ankle. The gathered crowd will stay until the two of them leave, not wanting to miss a second of possible excitement, and she feels like making them wait. “I want a rematch. Not now, but,” she winces as a muscle in her lower back decides to complain, “maybe in a few years.”

“Maybe.” It doesn’t sound like empty words.

Klark takes a better look at the Commander. Her nose and cheeks are turning red, and the breeze has loosened pieces of her hair from meticulous braids. She doesn’t seem triumphant or overbearing where she continues to stand over Klark.

“It was an honor to defeat you, your Majesty,” she says. Her eyes are shining.

“You can call me by my name if you want.”

Klark hadn’t planned to make the offer. It feels natural in... whatever this is, this feeling, this moment.

The Commander’s eyes widen, and then she looks off into the distance. She’s running her thumb
“Thank you, but -- I can’t offer the same,” she says finally. She doesn’t look back at Klark, keeping her head high.

“Why not?”

“Because there are some clan leaders whose tongues I’d rather remove than have address me with such familiarity,” Lexa returns. “And I can’t... show favoritism.” Klark watches her profile as she swallows, and adds, so softly it’s as if she’s not sure she wants to be heard: “Not in public.”

Klark hauls herself to her feet. “What if I promise to only use it when it’s just us?”

Finally, Lexa looks at her, eyes searching. “You don’t seem like someone comfortable with compromise.”

“It depends on who I’m compromising for. We’ll observe all the niceties in public, but if you’re going to make a habit of putting me on my back in front of my people, I get to call you Lexa in private.” Klark reaches out, as if asking for her knife back. “Deal?”

Lexa passes it back to her, and for a moment her fingers circle Klark’s, press them in a brief squeeze. “Deal.”

“She beat me,” Klark says as she walks back to Genai, waiting for the I warned you. Except:

“There was no shame in it,” Genai says. She still doesn’t look happy, but there’s a relaxation of the grooves around her mouth and the fine lines by her eyes that Klark has come to know means Genai is proud of her. “Very few can hold their own against a nightblood.”

Klark has no idea what that means, actually, but she’s too tired to ask Genai to explain. “She said I could call her Lexa,” she blurts out, still not in perfect control of herself after the high of combat, the
rush of emotion when Lexa met her gaze and said exactly that.

If she expected Genai to be even prouder at this, she’s disappointed: the light in the older woman’s face dims. Slowly, as if with reluctance, Genai turns her head to look at the Commander, across the arena.

The other girl is getting what might be a tongue-lashing from her own bodyguard, given the expression on the man’s face. Lexa nods every now and then, or makes a calm reply to the inaudible torrent of his words. But her attention is on Klark -- she’d been looking over at Klark, it seems, and now their eyes meet. At this Lexa’s face brightens, and her features relax into the smallest of smiles.

“No,” Genai mutters. “No one here can say you didn’t show yourself to best advantage.”

She takes Klark’s arm and marches her off before Klark has time to wonder why she sounds so unhappy about it.

“No scratch,” comes the order from across the fire.

Klark seethes, settling deeper into her fur-lined coat. She hadn’t even moved yet, she’d only thought about maybe turning so that the light of the fire fell on the other side of her face, maybe rubbing her healing tattoo against the rough surface of the log at her back... “It itches.”

“And if you scratch, it will heal unevenly.” The Commander is absorbed in minor maintenance to her sword. “Then your people will know their new queen cannot withstand the slightest discomfort.”

Klark lets her head fall back against the log with a muffled thud. She’s right, of course. Not about slightest discomfort -- Klark lived sixteen years of her life in the barrens and she’s tempted to remind this soft southerner what discomfort really means -- but she’ll look ridiculous, outlawing scarification only to mess up her own face.

The tattooing had taken up most of the morning. It was fine throughout the day when the chill in the
air kept her skin numb, but the warmth of the fire has an unexpected drawback. It feels like bugs crawling just beneath her skin. She squeezes her eyes shut, but can’t help a small whimper.

The Commander sighs. “Try patting your palm against it. Gently.”

Klark does so, careful to use the leather section of her gloves. The skin protests at any added sensation and she winces at the sting, but it helps.

“Thank you,” she says after relief sets in.

“I remember my first tattoo,” the Commander says after, if it were half a second longer and coming from anyone else, what Klark might mistake for a hesitation. “I was prepared for pain. It was what came after that surprised me.”

Abi had always said that healing pain was the worst kind. Klark squeezes her eyes shut and pats at her tattoo again so that the grimace can be mistaken for itch. “How did you earn yours?”

Klark knows they’re not here to trade these stories. She can’t sleep, what with her face, and the Commander spotted her and Genai (who now sits a polite distance off) at the fire long after everyone else has gone to bed. She’s here to press the Coalition without an audience.

But they’re both pretending. It’s easier after their fight cleared the air. Klark, anyway, can look across the fire and see a person, not a potential enemy.

Well, not just that.

“The last Commander lived longer than anyone expected. He decided the nightbloods ought to be given out as Seconds, like any other Woods Clan warrior, instead of simply waiting for the conclave.” The Commander’s tone is empty when she says this. It’s impossible to tell her opinion of this decision, whether she was glad for it or not.

Oh, so that’s what Woods Clan calls their contenders for the throne: nightbloods. Quite a few clans eschew inherited power, and of course all of them have rituals and challenges that can supercede it. She wonders what kind of questions and interrogation Lexa endured in this ”conclave,” to be picked from all the rest. “Commander Darg. My mother mentioned him.”
“Oh?” The current Commander doesn’t look up from the naked blade balanced on her knees. “What did she say?”

“That he only lived so long because he was in the pocket of half a dozen other clan leaders. Including Nia.”

“Well,” lightly, “historically, that has yielded the best results.”

Klark’s cheek itches, and she pats it again. “How did he die?”

“Asleep in bed. We think it was poison. The conclave was called, and I ascended. But not before I earned this,” and she places one finger across her bicep, where Klark imagines a design beneath the thick layers of protective clothing, “in a skirmish with Broadleaf. It wasn’t my first battle, or my first kill, but afterward my First decided I had distinguished myself enough to take a mark. She allowed for one more before my Ascension Day, where --”

“How old were you?”

The Commander pauses. “Fourteen for the first mark, fifteen for the next.”

“No, I meant -- when you became Commander.”

The Commander straightens a little, reaches for her sword’s sheath. “Sixteen.”

“That’s my age.”

The blade finds its way home with a *snickt*. “Yes.”

And it had only taken her two years to make a clan a force to be feared again, to bring together almost all the rest in unity.
Klark’s not threatened. She’ll do even better. She’ll make it her mission to. “If one of the older clan leaders had come to you then, and asked you to submit your power to theirs, would you have done it?”

“I’m not that much older than you.”

“Okay. What if an eighteen-year-old Nia --”

“I am not Nia.”

“No, but you’re an enemy. Or you have been.” Klark lets her head roll to the side so that she’s looking straight at the Commander. “You’re the one who has hunted and captured my warriors for years. Don’t try to deny it.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“You’ve stolen from us. You’ve cut off our resources when it served you. Nia hurt us because she neglected her duty. Hurting us has been your duty.” The Commander’s expression grows stonier and stonier as Klark talks, but she doesn’t protest. “How,” Klark asks her, “can I pledge fealty to you now, and then promise my people they will be safe?”

The Commander leans her elbows onto her knees, her face turned toward the fire. The flames lend a soft glow to her features and the hollow of her neck. “You wish the conflict between our clans to continue? You think that will make your people happy, or prosperous?”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a child,” Klark snaps. “There are options besides my submission and open war.”

“But they will take time.” The Commander’s face is drawn up tight with the strain of keeping herself in check. Klark can almost see the way she wants to scowl or shout, the imminent explosion lurking within. “And the Coalition cannot waste a second of it. Not if we ever hope to win against the Mountain.”

“My clan does not fear the Mountain.”
The Commander stares at her.

“We’re out of their reach. Not even their attacks from the air truly threaten us. If the Mountain Men struggle with survival in your territory, there’s no hope for them in ours.” She pauses, but the Commander does not give a rebuttal. “We have nothing but time.”

“You hope that if you wait your problems will solve themselves. Either the united clans will succeed against the Mountain, or they will succeed in their efforts, leaving your people in peace.” The other girl gives a mirthless smile. “A cold strategy for a cold queen.”

“As opposed to making friends of old enemies just so you can ask them to fight your war?”

“It’s not --” The Commander breaks off, looking away. “The Mountain may not target your people or your territory,” she bites out, “but don’t mistake that for acceptance. Their hatred of us is not like the hatred between warriors or warring clans, or even the hatred you might feel for someone who personally owes you blood.” The shadows from the firelight are deeper at this angle, carving out the hollows of her cheeks and the shallow recesses of her skull. “We are animals to them. They drain us of blood to cure their own sickness, or they poison our minds so that we turn on our own without mercy. They cower in the dark surrounded by wonders, weapons of incredible power, and they wipe out whole villages should one of us try and use such wonders to defend ourselves. They --”

“I understand the dangers of the Mountain.”

“Then why don’t you understand that we must fight it?” The Commander shifts until she’s on the ground, at Klark’s level and on her knees, her tone close to pleading. “Why did you fight your way through the barrens, and then fight Nia, if all you want is to bury your head in the snow? Why become a queen in the first place?”

Klark looks at her. There’s an edge of desperation to the Commander where she kneels, hands clenched into fists, eyes intent on Klark’s face. She looks half-wild.

She’s also the closest to human than Klark has ever seen her, which is perhaps why she confesses: “I almost didn’t.”

It feels like something that should crack open the sky and bring down an angry spirit to punish her for doubting her destiny. Probably her mother’s.
But the Commander doesn’t flinch away. She holds Klark’s gaze, and although there’s no pity in them, no softness, there is something that says: *tell me.*

“When my mother died,” and here she hiccups a short breath, a spasm as she says it out loud for the first time: *my mother is dead.* The air is cold, even this close to the fire. “I wanted to die, too. I hated her, sometimes, for dragging us out into the middle of nothingness, for training me and teaching me every day, and saying it was all for me. Like it was my fault. She made all these choices that ruined our lives, and then she died. It felt like the end of the world. It *was,*” she corrects herself. “It was the end of the only world I knew.”

The Commander sits back on her heels. Her expression is still intent, still fixed on Klark, but there’s a measure of reflection to it.

“I didn’t go out into the storm because I thought it was my destiny,” Klark continues. “I just wanted it to be over. Either I would reach the Ice Court, or I wouldn’t. I think part of me hoped I wouldn’t. I know it did,” she finishes, very softly.

“But you survived. And when Nia tried to kill you, you fought back. You killed her.”

“I made a mess of that, too,” Klark admits. “It was an accident. Not killing her, but... I was taught to kill cleanly and quickly, but I was tired -- I was *exhausted* -- and I. Slipped. My knife went into her lung, not her heart.”

The Commander nods, once. Klark has no doubt she’s seen that kind of death, the ugliness of it. “You could have given her mercy.”

“No.” No killing blow for the woman who murdered Klark’s father, who tried to murder Klark as a baby, who had hunted Klark and her mother for years. “I wanted her to suffer. I wanted to watch.”

Like she had watched Abi suffer.

“Did that make you feel better?”

And that is what makes the tears come. Of all things. “No,” Klark gasps, tilting her head back against the log to look up at the night sky. The stars are glittering swathes pricked out of the darkness, and she decides the tears that slip out from her eyes and into her hair are nothing compared to the
vastness of the world surrounding them. “It didn’t make me feel better. I realized nothing would. I could only...”

“Yes?” A gentle prompt when her words trail off.

“What was lost was gone,” Klark chokes out. “All I could do was be the kind of queen who would build a new world. One where, maybe one day, no one would ever feel like this again.” She raises her head to look at the Commander. “That thought was -- it is -- the only thing that makes me feel better.”

The Commander’s head dips, and Klark can see her shoulders raise with a deep breath.

“But that’s exactly why I can’t fight your war.” She expects that to bring the Commander’s head up, to look at her again, but the other girl doesn’t twitch. Klark wonders why she feels disappointed not to have those eyes on her again. “Think of how many people suffered, and for how many years, because Nia put her own power or safety above her people’s welfare. Think of how she failed the realm because of the time and resources she poured into looking for me. I agree with you, the Mountain is dangerous,” she says, and still the Commander doesn’t look at her, “but the last thing my people need is to fight yet another war.”

“It isn’t just about the Mountain.”

Klark hesitates, then sits up straighter, certain she’s misheard. “What?”

“The Coalition.” Finally, finally, the Commander raises her head. She looks... for the first time Klark feels like she’s looking at a girl, just another girl like her, and not too far off in age. “The Mountain must be defeated. But the importance of the Coalition is far greater than the one goal.” She sighs. “My family was slaughtered by Ice Nation raiders. Did you know?”

Klark knows. It was a very important part of Genai’s debriefings, a looming shadow casting the doubt that the Commander could ever deal with their clan fairly, despite everything. She nods.

“I had as much reason to want Nia’s death as you did.”

Klark frowns. “Are you saying... I owe you a death, or..?”
“No.” Is that a hint of a smile on the Commander’s face before she shakes her head? “Nia was yours. I only mention it because -- because I know what it feels like to lose the only world you have ever known. To realize it must happen, day after day after day, for others elsewhere. The Mountain has taken so much from us. But we have also taken from each other. Our way of life has only one, inevitable end.”

“So it’s more than an alliance. It’s the beginning of an empire.” Realization comes slow but certain as Klark continues: “You want the Mountain, but you want us to come together and stay together -- all the clans united under your leadership.”

Lexa opens her mouth and then closes it, carefully. “It doesn’t have to be my leadership. Not indefinitely. But as the Coalition was the result of my actions, I don’t see why I shouldn’t retain it for now.” There’s a slightly arrogant lift to her chin as she says it, but she continues with: “Afterward, if the clans can be persuaded to remain in accord... that matters more than who shall reign over it.”

The Commander keeps her own eyes on the fire, as if hesitant to meet Klark’s after exposing some secret part of herself. Almost as if she’s... shy.

“This is very important to you,” Klark says, because she’s not good at holding back.

Lexa draws in a deep breath. “Do you see an alternative?” she asks, instead of addressing the question. “Between this, and mutual destruction?”

“There’s always a winner in a fight.”

“But will it be my clan?” Lexa counters. “Or yours? Perhaps some unknown power will rise up out of the desert and slaughter us all unawares.” She meets Klark’s eyes across the fire. “Are you willing to take that chance?”

Klark considers it.

It’s simple, really. Safety and prosperity now, but an uncertain future. Or a calculated gamble: betting everything at hand, knowing at least she will not be alone in taking the risk.
If she were a better queen, maybe, she would play it safer.

But that queen never would have walked into the storm.

“Alright. I’ll be a part of your Coalition.”

Klark expects a smile in return -- maybe even a grin. She hasn’t really seen Lexa smile yet, but she feels like she deserves to after this concession.

Lexa doesn’t smile.

The realization of the victory she’s just been given comes over her slowly. Klark can watch as it loosens the tenseness of her shoulders, unclenches the fists on her knees. It straightens her back and raises her head, and then flows over the features of her face like water: happiness, and yes, gratitude.

For a moment, Lexa shines.

Klark has to look away and into the fire, heart twisting in her chest.

She doesn’t know how to deal with... she’d rather be fighting, almost.

“In return,” keeping her tone light and easy, “I expect you to take the fall the next time we spar for an audience.”

Lexa is very warm in response. “I don’t believe a false victory would satisfy you for one moment.”

Klark scowls and pushes her chin deeper into her coat. Lexa’s right. Damn her. “Then I will carry the humiliation of defeat on both counts.”

“You fought well.”
“Not well enough. All that training, and for nothing.”

“Not for nothing. Your mother taught you to survive, no matter what. If it had been a fight to the death, you would have -- considering where you were when I disarmed you, you would have been able to get away. You only surrendered because it wasn’t a true fight.”

“Weren’t you taught the same?”

“No. I was taught to win.”

Klark would press her on the difference -- she’s not sure she understands what that changes -- but the grimness of the Commander’s tone keeps her silent.

“Your mother loved you very much,” the Commander offers after a minute. “I heard of you, you know. The prophecy of the girl who might defeat Nia. Years ago.”

“How?”

The Commander’s eyes fly to her face, and she looks almost... guilty. “A friend,” she says after a moment.

Klark settles back against her log. “I know you had spies in this territory. You don’t have to pretend otherwise.”

“Then I won’t.” The Commander also makes herself more comfortable on the ground. “Yes, I had spies. One of them liked to tell me about the girl who made it difficult for Nia to rest easy at night.”

Oh, but that’s a sweet thought. Klark doubts it’s true, but it eases something still hard and tight in her chest, to think she troubled Nia’s sleep.

But the Commander has Klark at a disadvantage, because Woods Clan leadership was not something Abi had felt important enough to dwell on.
No, wait, there was something Klark has heard stories about -- from Genai, though. The bodyguard stressed this issue before. Not how it could be dealt with, just that it needed to be.

“The Shadow-walker is yours, isn’t she?” Klark asks.

Klark has been caught between admiration and chagrin since hearing about the Shadow-walker: the agent who worked in the cover of darkness and moved with a swiftness that bordered on inhuman, leaving silent deaths and ruin in her wake. Her warriors showed Klark the arrows they’d cut from the throats of Nia’s soldiers, the singular fletchings that made sure everyone knew the identity of their killer even though no one had seen her face. They hadn’t even been able to assure Klark it was a woman, but Klark is fairly certain. The focus on not just thwarting Nia’s efforts but humiliating her in the process, the slow tightening of a noose over years and years of effort -- it all seems like a woman’s revenge, even if Klark doesn’t know for what.

But Nia is dead, and the Shadow-walker is Klark’s problem, now.

There isn’t as much as a flicker of reaction across Lexa’s face. “You seem sure of it.”

It’s a common suspicion. The Woods Clan is not their nearest neighbors, but they have the resources and the reasons to allow for that level of sabotage. And then there have been reports of Ice Nation refugees turning up in remote Woods Clan territory, after the petty warlords who turned their villages into all but slave camps were found strung up and sliced open.

Klark has known for certain since the moment Lexa stepped off the boat and clasped her forearm in greeting. Not many rulers are strong enough to hold that kind of power in their command and not abuse it. Fewer still command the loyalty that means such a fierce, skilled warrior -- with such an obvious sense of justice -- wouldn’t turn on them in the end. One look at the Commander, the way she held her head and met Klark’s eyes, and Klark knew who had the leash of the Shadow-walker.

But she doesn’t say any of that now. She’s pretty sure Lexa doesn’t need the boost to her ego -- and Klark is still not sure she would want to be the one to give it. So she only holds the other girl’s gaze.

“And if she is?” Lexa finally continues, after long minutes where the only sound is the snap of burning wood and pops of the flames consuming them. They both know the fact she speaks first is an acknowledgement.

“If I’m in your Coalition, then we are allies. Allies do not send spies into each other’s territory. Not
ones like the Shadow-walker, anyway.”

She thinks Lexa looks oddly... fond? No, it has to be the play of shadows over her face distorting her features. “You assume she works under my direction.”

“She doesn’t?”

“It’s more like my suggestion,” Lexa says drily. “Someone like that, they’d be very difficult to command.”

“Ask her, then. Not to come into my territory any more, not to continue her war against Nia with me.”

Again, Lexa’s expression is an odd one. Surely she expected something like this -- what reason does she have to look so... so apprehensive?

“Please,” Klark is compelled to ask.

Lexa nods.

That’s all she can ask for, in the end. Klark doesn’t push it, instead allowing the suddenly somber silence between them. She finds herself blinking in and out of sleep, lulled by the itch of her tattoo and Lexa’s steady presence.

Some time later Genai shakes her awake and reminds her of the perfectly nice, perfectly warm bed waiting for her in her tent. When Klark looks around the fire, Lexa has already left.
Oh, hey, remember this?

One story in five parts, updating Tuesdays and Thursdays.

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Chapter 2

The penultimate day of coronation festivities is one of the busiest. Klark spends it in multiple audiences, listening to petitioners both foreign and domestic. Other clans present their proposals for trade, knowledge exchange, entrepreneurial ventures. Nia’s warlords come to her, usually on their knees, begging for a chance to show they can contribute to the new regime. She lets most of them leave on their own two feet.

Most of them.

The other clan leaders will leave after tomorrow’s ceremony; it’s only polite after taking advantage of her generosity as host for the past few days. Lexa plans to stay longer, she informed Klark of that when she arrived -- which she did early. Rules are meant to be broken for the leader of the Coalition, it seems. Klark finds she doesn’t mind it as much as she once did.

It makes sense to prioritize all of her other duties, and she doesn’t see Lexa until that evening’s feast. It’s the biggest yet in terms of numbers. No one is refused a seat at this meal. They use Nia’s hall -- now Klark’s -- and fill it with long tables. When that doesn’t do the trick they string up tents outside, drag out metal braziers and light fires to keep everyone warm. Klark feels like she’s at the center of an ember, glowing and alive.

At one point Lexa stands. She doesn’t say anything -- she doesn’t have to -- but the action causes silence and attention to cascade through the hall until reaches Klark across the great room. She looks up to find Lexa’s eyes on her, the Commander’s cup raised in the air.

“Drink with me, your Majesty,” Lexa says, as if there weren’t so much space and people between them.

“To the future,” Lexa says. “One we will share as leaders united.”

There’s a breath before the impact of her words hit and ripple outward. Most seem relieved to hear the Coalition will have a new member, some even very happy. There are a few cloudy faces, here
and there, and Klark sees one shorter figure get up and leave the hall -- one of the younger warriors, she thinks, with her long hair swinging.

But most of Klark’s attention is on Lexa, still holding her cup aloft and waiting.

Klark rises to her feet, ignoring Genai’s dark look, catching her own cup into her hand. The hall falls silent.

“To the future,” Klark calls back to Lexa, sensing her cue. “And a very dramatic one, I’m sure.”

Klark lifts her cup quickly to her lips to cover her grin. But she thinks Lexa catches it, from the glint in her eye.

“Relax, Genai,” Klark says as she sits back down.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to.” Klark reaches across the table to spear something from a serving dish. “It was going to come out anyway. What does it matter if people know tonight, or tomorrow morning?”

The bodyguard doesn’t respond, but she’s unusually quiet for the remainder of the meal, and excuses herself before Klark decides to retire. That’s fine -- Klark has other guards -- but it leaves her feeling surly.

It’s not an excuse, but it’s an explanation for why it takes her so long to acknowledge the warrior who approaches her elbow later, clearly waiting for her attention. She can tell by his face he has news she’s not going to enjoy, and for long minutes (minutes she hates herself for, later) she ignores him. This is supposed to be her night, and her last night of pure enjoyment before taking the metaphorical crown -- and Genai has already spoiled it a little. But the guilt weighs in her gut until she finally turns to him and snaps: “What?”

At this, her remaining bodyguards allow him to approach. He steps in close to whisper that what he has to say, she might not want overheard.
They leave the brightness and comfort of the hall for privacy outside. The winds are relatively calm, and so the cold isn’t as biting, even with sheets of stars replacing the sun overhead.

“Your Majesty,” the man says, his voice hoarse with emotion, “the fosterlings are missing.”

Klark hates the fosterlings.

Not them. Not the children -- and that’s what most of them are, babes barely out of arms -- but the fact of them. The fact they have been her responsibility since Nia’s last breath left her body in a bloody, wracking cough.

She met them as soon as she learned of them: that Nia had collected children, keeping them close to her and away from their families as an awful kind of collateral against disobedience from the leaders of farther-flung or more dissenting villages. Partly because Klark felt they deserved to know, as soon as possible, that their lives would no longer continue in this beastly manner. Partly because she wondered if she was, in a twisted way, responsible -- if Nia had learned not to threaten a child directly after observing the lengths that parents like Abi would then take.

“What do you mean, missing?” she asks. Her lips feel numb -- could be the cold, could be all that she drank at the feast. Could be the feeling of something awful settling its weight on her shoulders, yet another burden to bear.

“They went to sleep early,” the guard says. His face is drawn and haggard. “Young children sometimes believe that the next day will come quicker that way and they... they were very happy to be returned to their parents with the end of your coronation, tomorrow.”

Her stomach clenches.

“The guards to their hall changed in the evening, as always,” he continues. “But there is a signal sent at the beginning of each new shift as a precaution. It never came. When I went to check I found the guards were dead, and the fosterlings were gone.”

“Could they have left on their own?” Klark turns to see Lexa step out of the light spilling from an open doorway and deeper into the shadows with them. “Perhaps they weren’t as eager for a reunion as you thought.”
“No, Commander. They are... very young. Even if I was mistaken, there’s no way the children could have taken on two blooded warriors.”

“Do you have any suspects?” Lexa asks. She comes to stand by Klark, and then Klark feels Lexa’s hand press against her lower back. Klark doesn’t think anyone else can catch the gesture -- the heavy, draping furs of the other girl’s winter wear obscures small movements. She allows herself to relax back into the support.

“Too many to name and still have time to ride out after them, Commander.”

Lexa considers this. Klark watches her face. In another moment, maybe, she’ll have time to scold herself for this feeling of... dependency, of needing someone else’s help to see a way clear of disaster. Right now the buzz of panic inside her brain leaves her with no other option.

“Go back to your post,” the Commander orders the guard. “Tell no one of what happened. It could cause a panic among the guests.”

“But --”

“Think,” Lexa hisses at him. “A strike against your future queen, of this magnitude, hours before she’s finally crowned? Whoever did this wants it to be known. This is a desperate attempt to sow discord and undermine the trust your people have placed in her. Is that what you want?”

Klark watches as the guard pales. She also watches at Lexa’s warriors, only a short distance away, put their hands on their weapons in readiness at their Commander’s tone.

But the guard is already shaking his head. “No.”

“So do as I say,” Lexa says, gentler. “Go back to your post, and continue your night as if nothing has happened.”

“Now what?” Klark asks Lexa as the he leaves. She hates how pleading she sounds, but she can’t help it. “What do we do?”
Lexa searches her face, a short line of concern between her eyebrows. “Wait,” she says, and steps away to speak with her guards.

Klark watches, her hands wringing together. She wishes Genai was here. But it’s not so bad. With just Lexa.

She shivers as Lexa returns, the snow crunching beneath her boots. Her guards have already dispersed, and there’s no one to see the way she reaches for the neck of Klark’s outer jacket where the ties have come loose. So Klark allows it.

“I’m fine,” she says as the other girl begins to thread the ties back into place, drawing them tighter. “I’m not cold, I -- what do we do?”

“Nothing.” Lexa keeps her eyes on her hands as their do their careful work.

Klark stumbles backwards, away from the Commander. Whose eyes, when they meet Klark’s hold resigned sadness.

“What,” she says, her breath coming faster, “what did you tell your warriors?”

“You can’t pursue this,” Lexa says instead of answering the question. “If you rally tonight, everyone will know. It will be the same as if that guard decided to cry the alarm.”

“So someone else can go.”

“The result will be the same.” Lexa’s shoulders bunch in stubbornness. “And we have no idea who’s behind this, if they mean to draw us out -- there could be an even greater force waiting to descend on whoever pursues the fosterlings, or this encampment, once you or a portion of your warriors have left it. It’s too dangerous. You can’t take the risk.”

“You won’t allow me to take it.”
Her head dips, but her jaw is set. “No.”

“Who do you think you are? You can’t command me --”

“I can. That’s what it means now that you’ve declared your intentions to join my Coalition. You will swear fealty to me, Klark of the Ice Nation. If you didn’t know what that meant before now…” Her mouth draws up tight. “Your horse and those of your warriors have been set under my people’s guard. If you attempt to defy me I will discover it. I don’t think either of us want that,” she finishes quietly.

“Lexa, please,” Klark whispers. It’s a last-ditch effort, a show of humility that makes the skin on the back of her neck crawl, but she needs to chance it, because: “They’re children.”

“Exactly,” Lexa says. She straightens, the tilt of her head like it carries an old weariness. “And you are a queen.”

She turns, going back inside the hall and leaving Klark alone in the snow.

Klark doesn’t have much experience with horses. They don’t survive on the barrens -- not even the stocky, thick-coated kind bred for hardiness and the northern climate. But she’s spent whatever time she has since arriving at the Ice Court learning how to ride, keenly aware that falling off a horse is one of those things she should avoid in front of foreign visitors.

Of course she can admit, now, that “foreign visitors” really meant the Commander -- meant *Lexa*. Klark can blame the look on Genai’s face whenever she told Klark stories of the other girl’s accomplishments, her tone shading towards awe. Or Klark can blame herself, for leaning into the competitive edge she first felt in those moments, which only sharpened once she met Lexa for herself. She’s still not completely sure about the why of it, but she can at least admit now, and here: Lexa has always been someone Klark wanted to impress.

Stealing her horse and sneaking off the camp with it probably *isn’t* the way to do that. But Klark has already committed.
The horse doesn’t like or trust Klark, that’s clear. But its guard was one of the few that hadn’t received specific instructions that Klark wasn’t to be let near it -- clearly Lexa didn’t even consider that Klark would dare -- and so it’d been easy to send him away on a pretense, promising to watch his charge while he’s gone.

... could she have chosen a different horse? Yes.

She didn’t.

But Klark doesn’t need Lexa’s horse to be the easiest to handle or the most responsive, she just needs to get far enough beyond that camp that she won’t be spotted, and then circle around until she finds the tracks of half a dozen children and whoever has led them off.

To that person’s credit, the tracks aren’t so easy to find. Maybe it would be closer to impossible for anyone else -- but in the barrens the ground is frozen solid, the undergrowth negligible, and Klark had to learn to spot the faintest signs of passage and movement. Sometimes it meant the difference between dinner and another long, cold night of hunger.

She follows the tracks as the moon rises. It’s a clear night, and soon she doesn’t need to dismount to search. Or maybe whoever she’s following grew cockier as they got farther from camp, or perhaps weighed the value of speed over secrecy once they judged their plot had been uncovered. They couldn’t have guessed the Commander would forbid pursuit.

(Klark knows she’s being pursued. They’re not close enough for her to see them, not even along the flat plains, but every now and again she hears the echo of their horses’ hooves, a fragment of a shouted command. She uses her skills to keep ahead, keep unseen. It’s not the first time she’s been hunted while on a hunt of her own.)

In the end it’s Lexa’s horse that finds them, pulling on the reins as its ears swivel for something Klark wasn’t paying attention to. She brings them both to a halt to listen: the wuffling, rumbling noises of horses put to feed after a long haul. She lets the horse carry them to the others, driven by its longing for rest and treats.

The other horses are unguarded, sheltered beneath an outcropping of rock and tied together with leading strings -- probably the same the kidnapper used to guide them when transporting the children. All but one of them lacks saddle or reins, forcing their riders to cling to the horse’s coat or each other or face falling from its back at a gallop. Klark puts Lexa’s horse among them and gives it the feed bag from one of other horses that is already beginning to doze after a hard ride.
She creeps around the side of the rock face, soft on the balls of her feet. It’s quiet here as the rock splits, opens up into caves and crevasses, but every disturbed pebble has an echo that carries. The ceremonial jacket Genai stuffed her into earlier that day has a few too many jingling pieces -- Klark sheds it. It’s calming to feel the night breezes along her bare arms, to remember she has gone up against far worse than a coward who steals children, and survived.

“You’ll get yourself killed.”

Klark has to bite down on her lip to keep from shouting in surprise. She registers whose voice it is as she turns, and that’s the only thing that spares Lexa’s life. Klark sheathes she knife she already had half-drawn.

Lexa is smart -- she kept out of immediate striking range, tucking herself up against the rock face a few feet away. The shadow from it leaves most of her face in darkness, but the set of her mouth is clear enough.

“How did you --”

“We were too loud in a group, you could evade us too easily. I told the others to fall back and wait for my signal.” They’re both keeping their voices low, barely above a murmur. “And I thought it best they not see when I drag you by the scruff of your neck.”

Outrage spikes hot in Klark’s gut, but only for a second before she bares her teeth at the Commander. “I’d like to see you try it.”

Lexa opens her mouth, but the night is pierced by a brief, infantile wail. It’s smothered a second later, but the echoes linger. Lexa steps out fully into the moonlight, and the shocked, stricken look on her face cools whatever lingering antagonism Klark felt.

“Don’t signal for backup yet,” Klark tells her.

Lexa marshals her expression into her usual composure. “You have no idea what we’re going up against. You have no right to risk --”
“If we give ourselves away, whoever this is could disappear into the network of caves underneath these rocks. We could use dozens of teams searching for years, and never find them.”

“They wouldn’t be able to escape, either.”

“True. They’d starve first.” She stares Lexa down. “And maybe whatever child they snatch up before running starves with them.” She lets that sink in before adding: “They will never hear or see me coming. Just let me get close enough to know who or what we’re dealing with.”

She watches Lexa wrestle with it. It was one thing to play it safe back at the camp, to err on the side of caution and try and keep Klark from danger. But Klark -- she can’t say she knows Lexa, not this soon. But she feels her, somehow, and she knows Lexa is not the kind of person to turn back now. Not when they’ve come this far, and victory dangles just out of reach. Lexa might be cautious, and careful, and those things might shape her -- but Klark already knows what drives her is justice.

“Swear to me,” Lexa says finally, her face turned away, and Klark’s heart soars even before she continues with: “that you will be careful. Swear to me if I let you do this, you will take no steps without conferring with me first.”

“I swe-”

“Swear on your fealty to me.”

Klark’s mouth dries up as Lexa turns to meet her eyes. The sharp look in them might as well be a knife held to her throat.

“I swear,” she whispers.

The kidnapper is smart. She couldn’t corral all the fosterlings at one time, but Klark can see she didn’t have to. She just had to grab the youngest and smallest of them -- a little girl whose parents’ territory is in the deep North, the last habitable sliver of land before it meets the dark sea -- and the rest fell in line. Klark shouldn’t be surprised. Ripped from their families, cloistered at court, it was only natural for the fosterlings to bond with each other. She wishes she’d anticipated how someone
She realizes, creeping close to the shallow cave where the children are huddled, that she’s seen the kidnapper before. She can’t place exactly when, most probably during one of Genai’s sweeps where she pointed to everyone in sight and rattled off a name -- Oronto? No: Ontari. A dark-haired, dark-eyed girl, with Nia’s scars on her face and the look of someone whose inner world was very, very far away from wherever she was standing.

Maybe Klark should have paid more attention to that. But it wasn’t an uncommon look among Nia’s former soldiers, especially those of her innermost circle. Klark had pitied her -- pitied all of them. Had thought they, more than anyone, would understand why Klark had to be Queen.

“She isn’t coming for you,” she can hear Ontari tell the children. “Stop snivelling.”

None of them are crying -- Klark thinks they look too tired for that, as she inches forward on her belly -- but some of the youngest are fussing, either because of cold or hunger. The oldest are doing their best to comfort whoever’s in distress, while sending less than charitable looks Ontari’s way.

“You were only tokens in a game to her,” Ontari continues. “She was using you for your parents’ loyalty.”

“She said we could go home,” says the little girl in Ontari’s lap, with Ontari’s dagger aimed at her side.

Klark is close enough to see Ontari’s grip on the youngest fosterling tighten, but the little girl doesn’t cry out. “Well now you can’t,” Ontari responds, harsh. “Now none of us can go home.”

“Where are we going?” asks one of the older boys.

“Wherever I say,” Ontari hisses. “And you’ll follow me, or you’ll die out here in the wasteland. I’m your queen, now.”

... Klark has never considered herself particularly good at winning people over -- she’d rather beat them into submission, usually -- but wow, Ontari is really not good at it.
But that reminds Klark.

It’s easy to find the size and shape of the stone she wants. The hard part is getting the angle from her position: literally on the ground. Every shift sends smaller pebbles rustling and whispering, and the way she’s holding her sling makes a sharp pain radiate from her elbow. She drops her stone with her first attempt, which hasn’t happened since she was seven. But the second try launches it through the air, landing square against Ontari’s cheekbone with a crack Klark can hear across the distance.

Ontari screams. The fosterlings haven’t been political prisoners for this long to neglect an instinct for survival and quick thinking -- several hands reach out to yank the youngest of their group out of the Ontari’s lap, and they’re running in the next breath. They freeze when they see Klark, rising to her knees with a blade already in hand.

She uses it to point where she came from. “The Commander is over by those rocks. More of her soldiers are on the way. Go.”

Klark doesn’t need to tell them twice, but when she looks back Ontari is already gone.

She curses, leaning into the cave to look for telltale marks of escape deeper into the caverns -- but no, Ontari seems to have fled out into the night rather than be cornered in the endless dark. Klark is glad. She wants Ontari for herself, she’s discovering. There’s a low, hungry heat building at the pit of her stomach, and it wants to drag Ontari back to the Ice Court by her hair.

She’s picturing it as she follows the trail up onto the cliffs above. The air feels thinner here, colder, frozen pinpricks of snowflakes falling on her face, just as something strikes the back of her head.

Klark’s ears ring as her knees hit the ground. This close to the sky, she can almost hear the gods laughing at her for being so stupid.

Ontari snarls, a wordless growl of rage. Klark rolls away as Ontari swings again -- she’s wrenched a branch free from one of the trees that grow in the cliff crevices, gnarled and sturdy against the constant winds. Klark is unsteady as she climbs to her feet, but she keeps her blade in her hand. She can see Ontari’s is at her waist, but the other girl is smart: she uses the length and heft of the branch to keep Klark at a distance. Ontari probably knew after the ritual combat that she wouldn’t be able to take Klark in a fair fight.

“It was a stupid plan,” Klark tells Ontari. She’s pretty sure if she keeps the other girl talking,
eventually the double vision of her will come back together into one. “There’s nothing for you in the far North, all those families are loyal to me --”

“I wasn’t going north,” Ontari hisses. She’s on edge, desperate and defensive. Klark has to use that to her advantage, somehow -- find a way to counterbalance her own mild concussion. “But you’d think that. Life in the barrens has made your blood slow and your brain sluggish, just like she said it would.”

Klark stumbles, leaps away as Ontari tries to take advantage and swing her branch.

“You’re very loyal to a dead queen,” Klark says, when she knows she can speak calmly. “I wish you’d given me a chance to prove myself worthy of that loyalty.”

“You?” Ontari’s breathing fast, adjusting her grip on the branch as she alternates watching Klark’s face and her feet. “You think I’d become one of your subjects? A barbarian who never spent a day -- not a single day -- serving in that bitch’s court?”

She swings, and with such force she almost unbalances. Klark has to scramble back, struggling for footing on dirt that’s frozen solid.

“Do you have any idea what she would make us do? How she would make us prove we were worthy of service?” Ontari looks haunted as she paces with her weapon. “And all the time knowing the threat of you, and your coming, was the only thing she feared. The only thing that could stop her. When I was a child I would beg the stars to send you every night. I would wake up every morning and try to keep my eyes closed as long as possible, hoping to give you more time to arrive.”

“But I did come,” Klark says, struggling for focus -- it feels like the inside of her head is lined with fur. “As soon as I could. I killed Nia.”

“Too late,” Ontari says flatly, and swings again.

Klark’s too slow and the branch catches her hip, throwing her to the ground. She has a perfect view of Ontari, raising her branch again for a blow that will probably all but finish Klark off. Behind her is the velvet darkness of the night sky, a glittering wash of stars. Ontari herself is thrown into harsh contrasts as the moon grows brighter overhead.
Through the noise in her head, Klark manages to find: anger. At herself, mostly. It takes only a moment, less than, for her to realize that even with her destiny completed, she doesn’t feel done.

Something draws Ontari’s attention, and she glances up.

Not soon enough.

Lexa must have leapt over her prostrate body, Klark realizes much later when she’s trying to piece fuzzy memories together. That’s the only way she could have put herself between Klark and Ontari so quickly, causing Ontari to stumble back. Klark misses it. She’s a little sad about that, after. She thinks the Commander must have been quite a sight.

All she knows in that moment is she isn’t dead yet. Which is nice, if puzzling. She can hear the sound of combat close by. She’s not part of that, though. She’s pretty sure. She could just close her eyes. Her eyelids are heavier than the rough stones digging into her back.

Something -- some one -- directs a backward kick that connects with her ribs.

“Ow,” Klark protests, opening her eyes.

“Get up,” Lexa says without looking away from her opponent. Her sword gives her a reach that cancels Ontari’s advantage with the branch, but her focus is split. Klark wonders why Ontari doesn’t use that, and then sees the look on the other girl’s face: panic edging into fear. Ontari doesn’t seem eager to lock weapons, any kind of weapon, with the Commander. Not at all.

“Up,” Lexa snarls. “I thought your mother taught you to survive. If she could see you now she’d cover her face in shame.”

Abi would be more sympathetic to the fact Klark probably has a concussion.

... on second thought.

Heaving herself up onto her knees is one of the hardest things she remembers ever having to do, every muscle and sinew opposed, screaming at her to lie down. It takes all of her concentration to
push past it, and Klark doesn’t pay attention to Lexa and Ontari again until she can kneel upright.

Lexa’s scored a hit, Klark notes muzzily. There’s a long cut on one side of Ontari’s face. In the moonlight, the blood streaking down her cheek looks black.

“-- could have come to us,” Lexa is saying.

“To be welcomed me with open arms?” Ontari scoffs. “The cuckoo’s child, raised by your enemy?” Her face twists even further in disgust, though Klark is not sure who she’s directing it at. “What would I have done with the rest of my life? Waited for yours to end? Watched as she ruled the kingdom I was promised?”

“Your blood guarantees you a place --”

This incenses Ontari, and she rushes forward with a roar. Lexa counters each swing. Again, Klark can see she could disarm Ontari easily -- but she doesn’t. Klark wonders what she’s waiting for.

“A place?” Ontari cries out. Klark can hear the exhaustion beginning to creep into her voice. And still, Lexa doesn’t kill her. “A room in your tower. A mention in her legend. My blood means I am meant to rule, and you think I would be satisfied with scraps.”

“There have never been two nightbloods of an age alive, like this,” Lexa says. Klark wishes she could see her face, there’s a note to her voice of -- of yearning? If only she didn’t have her back to Klark. “You could have been my advisor, my... or if you didn’t want to leave the clan you knew, then be a liaison, you could have served --”

“The two of you.” Ontari’s face is a rictus of conflicting emotions. “Fate’s favored daughters.”

... maybe Lexa is waiting for Klark? Maybe the Commander thinks the Queen should take this kill? Klark reaches around, hiding the movement as she loosens the knife in her back sheath as if testing her bruises.

“All the gifts you have received,” Ontari continues, almost caressing. “Both of you should be careful. Of course I envy what you have, but I know -- we both know -- it only means there is more the world can take from you. Power. Happiness. Love.”
Klark blinks and the blade is naked in her hand. There’s a faint ringing in her ears. She’s pretty sure she lost a few seconds. She really wishes Lexa weren’t so particular on the niceties -- couldn’t she kill Ontari and just tell everyone Klark did it? -- but if this is how it has to happen, then it has to happen quickly. Before Klark keels over into the snow.

“Everyone sees the way you look at her. Everyone knows.”

Klark thinks Lexa makes a response to that -- she hears something low, can just catch the end of a head-shake out of the corner of her eye as she shifts and allows stiff muscles to loosen.

“How long,” Ontari asks, “before word spreads? To the other clans, to Polis? To that girl whose name is paired with yours in such beautiful songs?”

Lexa stands like she was carved from the cliff face. It helps, it means she’s blocking Klark from Ontari’s view as Klark shifts up onto the balls of her feet and into a crouch.

“I can’t wait until she knows. Then I won’t be the only one to have my life stolen, my heart broken, by the girl who walked out of a storm.”

Klark attacks.

She uses Lexa as a pivot, swinging around the obstacle of the taller girl’s body with a hand on Lexa’s bicep for torque. Lexa jerks -- Klark surprised her -- but Klark is already launching, coming around the other girl so fast and so hard Ontari can only widen her eyes before the two of them collide.

It’s a body-to-body hit, a slam that knocks Ontari off her feet and into the fresh snow. The other girl tries to raise her weapon, even winded, but Klark is ready for it and pins that shoulder. Her own knife was already in her hand -- was sinking deep into Ontari’s side as they fell to the ground together -- and she uses the same adjustment to send it even deeper into Ontari’s heart.

Ontari gives a strange little cry. She twists and kicks with the sudden strength of the dying, but Klark is used to it. Her vision can be as spotty as it likes, it won’t impede the surety of her hold and the familiarity of containing a prey’s dying throes. No life goes without a struggle.
Finally Ontari goes limp. She’s still alive -- her eyes are glassy but responsive, her breath coming in quick, aborted gasps. When Klark sits up, Ontari doesn’t.

Ontari says something.

Klark hesitates, but a quick look at Ontari’s weapon reveals she’s released it to fall several inches away from her nerveless hand. There’s no way she can recover it now. Klark bends closer to hear the breathy, almost hiccupping words coming from Ontari’s mouth.

“Is it always like this?” the other girl is asking, over and over. Perturbed, Klark turns her head to see her eyes better. They aren’t glassy, they’re distant, and to Klark’s addled brain it feels like she’s looking past Klark, into Klark, an awareness that encompasses far more than the space between them.

Ontari’s eyes find her, and focus. “Do we always end like this?”

Between the winds and the expanse around them, the words have the slightest echo.

Klark can feel every futile pump of Ontari’s heart through the knife that connects them. She shoves it deeper to put the wild-eyed girl out of her misery.

Ontari dies.

Klark jerks her knife free of the body, breathing hard. The attack took the last of her strength -- maybe a little more than, her legs don’t feel quite ready to hold her, and the sweat collecting along her neck and back is going cold. The skin of her bare arms feels like ice. A fine, insuppressible shiver starts through her, but she tries to put on a good face as she shuffles on her knees to face Lexa.

Who is staring down at her looking... stricken. And something like grieved. But that has to be a trick of the strange and shadowed light. What reason would Lexa have to mourn the death of a usurper?

She’s not even looking at Klark’s face, but her hands. Klark follows her gaze and finds them spattered with Ontari’s blood, again unnervingly black as a trick of the light.
“Next time,” she hears herself saying, “you have my permission to take the kill.”

“Your permission --” Lexa finally looks at Klark’s face, and what she sees there makes her blanch. “Klark.”

Klark would answer, but she’s too busy pitching forward into darkness.

Something is hitting her face. She feels it. She just... feels it as if it were happening to someone else.

Until a particularly sharp crack catches the top of her cheek and the pain starbursts into awareness, in time for her to catch: “... up right now I swear I will --”

Klark blinks, and whatever Lexa was about to swear, she folds it behind her lips. “Good.” She steps away.

Speech feels like it requires re-learning her own language. “... happened?”

“I decided it was better if you didn’t die of exposure before you had a chance to die of a brain injury.” They’re in the shallow cave where Ontari planned to spend the night earlier. It’s not warm, but it’s out of the wind, and the moonlight pours in from the entrance. Lexa must have carried her back down the cliff face. Right now the Commander is busying herself with a canteen of water, thoroughly soaking the edge of her own shirt. The look she sends Klark is searing, Klark would swear it leaves a mark. “Sorry to thwart your lofty ambitions.”

“I wasn’t...” Klark begins to protest on instinct and then gives up, sagging back against the cave. Lexa has propped her up sitting, but she can sleep like this. If she can close her eyes for --

Not a slap this time, but a very sharp poke. And into a bruise. Klark wonders if Lexa took note of where Ontari landed her hits, earlier, of if she’s just lucky.

Opening her eyes to see Lexa’s anger, she’s not betting on luck.
“Don’t you dare,” Lexa says. She takes one of Klark’s hands by the wrist and begins to scour it clean. Klark wants to tell her not to fuss, it’s only blood -- she’s been covered in it before. “You know you have to stay awake. At least until we ride back to the Ice Court and hand you over to the healers.”

... it had been a long ride out. Klark whimpers.

Lexa’s clear satisfaction is sharp enough to slice someone open. “Maybe next time you’ll think before throwing yourself into -- how dare you, you’re a queen, your life is not just your own. You carry your people’s lives and hopes, and to risk that for --”

“Worth it.” The energy for this argument is going to be a struggle. Lexa is probably counting on that. Well, if she’s allowed to cheat like that, maybe Klark is allowed to throw up on her.

“And were the birds worth it?” Her movements are jerky, but her touch is gentle as she moves on to Klark’s other hand. The first is now perfectly clean of blood, even in the fine wrinkles of Klark’s joints and under her fingernails. “More than your promise not to attack without me.”

She gets up and moves away after that, too abruptly for Klark to answer. Klark is still blinking in confusion -- and a little guilt -- when Lexa returns with the jacket Klark discarded earlier. She manhandles Klark into it, but it’s the look on her face that makes Klark wince.

“Lexa --”

“You swore.” Klark’s arms are in the jacket, and Lexa begins to fasten it so snugly Klark is not sure she’ll have much movement once finished. “On your fealty to me.”

“Yes, I did.” Her head is still swimming -- spinning -- but she remembers this much. She considered this part very important. “And anything I swear on that will be binding, as much as my life. Once I give you my fealty.”

Hands latch on either side of the jacket’s collar, pulling Klark right up into Lexa’s face. “Once you - -”
“Which is tomorrow,” Klark says gamely.

Lexa stares at her. Her grip tightens for a split second, until the constriction around Klark’s throat borders on uncomfortable.

Then it’s releases. Lexa sighs out, shoulders drooping. Her eyes fall shut. Her head falls forward until their foreheads touch.

“Tomorrow,” Lexa says after a moment, her breath skating along Klark’s cheek.

It feels like forgiveness.

Lexa won’t let her ride by herself. She doesn’t trust Klark not to try and fall asleep on horseback, and honestly, Klark agrees.

It should be more humiliating. Klark can see the half-smiling looks Lexa’s warriors send them at the sight of the Ice Queen nestled in the Commander’s arms. Even the rescued children giggle at them, although that might be from Klark sticking out her tongue in an attempt to prove she’s not as bad off as she looks.

But. It’s comfortable. Lexa keeps the horse’s stride even and smooth. And Klark’s allowed to let her head fall back to rest in the crook of Lexa’s neck and shoulder, even if Lexa persists in keeping her awake with small, inconsequential questions.

It’s not a conversation, really, because Klark doesn’t have the energy or focus for it. Instead Lexa quizzes her. Nothing she actually cares about, Klark thinks, but whatever will keep Klark talking. First memory. Favorite food. Has Genai ever really torn someone’s throat out with her teeth for crossing Klark.

“No,” Klark giggles. “That’s just the way she looks. She’s never -- well, unless you count the snowcat.”
“Snowcat?” Lexa pronounces the Ice Nation word like it’s new to her.

“Medium-sized predator. Lives off rabbits, mostly, but I startled it. It startled me. The barrens don’t have anything like it.”

“Like what?”

“So...” Huge, tufted ears. Downward-sloping bodies to allow for longer hind legs. Absolutely, comically enormous paws. “... cute.”

Lexa’s arm around her waist -- she holds Klark steady there, grips the reins one-handed -- spasms. “Cute?”

“It was,” Klark protests, defensive even months after Genai’s thorough scolding. “It didn’t deserve to die.”

“I assume Genai killed it?”

“Well. It attacked me.”

“... you couldn’t defend yourself?”

“I said I was startled.”

Klark can hear Lexa’s slow grin. “You didn’t want to. You were hoping it would give up and move on.”

“It would have, except Genai boxed it in. Don’t laugh.” She knows she’s being petulant. Between her aching head and exhausted body, she doesn’t care.

Lexa doesn’t say anything. From the slight shaking of her body, she knows enough to not laugh out loud.
Klark can see the glow of the encampment just on the horizon, all the torches leading the way home.

“They’re beautiful, too.” She adds in the lull. “They have little white and black streaks in their fur that makes their faces look painted. And they’re smart. Genai says they climb anything, and swim. They’re too smart to be found, usually.”

“Like you and your mother. In the barrens.”

“Hmm.” She wants to tell Lexa it’s not like that, she just likes the snowcats’ faces. But she doesn’t have the energy. “I might never see another.”

Lexa shifts behind her, adjusting her arm around Klark. She ends up pulling Klark a bit closer, their bodies fitting together more snugly. It’ll make for an easier last length of the ride. “Perhaps when I next visit we can hunt them together. Not to capture or kill. To see them again.”

Klark nestles deeper into Lexa’s shoulder. “Why would you?” she asks drowsily.

“I...” The question takes Lexa by surprise, Klark thinks. They ride in a silence longer than Lexa has allowed since starting back. Klark could have easily drifted off, but. She forces her eyes open, not wanting to miss Lexa’s reply.

“I never expected to come this far.” The admittance is soft, and low. “I was prepared to do whatever it took to bring the clans together. If my life was needed for that, I would give it.” They ride again in quiet for a bit before she finishes: “I hoped that would not be necessary. But I couldn’t let myself... look forward to the alternative.”

Klark knows what she means. It hadn’t been killing Nia that had nearly undone her. It had been in the moments after Nia drew her lasts breath, when Klark looked up to see seasoned warriors, and a stunned court, slowly sinking to their knees before her.

That had been the moment she nearly lost herself, swallowed beneath the wave of what next?

“I enjoy the thought that there are still things to... do, to see and experience. Things that are still waiting for me to discover.”
And Klark is pleased to think there might be things about this world she knows and Lexa doesn’t. Things she can introduce to the other girl.

“When do you think you’ll visit us again?” Klark asks, pressed to Lexa’s chest. The encampment is even closer, now.

Lexa sighs. “I’m not sure. It’s a long journey, and I can’t often leave Polis for so long. You’ll be asked to the yearly Summit before I can make it back to the Ice Nation.”

Klark nods slowly, feels Lexa’s chin rub against her head. “That’s fair. First you came to me, and next I’ll come to you. We can discuss the next time you’ll visit, then.”

Lexa hesitates before saying, a bit waspishly: “I only came to you first because of the great ceremony involved, you understand. As the leader of the Coalition—”

Klark laughs. It creaks in her chest after the strain and death of this long night, but it feels good, too - it feels clean.

Lexa doesn’t join her, exactly, but every time Klark appears to be tapering-off Lexa gives another put-upon huff, and like that Klark is smiling when they return, and Lexa gives her over to the healers.

The final day of Klark’s coronation dawns clear and bright, and Klark is nervous.

Not of herself. She’s trained the litany and gestures of this for weeks with Genai. She could do this fully concussed and suffering from fresh wounds, not just a little worse for wear after a bad night.

She’s nervous about Lexa.
She’s been searching for the other girl since the morning meal, but apparently her time has been taken up with audiences with other clan leaders. There’s no real time before the ceremony itself, but Klark pesters and pesters Genai until she agrees to tell Lexa’s bodyguard to come to the preparation tent early.

Klark is pacing when Lexa walks inside. She looks up to see Lexa halted in the entrance, staring, her arm still frozen in the action of pushing away the curtain.

“You look nice,” Lexa says.

“Thanks.” Klark spares a thought for her new robes. She hadn’t liked them at first; the long sleeves that ended at her fingertips had been a particular point of contention. She isn’t vain -- she isn’t -- but she likes to leave her arms bare when trying to leave an impression. She’s more aware than ever since joining the Ice Nation proper that she doesn’t strike the most imposing figure on first glance. It has to be said: she’s fairly short, and just the littlest bit round. She dares anyone to try her, regardless, but when it comes to sheer intimidation...

“Leave them,” Genai had said as Klark had scowled and tugged at the sleeves like she would rip them out at the shoulders. “They make you look regal -- like a queen, not a brawler. And if you leave them I’ll shave your head,” she finished in exasperation.

She hadn’t, not the way Klark had first envisioned: completely, or maybe with a ruff down the center like Klark had seen on younger warriors. But there was a good chunk of it gone, and Genai had tied what was left back in elaborate braids that lay close to her skull. Klark really wanted to learn how to do that for herself. Abi had not been one for the niceties of hair-braiding.

She did like the heavy trim of thick, white pelt that ran along the robe’s edges -- her wrists, her collar, and so deep at the hem the robe was almost more fur than fabric. “It’s tradition for the Ice Nation monarch to wear whitefox fur,” Genai had told her, watching as Klark luxuriated. “And the color brings out your eyes.”

“I needed to talk to you before -- before we do this,” Klark says. Lexa remembers herself enough to step fully inside and let the tent flap fall behind her, shrouding them in relative quiet and shadow.

“Is something wrong?”
“Yes.” Klark grimaces. “No, but -- it’s about something you said last night.”

Lexa is wary, casting her eyes at the corners. “Last night was --”

“About how I keep throwing away my life.”

Lexa drags her eyes to Klark’s face. “I was angry.”

“You were.” Klark takes a deep breath to calm herself. “You were also wrong.”

“... you take more risks than you should.”

“I don’t --” Klark bites down on her words, forces herself to be calm. “I take the risks that are necessary.”

She can see that Lexa wants to be conciliatory -- especially considering what they’ll be called to do in mere minutes -- but is struggling. The muscles in her jaw work, but she makes no answer.

“If you will ask fealty of me,” Klark continues, clenching her fists at her sides until her nails dig into calloused palms, “I need you to know what I will and will not promise you. What my fealty means.”

The crease between Lexa’s eyebrows deepens, but she’s beginning to look considering instead of frustrated. “Go on.”

“I don’t think it’s a difference in who we are as leaders.” Klark feels free to go a little slower, now that she knows she’ll be given a fair chance. She chooses her words with extreme care. “I think -- I think we are very much alike, in that we are willing to give to our people... everything of ourselves.” She swallows. “But I need you to know, the needs of my position are different.”

Lexa doesn’t say anything now, but her attitude indicates Klark has her full attention.

“You aren’t just one clan leader. You lead the Coalition. Maybe that will change -- maybe power will shift, or someone with even greater vision will step into your place. Until then, you’re needed.
You must prioritize your life and leadership above others. Not because it has more value, but because you carry so many others.”

“You don’t think it’s the same for all leaders?”

“To an extent.” Klark forces her hands to relax, glad they’re hidden by the long sleeves of her robe. “But, listen. My people are not... they’re barely united. What they share beyond language and culture is trauma. Fear, and shame, and regret.” She lowers her voice until she is certain her words can’t possibly be heard outside her tent -- and part of her burns to say them out loud, even then. “The Ice Nation is barely a clan, in fact. More like the survivors of a long war, only their enemy has always been within.”

“Your reign will change that.”

“I want it to. But it has to begin with prioritizing my people. And not just as a whole, but -- Lexa. Those children. They deserved better than to be used up for someone else’s greater purpose. All of them do: the warriors, the families. Nia and those before her have done so much damage. If things are to change, then I must be a different kind of ruler. One who is proven willing to sacrifice her life for any of theirs.”

That was the realization that kept the wave of uncertainty at bay when she looked up to see all those kneeling before her. Her own confusion, her pain, had been nothing to the stark fear in her people’s eyes. She is young, and untried, and alone. But somehow, she would find the resources within to meet their overwhelming need. That was the sense of purpose that had carried her since that moment.

Well, not completely alone anymore. She has Genai.

And maybe...

“I know it’s not how you lead. Or how you would have me lead.” Klark swallows. “But I can’t be anyone else’s vision of a queen but my own. I will give you my fealty. But my life will always belong to them.”

Lexa’s expression has smoothed out. Klark can’t read it, although she thinks the look in Lexa’s eyes is curiously soft.
“You didn’t have to tell me all this,” she says.

“No, I guess not. But I -- respect you. I wanted you to know the truth.” Her heart is hammering away so hard in her chest she feels light-headed. “I would like us to be friends.”

Lexa’s mouth drops open. “I -- what?”

“Don’t laugh at me,” Klark warns. “I know how it sounds. I know we’re not children.” She straightens her back, self-conscious. “I only... I want to be clear. I’m not just nice to you because of your position.”

“Are you nice to me?”

Klark glares. Lexa turns her head away, touching her knuckles to her lips before turning back. The line of her mouth is steady by then. “I’m sorry,” she says, demure. “You were asking very nicely to be my friend.”

“Lexa.”

Lexa bursts out into laughter. It’s a nice sound, unexpectedly light and a little husky, and Klark’s stomach twists with happiness. Even if she is the one being laughed at.

And then Lexa is reaching out a hand to Klark’s face, still laughing to herself: “This is why I --”

She freezes. They both do, Lexa’s arm suspended between them. Her fingertips so close to Klark’s cheek a deep breath would connect them. Klark holds hers for a reason she can’t name, staring into Lexa’s widening eyes.

Slowly, slowly, Lexa’s arm falls back to her side.

She looks...

“Are you okay?” Klark asks. She’s a bit shaky herself. She feels like something fled from the tent
when Lexa’s touch failed to reach her -- it feels colder, even with the sun bearing down on them through the roof.

“I didn’t...” Lexa shakes her head, closes her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she says after another moment. “I’m just tired from last night.”

“Will you be alright during the ceremony?” Klark asks inanely. Of course Lexa will be. But she feels the need to say something.

“Yes. Yes.”

Almost against her will Klark’s gaze is drawn down to Lexa’s hand. She’s running the thumb across the tips of the other four fingers, slow and lingering. Klark doesn’t think she knows she’s doing it.

They both jump when Genai sticks her head into the tent. She stares at Lexa at first, a frown etching itself deep into her features, before she turns to Klark and nods.

“They’re ready to begin,” Klark tells Lexa.

“Yes. I will -- they’ll need me in place before your entrance.” Lexa goes to exit, Genai barely shifting to let her pass. She stops, and says over her shoulder, “We are friends, Klark.”

Then she’s gone.

“... is that what you called her for?” Genai asks.

“No,” Klark scowls. “We had serious business to discuss.”

“I heard her laughing.”

“You stand outside to guard me, Genai, not eavesdrop.”
“Hmph.” Genai retracts her head and lets the entrance fall closed again with a dissatisfied twitch.

Klark takes all of it -- her bewilderment at Lexa’s behavior, her annoyance at Genai, even the slow-growing warmth at Lexa’s departing words -- and shoves it to the side. She breathes in, straightens her shoulders, and holds her head up high.

Time to become Queen.

“My warriors will start on the road in a few hours.”

Klark stares at Lexa, the roasted delicacy in her hands forgotten. “Where will they go?”

The look in the other girl’s eyes is opaque. “To Polis.”

“I... oh.” Klark puts the food back on her plate, feeling stupid. She can’t ask are you going with them because, of course, of course she is. “Oh.”

The feasting continues around them. The day is mild enough to hold the post-ceremony celebration outside so that all can eat together. She can hear laughter and snatches of singing coming from every side.

“Your intention was to stay a few days longer.” Klark isn’t sure why she’s retreated into formality. Maybe it’s a holdover from the ceremony, the weight of ritual and vows as she knelt in the snow before Lexa with her hands held palm-up. Waiting for the touch of cold fingers that brought her to her feet.

“It was. But I’m told the ice is thickening on the lakes, and it will be safer to travel by road. We’re starting earlier since it will take more time.”

Lexa doesn’t look at Klark as she talks, her attention on the joyous crowds surrounding the head
table where she and Klark sit. On either side, at their own tables, are the other clan leaders. Klark was happy enough to sit in silence with Lexa, until this. Perhaps she felt a bit -- the tiniest bit -- shy in the other girl’s presence after embarrassing herself in the tent. Lexa’s own getup for the coronation doesn’t help: she’s donned a long cloak the color of rust, of a material that catches the light and seems to shift with it. She’s also painted dark streaks across and trailing from her eyes, what Genai had whispered to Klark was a traditional affectation for Woods Clan warriors. It gives unexpected dimension to Lexa’s features, making her look more solemn, and even older. Which Klark definitely does not resent.

“Oh.” Klark struggles for something else to say in response. “Well, it won’t be long before I’m in Polis myself. So I guess it doesn’t matter.”

Lexa doesn’t answer for a long moment.

“Commander?” Uncertainty grips her. “We’ll meet at the Summit this year, won’t we?”

Slowly, still not facing Klark, Lexa nods. “Yes.”

There’s an oddness to her tone. It sounds almost like longing. But it also sounds like regret.

... no, it’s just... Klark has had a long day. A series of long days. And she’s disappointed at this news, of course. She’s imagining things.

There had been a moment, during the coronation. After Klark had been lifted to her feet. The sun had been shining, and all around them blue, blue sky as Lexa accepted her oath of fealty. Their eyes had met, and where their hands clasped together it felt like a current.

Klark keeps hoping there will be something like that again. Even if just an echo, or the faintest reprise. Some moment during the feast, in between warriors and well-wishers coming by the table to talk with them both, when Lexa will look over and...

But there’s nothing, and it’s only a short time before Klark is seeing Lexa and her warriors march away from the camp with banners snapping in the breeze. Beside her, she hears Genai give a sigh of relief.

Klark isn’t disappointed. Too much has happened for a few hours of the last day to spoil it. She has
Lexa’s respect, and friendship. She can be content with that.

After all, one thing is certain: they will meet again.

Chapter End Notes

No one's ever called me on it, but now that this story is finished I realized I never worked in an explanation for how this chapter contradicts Costia's claim in TWQR that Lexa stayed with Klark for a few days after the coronation.

That was Lexa's original plan, and Lexa never contradicted Costia's assumption that happened, but as you can see she left immediately afterward. And then stopped her caravan once they were out of Ice Nation territory and proceeded to have a full-on meltdown for a few days in the middle of nowhere. Trees were hacked. Dirt was kicked. Streams were brooded by. Peak Gay.

Then she pulled herself together and went to go confess to the previous love of her life that she'd fallen in love with someone else in the space of a few days.
Klark wakes up.

It’s a fragmented process. First, she’s conscious of the air she’s pulling into her lungs: warmer than anything she remembers without the tang of a wood fire to it. The length of her body is resting on the ground -- she can feel dirt under her hands, grass tickling at her wrists. But her head is propped up on something softer.

Second, she hears the voice.

“-- hear me? Klark? Can you open your eyes?”

She knows that voice.

Panic makes her sit up and scramble to her feet before she even takes her bearings, before her eyes can fully adjust to the sunlight. Her reflexes kick in and catch her before she overbalances, and she manages to turn with a measure of grace.

Half a dozen strangers look back. She doesn’t know any of these people -- they’re clean of tattoos or scars, their clothing is strange, and some of them are carrying guns. They look at her with an expectancy that makes her skin crawl.

But they’re preferable to the sight of the Commander of the twelve clans kneeling on the ground, and the knowledge that Klark had her head in that lap a second ago.

“Klark?” the Commander says. There’s something off about the way she says it.
Not that Klark cares if the Commander takes the time to pronounce her name correctly.

She takes solace in the thought, allows it to straighten her shoulders and spine. “Heda.”

The Commander’s eyes widen a fraction. “Klark.”

It sounds right that time.

Genai is nowhere to be seen. It’s not unheard-of for her to leave Klark’s side, but... She looks up and around her. There’s a mountain at her back, dark and looming, with a door cut in the middle.

A door --

It has to be the Mountain. She has to be --

How did she get here?

Someone says her name -- but wrong, somehow wrong again -- and there’s a touch to her shoulder. Klark is wound so tight it’s almost a relief to give over to instinct, grab the unknown hand and pull until the stranger’s weight is over her hip and she can throw him to the ground. Both knives are in her hands even as he’s blinking up at her in confusion: one at his throat, the other pointed at the girl who went for her weapon when Klark laid hands on the young man.

They’re an odd pair. Similar enough in coloring and features that she can guess at their relationship even though he’s not dressed like she is, like a Woods Clan warrior. She has no tattoos, though, and she was still a little too slow to react for Klark to believe she’s fully one of theirs.

The others are just as strange. Clearly not of any clan, but walking in daylight. Two of them, boy and girl, are spattered with what looks and smells like drying blood.

Her skin crawls for the necessity, but she looks to the Commander for help.
“Allies,” the Commander says immediately. “All of them. And safe.” It doesn’t register on Klark she’s using Ice Nation language until she switches to her own, snarling at the too-slow Woods Clan warrior girl: “Stand down. Don’t make her kill you.”

Clearly resenting it, the girl rests back on her heels.

The young boy covered in blood says something. Klark doesn’t catch the words -- she never liked her lessons in the Mountain’s language, never saw the use, and only persisted in the knowledge that... certain others were already fluent, and Klark didn’t want to fall short. But his distress is clear as a bell.

Reassurance comes from the man Klark put on the ground. Again, he speaks too quickly for Klark to follow, but it puts the boy at ease. Klark could hold her defensive stance all day, and part of her wants to, but she doesn’t want the Commander to think... she sheaths her skinning knife. She keeps her striking knife in her hand, but points it at the ground rather than her captive’s throat.

The young man sits, squinting up at her. There’s dust in his hair and on his clothes from where she threw him down, but his attention is only for Klark. “You know,” he says, slowly enough that she has no trouble understanding, “I don’t think I believed it. Not really. Not until just now.”

Before Klark can puzzle out what he possibly means, she hears “Your Majesty!” echo in the field around them. She turns to see Genai and Trest riding out from the line of the trees.

Adrenaline drains from her in a swoop. She slides her second knife into a sheath just before she begins to be aware of the catalogue of aches and pains running through her body: the strain of muscles in her left arm, the soreness in her shoulder, and gods but she’s hungry. She feels like she hasn’t eaten properly in days.

Trest budges up as soon as he rides over, and Klark swings herself into the saddle behind him as she takes the reins. She has no idea what’s going on, but she doesn’t need to. Not until she knows she’s safe and secure, with her own kind.

“You’ll take care of her.” That from the Commander. Klark doesn’t wait to hear Genai’s response. She spurs the horse with her heels as Trest whispers directions back to camp. But she’s not surprised at the softness of it. She’s sure if she looked over her shoulder, she’d see a very convincing performance of concern.
Lexa’s always been a good liar.

“... my soul did what?”

Genai throws up her hands. “Woods Clan,” she says darkly. It’s how she’s punctuated this bizarre story at intervals, and now how she chooses to wrap it up.

Klark might think... no, she’s not sure what she might think. But every time she feels herself beginning to doubt, her fingers creep up to the gunshot wound in her shoulder. That’s real. That happened.

And she can’t remember it.

“What do I need to know?” Genai understands what she’s asking. What’s most important? What does she need to focus on? What can she deal with that’s in her control?

“Echo sent five hundred warriors with me, kept one hundred and fifty at Court.”

Echo. What Klark would give to have her here. “More than I would expect. Is she afraid of attack while I was...”

Genai shakes her head. “I told no one else of your. Condition. But there reports of strange activity near the border. She was taking thirty warriors with her and preparing to explore the situation as I left.”

The queen in Woods Clan territory and the Heir outside the Court. Klark doesn’t like it. She itches to get on a horse, any horse, and start to ride home. It’s too warm, here, the air is heavy with water, and to think of the Commander out there, that Klark might actually go outside of this tent and see her --

She shudders off her unease. “Did we lose many warriors?”
“No fatalities reported.” When Klark raises an eyebrow in surprise, Genai continues: “The Commander led a very impressive campaign, and the intent was to distract instead of engage. A few injuries, and some of them may be serious enough our warriors will have to weather winter in Polis. But perhaps no lives lost.”

“And while you were out there, I went into the Mountain.”

“Yes. You can’t remember?”

Maybe can’t is the wrong word. Doesn’t. But could. Maybe. Potentially.

In the first few months of her reign she used to dream she was talking to Abi. Well, mostly fighting with her, but that was true to life. They’d hash out whatever new obstacle or issue Klark had discovered was part of being queen of a scattered, distrusting people, just as they used to argue over potential problems in the past. Klark didn’t always remember the exact details when she woke up. But every time she was left feeling more certain of herself, more confident in her position. And at the same time utterly bereft with the reminder of what she’d lost.

This is almost like that. As if the specifics of what happened were unimportant, dismissed into the recesses of memory she might reach, if she feels like trying. She’s left with the feeling of... resolution. Together with the smallest sigh of wistfulness; as if she’d gotten used to something -- some one -- and now they were gone.

“Of course this would happen in front of the gathered clans,” Klark mutters under her breath. “Do I have something to fear there? Do you think they’ll try and find a way to leverage it against me?”

But Genai shakes her head. “When you were... compromised, you were careful not to mix with anyone who might guess your condition. You kept to these, these Sky People, for the most part. I doubt they’ll carry tales to the other clans or their leaders, and even if they do, not many will believe them.”

“Woods Clan warriors would.”

“I don’t think so,” Genai says slowly. “It was difficult to convince the Commander and others what was happening, at first. This ritual is reserved for Woods Clan, and they didn’t like that it was shared with an outsider.”
But her other self had caused enough death to deserve it. Klark thinks maybe she’s supposed to feel disturbed by the fact, but she isn’t. She’s already taken so many lives to keep her own. She isn’t surprised to hear it’s something of a theme, no matter where her story begins.

... born up in the sky. She should take a moment to think about that. Once she gets a moment.

“So, among clanspeople, you knew,” she says. “And Trest. Did you tell Echo what was happening?” Genai nods. “Three, then, and the Commander makes a fourth.” The look on Genai’s face makes her stomach clench. “What?”

“Several others from Woods Clan knew. A spiritual figure who verified the ritual. A general who was present at your capture, along with her second. The Commander’s... the Shadow-walker.”

“You met her?” For one joyously pure second all her headaches melt away into excitement. And a little apprehension. Shadow-walker hasn’t been active since Klark took the crown, which has allowed her to collect stories of the subversive agent in the meantime. It’s hard not to admire Shadow-walker’s cleverness and sheer nerve. But it was easier when she didn’t seem to be Klark’s problem. “Is she still here?”

“Yes.”

“Is she serving as a general, now? Or an advisor?”

“She’s the Commander’s favorite.”

“She...” What had the name been. Anconia? “Costia. Costia is -- she’s the Shadow-walker? You’re sure?”

“I saw the fletchings on her arrows. And she admitted it.”

Costia.
Klark has heard less about her by that name. The reports didn’t give enough to form an impression of her as her own person instead of an accessory to, or an enhancement of, the Commander’s legend. Lexa being so young, so powerful. And so loved.

It makes too much sense. Klark feels stupid for not figuring it out on her own.

“I’m tired,” she tells Genai. Suddenly it’s all she can do to keep herself sitting upright on her cot. “If there’s anything --”

“Nothing else for right now.” Genai stands, but instead of leaving the tent she steps closer, puts her hand on top of Klark’s head. Klark leans her forehead into the older woman’s shoulder. They allow this of each other, sometimes, when there isn’t anyone to observe the Ice Queen’s need for simple comfort, or the fact the older woman is the only one in a position to give it. Genai smoothes her hand over Klark’s braids and says, “There’s more, but we can tackle it after you’ve slept.”

Tears prickle at Klark’s eyes. It’s exhaustion. It’s everything, all at once. “The reinforcements from home -- we didn’t plan the need to care and feed for them during the Summit. Or the journey back.”

“The Commander assured me Woods Clan would assist.”

“Did she.”

“You demanded it of her. The other you.”

“Huh. And she got what she asked for? Maybe she left too soon.” Possessed by a version of herself from another world, shot, starved. And her double didn’t even have the decency to sit through three days of clan politics for her. Klark lifts her head when she feels her bodyguard tense. “It was a joke, Genai. I’m just cranky after... everything, and still having to endure the Summit.”

“Forgive me if I prefer you representing our clan’s interests to a stranger.”

Klark barks a laugh. “A representative was good enough last year. What changed? Of course, the whim of our dear Commander.”
Genai crouches in front of her, scrutinizing her face. “Go to sleep,” she says, half-scolding. “You’re not yourself.”

She’s right. Klark made her mind up not to be angry about this a long time ago. Or, a year ago. Anger came from hurt, and it was ridiculous to be hurt by the maneuvering -- the manipulation -- of someone like the Commander. It was childish. Her mother was dead, Nia was dead by her hand, and Klark was a queen. She should be beyond childish things.

Genai makes her way out of the tent, and Klark takes a moment before closing her eyes. She pulls up the memory, fresh and sharp as the wind coming off a frozen lake. Herself, raw to the throne after less than a year on it, her excitement at hearing there was a warrior from Polis with a message. Her eagerness in thinking it came from a friend.

But the message from the Commander had been clear: Klark was not invited to the Summit. She was not invited to Polis. Was not welcome in Polis, now or in the near future. Or, the message didn’t explicitly state that, but it didn’t have to: it stressed how only the most irresponsible queen would leave a vulnerable people this early in her reign, how anything -- anything -- that Klark might contribute would be better presented by someone from her court with more diplomatic experience and skill. Klark, the message stressed, was a creature of the North, and best suited to staying in it.

No mention of whether creatures of the South would ever deign again to visit.

Klark had felt numb when the message was first delivered to her. She had managed to say the right things and smile in the right way for the rest of the afternoon, until audiences were over and she could retreat back to her rooms.

Where she had cried the first hot, hurting tears she’d allowed herself since Abi died. Only these had been from shame. Friends. She’d actually thought -- and she’d been looking forward to --

Not just as friends. Those early months of ruling had not been gentle, or kind, and Klark had longed for someone else who understood. Who also knew about the sacrifices at every turn, and the regrets. Who could talk to her about it. As they once had.

But the year since had stripped Klark of almost everything that was childish. She was a queen of her own making, and no one else’s, now. When the unexpected summons to Polis had arrived, months before, she’d only felt the barest twinge of remembered anger. Lexa must have her reasons. She always did.
It’s on Klark, she reminds herself as her eyes fall shut, to remember what tricks the Commander is willing to play in order to get what she wants.

They travel back to Polis without the Commander. One of her generals leads the bulk of the Wood Clan warrior back to their capital city -- “Anya,” Genai whispers as she lean across her saddle when Klark catches sight of the tall woman with a dark look -- but the leader of the Coalition stays behind. Something about negotiations with the Sky People, and perhaps the leader of the now-fallen Mountain.

Klark asks Genai to point out Costia if she sees her. But every time Klark spots someone who lives up to her expectations -- a particularly beautiful face, a warrior so bedecked in weapons they rattle as they ride past -- she looks to Genai and the bodyguard shakes her head.

Polis is not what she expected. Klark is still working to undermine years of Nia’s influence at the Ice Court, as well as the power-hungry monarchs before her. Things have improved, but there persists a sense of nervous supplication, a lingering population of sycophants and the small cruelties they use to hoard power. She’d kill them all and have done with it, but she worries about the message it might send to those who don’t see their manipulations as clearly. But it’s favorite bedtime story to tell herself before sleep.

Polis, with its great Tower and the shining ribbon of river flowing around it, is a world apart. The troops are met with cheers and songs as they ride up to the gates, and if there’s any real preference for Woods Clan warriors over those from Broadleaf, or Shadow Valley, or Ice Nation, Klark can’t see it. It’s too late in the season for fresh flowers but the city people weave crowns of jewel-colored leaves and throw them out into the crowds, toss fir branches beneath the horses’ hooves until the stinging, rich smell is everywhere. There’s so much joy, the air almost shimmers with it.

There’s a special interest in her. When she rides past warriors from other clans salute, and children clamber over each other and their caretakers to get a better view. She knows it’s for the other her, the one that brought down the Mountain and then fled to her own world. That’s a bitterness that stays at the back of her throat. But it’s hard to hold a grudge surrounded by so much celebration, so when Genai hisses at her to sit up straight she does. And sweeps her braids over her shoulder to better shows off her tattoos.

She thinks it’s more than the Mountain, though. People are much less demonstrative inside the Tower, but there’s a sense of cohesion, of collective work, that pricks at her. Even without the Commander walking its halls the place runs smoothly, happily. Meanwhile the thought of what
chaos could be brewing after such a long absence from her own Court makes her stomach curdle.

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself,” Genai tells her at the midday meal, loading Klark’s dish with more helpings from the serving plate. Klark waits until her bodyguard passes it down the table before using her knife to push half the food to Trest’s plate, which he’s scraped clean. Genai makes an outraged noise, but Trest is already tucking in. No matter how hungry Klark is, Trest is always hungrier -- he’ll probably be twice Klark’s size once he finishes his growth spurt.

“You’re just angry because you don’t know when you’ll see Echo next,” Genai needles at her in revenge.

Klark straightens, stung. “We’re not --” She rolls her eyes before digging into her food. “I’ve told you, Genai, she’s my heir first.”

Genai makes a face. Klark has never understood why her bodyguard was so invested in the relationship between her and the older Ice Nation warrior. She’d been Klark’s pick for a potential heir from the start, but after the official declaration they had become... more. Klark had hesitated at first, worried it might be seen as an abuse of power and unfair influence, but Echo had laughed herself sick when Klark shared this.

“I can’t be too careful,” Klark had protested, lips still stinging with the kiss Echo had pressed to them. They’d been in her rooms, alone, discussing collection of the coming harvest. Lexa’s messenger had left days ago, taking Klark’s representative with him.

Echo had laughed again. “Trust me,” she had said, warm and inviting as the candlelight throwing quivering shadows in the space, “if we’re together, you won’t be the focus of their ire.”

Klark had frowned. “You mean they’ll doubt the reasons you were named my successor.”

Again, Echo had laughed. She was so different, Klark had thought: mercurial, dark-humored.

Although... different compared to what?

“No one doubts you like that,” Echo had reassured her, reaching out to cover Klark’s hand on the table. “Or your decisions. No one but yourself.”
The motion over her thumb over the skin of Klark’s inner wrist had been soothing. But paired with the promise in her eyes, it had made Klark’s pulse quicken. “Whatever it is you want from me, I don’t know if I can give it.”

“You don’t get it.” Echo had threaded their fingers together. “What I want is to give you something.”

“Out of gratitude?” She hadn’t been sure what would be worse: that, or pity.

“Because I can,” Echo had said gently. “Because you... there isn’t anyone else you want, is there?”

Heart pounding, Klark had shaken her head.

Echo had given an odd little smile. “Then because I want to take the opportunity. For as long as it lasts.” She waited until Klark gave her hand a hesitant squeeze until pulling her closer, slipping her other hand into Klark’s hair. “You are beautiful,” she whispered, “and strong. And we share a duty like no two others in the Court.” She ghosted a second kiss over Klark’s lips before adding: “If we are so alone in our responsibilities, wouldn’t it be nice to be alone together?”

Echo spent most of her nights in Klark’s quarters after that. Klark had braced herself for consequences, especially from Genai. Instead, the bodyguard was approving, even happy to hear of it. Genai pins a lot more on the arrangement than mutual appreciation, to Klark’s growing annoyance. No matter how many times Klark tells her otherwise, Genai clearly hopes she and Echo are headed for bigger promises.

“Shame on you, then,” Genai tells her now. “She misses you very much.”

Klark doubts it. Oh -- not that Echo misses her, or looks forward to her return. But that it’s more than missing a daily companion, especially one whose absence means a heavier burden on her own shoulders. “I’m not ready to be Queen, you know,” she had mumbled into the back of Klark’s neck, nuzzling her as they lay together the night before Klark’s departure to Polis. “Don’t get eaten by any bears. Or snowcats.”

Klark had reached back to thwap Echo’s bare leg, listening to the other girl laugh. “One time.”
“She’ll do a good job without me,” Klark tells Genai. “I just... I hate not knowing how much longer we have to wait for the Commander to return, so we can finish this and go home.”

“The Commander is back in Polis. Since this morning, I would guess.”

A small shock zips up Klark’s spine. “She is? How do you know?” They’d been together all day, and Klark heard nothing.

Genai nods to a figure across the eating hall. “Because that’s the Shadow-walker, and she goes where the Commander does.”

Hating herself for it, Klark turns to look.

She must have known, whatever she’s been pretending, that the real Shadow-walker couldn’t be so ostentatious, so noticeable, as her previous guesses. The agent would have been marked long before now by Nia’s warriors if she didn’t know how to blend in and disappear. But she is interesting-looking. Not pretty -- “pretty” almost feels like it would be an insult; too soft, too... permissive. Nothing about this girl is asking for anyone else’s approval.

Klark would be afraid she’d be caught staring, but from the moment she glanced over the Shadow-walker has been staring right back.

She rises from her table, and two others climb to their feet with her. Klark is surprised to recognize one of them: the dark-haired girl from the foot of the Mountain, the one who almost drew on Klark. She limps a little when she walks. The second warrior looms, he’s so tall. But even so his general demeanor encourages onlookers to dismiss him, look elsewhere.

The Shadow-walker must know the same trick, Klark thinks as they approach, but she’s not using it now. Right now every other person in the eating hall watches as she walks up to the queen of the Ice Nation. From the way Shadow-walker carries herself she knows, and it’s her design.

The table is between them when she stops in front of Klark. She has yet to take her eyes from Klark’s face.

The silence between them lengthens, stretches until it feels at the snapping point. Klark refuses to be the one to break it.
Genai, giving a small sigh under her breath, rises to her feet before addressing the Woods Clan warrior: “Is there a problem, Shadow-walker?”

“No,” the other girl answers. She seems oddly subdued, considering the air of command she carries that has caused the rest of the hall to fall silent. “No, I... I’m only confirming something I already suspected.” Before Klark can respond to that, she follows with: “I suppose I could thank you. For Nia.”

Klark doesn’t miss the fact she isn’t actually doing that. “Don’t bother. It wasn’t for your sake.”

Genai’s shoulders twitch. But Costia raises an eyebrow and her look -- which Klark didn’t register was a bit gloomy until now -- lightens. “Didn’t you do it for all of us, in a way?”

Ignoring the undercurrent of mockery, Klark folds her arms on top of the table. “No. I did it because she killed my mother. Because she was going to kill me.” Looking the other girl square in the eye: “And because no one else was going to.”

That’s the one thing that’s always troubled her about Shadow-walker, and the final piece to fall into place when Genai revealed her identity. As an agent, she’d seemed unstoppable -- untouchable. Cleverer and quicker and always ten steps ahead of the warriors sent to capture her.

So why hadn’t she killed Nia?

The only possible answer was that Lexa told her not to. Klark doesn’t even need the flicker of Costia’s gaze for confirmation.

Stupid. Oh, Klark gets it -- love, and all of that. She and the Commander must truly share something special, for her safety to be prioritized above the possible political gains of Nia’s death. Or... well, from another perspective, there had been no clear gain: anyone replacing Nia would have been raised up in her image, and perhaps even regicide would have failed to bring about a change.

But knowing what Klark knows of this woman, and standing in her presence for mere minutes, she can already see how the edict could have ended in disaster. Denied direct action, the Shadow-walker would have had to get creative -- and that’s exactly what she had done, pulling bigger and bigger stunts, trying to finish off Nia through sheer aggravation. If it had continued, who knows what risks she would have taken.
So, love can sometimes make Lexa stupid. It’s worth tucking away into the back of her brain, although Klark isn’t sure how she’ll be able to use it.

“It’s probably for the best,” she tells Costia. “If you hadn’t been so careful, you might have ended up being Queen.”

Sheer panic flashes across the face of the tall Woods Clan man standing at attention. Costia looks a bit unnerved herself. The atmosphere around the six of them feels considerably less tense.

“Will you sit with us?” Klark asks. She thinks she’d like more opportunities to make these stone-faced people break.

“I... no,” Costia says, “thank you. The three of us are leaving Polis in an hour.”

Klark’s heart sinks. “Don’t,” she blurts out, surging to her feet. “Stay. Another day at least. I’ve wanted to talk with you for a while, now.”

It’s true. Klark didn’t just beg every warrior in her court for every tale they’d ever heard of Shadow-walker just because she wanted to be prepared, should the agent return to the Ice Nation.

Costia gives her a long look. Whatever she finds in Klark’s face makes her hesitant for the first time. “No,” she says gently. “Not now. But perhaps... another day. Perhaps our travels will take us closer to your court.”

Klark meets the challenge in the other girl’s eyes by raising her head even higher. “You would be welcome. And I think you’d be surprised how many people are eager to greet you.”

“Hmm,” Costia says, thoughtful. She turns and begins to make her way out.

Only to stop and turn back.

“She chose you,” she calls back to Klark.
She uses the Ice Nation’s language -- Klark doesn’t think anyone but herself, Genai, and Trest would understand it among those in the hall. It isn’t spoken often outside their clan, but Costia’s accent is perfect.

“Just in case you’re tempted to think, later on, that I made the choice for her,” Costia continues. “That she pushed you away, or ran from you. She did those things. But before all that, and after all that, she chose you. In every way that mattered.”

She turns on her heel and walks out before Klark has a chance to catch her breath in the wake of it.

Everyone in the hall is staring. Thankfully, they seem just as confused as Klark -- she was right in suspecting no one else would understand Costia. Not that Klark understands. Slowly, she sinks back into her seat.

Trest looks back at her with similar bewilderment.

But Genai.

Genai is looking fixedly at her empty plate, fiddling with her eating knife. Her lower lip is caught between her teeth.

“Genai.”

The bodyguard starts, and then guiltily raises her eyes.

“What haven’t you been telling me?”

Klark banishes Genai to the barracks with the rest of the Ice Nation warriors, choosing to take only Trest as protection when she retreats to her room. They both know if she was really angry, she would have chosen another bonded pair to play bodyguard for the remainder of the Summit -- as
long as Klark keeps her second, Genai hasn’t completely fallen from grace.

Not that she isn’t angry enough.

But it’s not Genai’s fault. Not completely. Klark could have asked to know more than what was immediately necessary. She could have poked at her own memory. She could have found out, before now, in whose tent her double slept for so many nights.

Why didn’t she?

She paces the length of her room. She knows the details of the rumors are false. The Commander would never. Lexa is not her favorite person, but Klark does know her. She would never have Klark share her bed in any but the most literal sense, no matter what rituals the Woods Clan believes in, knowing Klark herself was not... aware. That isn’t the girl Klark met, and two years is not enough to change a person so deeply. And even though it makes Klark scowl until a headache tugs at her temples, she suspects any tent or bed-sharing was only to serve the greater plan of bringing down the Mountain. She has no idea how. But that would also be too believable of the girl Klark knew.

It’s not the obviously false rumors that bother her. It’s what fuels them: the belief that Klark, *Klark*, is at the center of this schism between Costia and the Commander. Genai swore that last part was true, Costia had given back a -- a ring, of some sort, a token that lent her the Commander’s power? She’d done *something* that made everyone certain it was over between them. Which meant dozens of lore-singers had to find new material.

... or maybe they’d just add a coda about Klark, and how the Ice Nation is treacherous and scheming still.

Klark pauses to kick a chair across the room. She can’t believe this. Even Costia seemed to think -- no, no it had to be some massive misunderstanding, of proportions more suited to a comic play than this... This was Klark’s life, what did Lexa think she was doing? How could she have possibly allowed Costia, of all people, to believe something like that?

Of course Klark is familiar with the fancies Lexa will allow others to believe, if it ultimately benefits her. But she really did think there were limits. Scruples.

There’s a mirror in the corner, pitted and dark. It catches her reflection and Klark is caught staring at herself, a fist pressed to her mouth and breathing hard.
What if it’s true?

She wants to throw back the thought as quickly as it surfaces from the turmoil in her mind, but she pauses.

Considers.

... what if it’s true?

What if Lexa really has fallen for Klark’s double?

It seems impossible. But then, so does the Shadow-walker abandoning her lover and relinquishing her claim to the queen of the *Ice Nation*. So does projecting one’s soul from one world into another, and to bring down an enemy that terrorized the clans for generations.

And when she thinks of it that way, she imagine how it might happen. Lexa has shaped the course of her life around the Mountain: forced the Coalition into existence for it, given up personal vendettas for the sake of it. Maybe she really could love with the girl who destroyed it.

But that girl is gone.

A knock at the door makes Klark jump. She presses her hands to her face, feeling the heat in her cheeks as she forces herself to calm down. Shaking back her hair, she walks over to open her door.

Trest is on the other side, looking miserable. She sees the reason why over his shoulder: a Sky Person.

“He won’t leave,” Trest says in a whisper. “I keep *telling* him --”

But Trest is still working on learning the Woods Clan’s language, forget the Mountain’s. Klark doubts the Sky People speak any dialects found on the ground. She gives Trest a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.
“No visitors,” she says to the Sky Person behind him. “Go away.”

The Sky Person grabs the door to keep her from closing it, and then blinks to find her knife nudging into his solar plexus.

“I, uh -- wow. Wow, you weren’t kidding. Please don’t kill me.”

“Go away.” He speaks a lot more quickly than she’s used to, but she doesn’t think her accent is that bad. He shouldn’t have so much trouble understanding.

“Listen, one second. Just let me show you something. Okay?” He releases the door and holds his hands up, wide and empty.

Klark gives him a second once-over. He’s tall, with close-cropped hair and dark skin, but he doesn’t move at all like someone trying to impress their body’s advantages on others. His hands have no weapon callouses, and the line of his shoulders is soft. But as he watches her closely she gets the sense of calculating intelligence behind his eyes. Despite his attempts to stop her from closing whatever doors she wants to be closed.

Klark nods and lets the hand with the knife drop to her side. Word in the Tower is that they’re not supposed to kill or maim the Sky visitors just yet, anyway. But she doesn’t sheathe it.

The Sky Person notices. He moves even more slowly and deliberately as he reaches inside his jacket, and her estimation of his intelligence goes up another notch.

He brings out a thin rectangle, white-ish and crumbled at the corners. “This is for you.”

“From you?”

“No.” His eyes flicker. “From you. The um, the other you.”

... huh.
She tucks her knife back into her belt and stands to the side. “Come in.”

He does so warily. Klark nods at Trest before closing the door between them.

“Sit?” she asks the Sky Person, indicating a small table in the corner. He does, and she drags the second chair over from the other side of the room. It wobbles -- one of the legs bent when she kicked it -- but holds her.

She indicates herself. “Klark. My name.”

He blinks at her again. “I know that. I... oh. I’m. I’m Wells.”

“Wells,” she repeats, and he stares at her some more. Lacking the words, she gestures at the object still in his hands.

“Oh.” He shakes off his befuddlement and lays it on the table between them. “Here.”

Klark looks at it, then back at him, then down at the object. “What is it?”

“A letter, from her. See, it’s,” he reaches to fumble it open: it expands, showing her the dark marks on the brighter surface, “it’s a letter.”

He holds it open, expectant.

“You can read?” Klark asks.

“No, I didn’t read it, I promise. She gave it to me the night before the attack on the Mountain. She... I didn’t really know her, I mean you, in this world, but she said we knew each other in hers, so. She trusted me to give it to you. Once she left.”

“No, no.” Klark shakes her head and repeats, hoping he’ll really listen to the words: “You can read.”
She can see the moment comprehension hits, his eyes widening. “You can’t.”

Klark shrugs. She’s heard of the practice of making words out of designs, but it’s not something the Ice Nation does. Or any of the clans that she knows of. It’s very... Mountain: hoarding words and wisdom like that, making it so much harder to share. She never wanted to learn the trick of it herself.

“Oh. Okay.” He looks down at the -- letter -- in his hands. “Do you think she knew that? I think she knew that.” He squeezes his eyes shut and takes a deep breath.

“So,” when he opens his eyes again, “I’m guessing almost no one in this building knows how to read English. Except me, of course.”

Klark tilts her head at him.

“And anyone else from the Ark, but are they suckers? Probably not,” he mutters. “Would you -- would it be okay if I read it to you?”

“Please.” It’s easier to smile at him than expected. He seems just as frustrated with Klark’s double as she is, which, in comparison to all the worship and acclaim...

“Okay. Here we go.” He clears his throat as he picks up the paper. “I don't know how to write this letter.”

He halts, and it’s clear he’s as embarrassed as Klark is in this moment. “Are you sure this is okay?”


He gives her a sympathetic look. And Klark... Klark wonders if her other self knew it would be like this. If she knew the two of them would be gentler to each other with this introduction of awkwardness.

It’s pretty clever, actually.
It’s reassuring to know they aren’t so different.

“I want you to know,” Wells resumes, “the only thing getting me through is that you probably feel the same way about reading it...”

The irony is that she doesn’t have much to do during the Summit. Ice Nation is fantastically isolated - and fragmented, but she hopes that isn’t as understood by outsiders -- and aside from border negotiations there’s very little to discuss with other clan leaders. A few of them are interested in the resources Ice Nation could offer in future, such as pelts or ivory, but there’s no established market. More than a few are interested in expanding their markets, but out of every ten merchants to approach her only one or two are willing to venture travel that far north with their wares. Even the more adventurous seem deterred by Klark’s honest account of the conditions they’ll face: the distance between settlements, winter storms and blinding summer sun, the language barrier. Nia used the self-reliant nature of the Ice Nation to her advantage, perhaps stressed it to the breaking point, but it hardly began with her.

“But your capital city,” someone -- a merchant-prince from Delphi -- protests, his long nails painted the colors of guild alliances. “You could establish it as the center of trade, allow our people to create a home for themselves under your wing.”

Klark shakes her head. “The Ice Court isn’t like your cities. There’s an established hall for waiting out the winter storms, but the rest of the year we follow the animals as they migrate, or to avoid the worst weather. Even the settlements shift within their territories according to the demands of the land. See,” and she shrugs off her jacket to show them her shoulder tattoo, the stark design of fish and fowl contained by the swirl of water, or air currents. She talks about their way of life and how it contains a promise to the land itself, the recognition their survival could only result from learning its ways and whims. Other clans might cut roads into the earth and build towers that tapped against the sky; they could try to tame their world. The North was wild, would always be wild, and anyone who made it their home must take that wildness into their heart.

She can see some of them don’t like it, walk away from her shaking her heads and abandoning their half-formed plans of remapping the North with their trade. Her heart aches for the the possibilities she might be losing for her people -- diplomacy was Roan’s gift, not hers. (Ugh, Roan. She has to deal with him, eventually.) Maybe if she were softer, presented herself with more compromise... But Klark is proud of her people. She’s proud of their lives.
And it isn’t lost on everyone. All the Boat People ambassadors recognize her on sight and clasp her hand in friendship. A village leader from Rock Line doesn’t say much, but nods thoughtfully every time Klark pauses for breath. A Plains Rider warrior is so openly appreciative of Klark’s shoulder tattoo, Klark shows her where its sibling begins at her waist: dense forests and furred predators that clamber down the curve of her thigh. The horse-sister traces a bold line at Klark’s hipbone, making Klark’s stomach muscles jump.

So Klark appreciates the opportunity connect with leaders and peoples from clans she hasn’t seen since her coronation. She’s grateful to be able to share more of her people, to help the slow process of moving Ice Nation from a place of fear to familiarity in other’s minds.

She’s also aware she’s playing right into the Commander’s hands.

Her presence at the Summit is beneficial, of course. But it mostly benefits Lexa. Behold: the savage nation and its wild queen that Lexa brought to heel. Well, brought into the Coalition. But hadn’t Klark sworn her fealty? And now, hadn’t she brought down the Mountain for Lexa?

So when the final day and audience of the Summit arrives, the meeting that requires the presence of every clan leader or representative, Klark decides to go all in.

She left her formal robes at Court, but her pack contains a mantle stitched from the pelt of an ocean-biter. The fur has a translucent quality, not pure white like her robes. It makes the black pads of the intact claws that much more stark where they fasten at her collarbone, and picks up the hue of the gold-dipped claws. Genai, back in good graces, helps Klark fasten thick leather bands around her biceps tooled with her story -- her birth and Nia’s rage on her right arm, her return and Nia’s death on her left. It’s too hot for her furred boots. It’s too hot for any of it, but Klark is determined. As a final touch Genai brings out the paint made from white chalk dust all Ice Nation warriors wear into battle and streaks Klark’s face: three parallel lines on her untattooed cheek, and one more down the part in her hair. She adds gold flakes to the center part as well, careful with their trembling delicacy until they settle into the paint.

People stop and stare as she walks through the tower to the throne room, and the other clan leaders aren’t much better when she enters. Klark is the last one to arrive-- even Lexa is seated in a chair of warped and twisted wood on a raised dias. Klark drops into her own chair, deliberately insolent as she raises her eyes to meet the Commander’s.

You wanted a captive barbarian, she thinks. You’ve got her.

It’s the first time they’ve seen each other since Klark woke at the Mountain. If Klark’s intimidating
façade has done its work -- if she’s gained back whatever she lost in estimation when she awoke confused and forgetful with her head in Lexa’s lap -- it doesn’t show in the Commander’s expression. There’s only a flutter at the base of her throat as she swallows.

“Greetings to the Queen of the Ice Nation,” the Commander says, sounding a bit gravelly. “Who has at last honored us with her presence.”

Klark can see Wells struggle to contain a grin. He looks nice as well. They couldn’t give him any Ice Nation apparel, or it might give away their game, but Genai suggested patching and re-dyeing his own clothing as a quick fix. It was odd attire to begin with: made well enough to endure but flimsy and unnatural-feeling in a way that made her fingers itch when she touched it.

“Artificial fibers,” he’d explained cheerfully when he saw her do it. “We couldn’t grow cotton or use animal pelts in space, so we figured out how to made fabric from, uh, do you know the word plastic?”

She didn’t, but she had a vague picture of what he could mean. “But how did you keep warm?”

Raven, sitting over on her own bed and fiddling with something comprised of gears and scrap metal - Woods Clan territory especially was littered with this kind of debris from the world before -- had snorted. “Who said we were?”

Klark liked Raven from the moment Wells introduced her. They were the two youngest among the contingent from the Sky People, but clearly the most at ease in Polis. Wells was the de-facto leader, explaining he’d been commissioned by their Chancellor to see to their interests during the Summit because of his familiarity with the issues at work. Raven’s presence in the Woods Clan city was never fully explained, but Klark has known enough loss to take one look at the girl and know: whoever her home used to be, they’re no longer around to run to.

It’s good for her, listening to them talk about where they came from. Her mind still balks at the idea of tons and tons of metal floating in space, so she concentrates on the stories of the people inside it: the hope and hardship. Never having enough of anything.

It isn’t the same, Klark had thought, asking careful questions of them both and learning their different perspectives of life among the stars. (She thinks Wells learns a lot as well, listening to Raven.) But it’s similar enough to make her understand why her other self would fight so hard, would take over Klark and Klark’s life for a time, in order to protect these people. She visits whenever she can, despite Genai’s mutterings about taking in strays. She feels like she fits better into her own skin each time.
She throws Wells a wink now, appreciating how the newly crisp black of his clothes compliments his natural air of authority. The Commander clears her throat and resumes the meeting.

The last day, and the last audience, has much less structure than the previous days of the Summit. This is the opportunity for the clan leaders and representatives to speak their concerns directly to the Commander, bringing any business they don’t feel has been thoroughly addressed. Most of it is leaders complaining about the details of deals already reached, and Klark watches as Lexa works to shut them down without outright offense. There are a few genuine concerns placed on the table, though, and Klark tracks the movement of the sun across the sky through the wide, curtained windows. She waits.

Finally, the Commander sighs. “Well, if that’s all the business for toda--”

Klark stands.

_I don’t know what memories you’ll keep_, the letter had said. _I got pieces of yours when I needed them. So if you’re the same, you should know the most important things right away._

“Ice Nation calls to abolish the nightblood tradition,” she says, and has the distinct pleasure of watching shock spread over Lexa’s face.

“The Sky People second.” Out of the corner of her eye Klark sees Wells rise to his feet, standing with his arms held behind his back. “Along with the Mountain.”

“Sky People speak for the Mountain, now?” the Commander snaps out. Her eyes don’t leave Klark.

“... no.” Wells grimaces. “But it was hard enough to make them agree to the Persephone Project. They wouldn’t have agreed to a foster program if they knew it meant throwing their children into a competitive blood sport. But if you want word on it, I sent a letter, I should hear back soo--”

“Sky Nation is not part of the Coalition,” the Commander cuts in. She glares at Wells. “No one outside the Coalition has influence over what governs it, or how. And this is _Woods Clan_ tradition.”

“It was,” Klark says. “But now you’ve brought us together. We are one people, united.” More or
less. “Can you promise no nightblood children will be born outside of your clan?”

Lexa’s hands tighten on arms of her throne until the knuckles are white, and Klark knows she can’t.

“Ice Nation wants an amendment to the laws surrounding nightbloods and the process of their conclave. We understand the seriousness of changing another clan’s traditions, but if these things affect other children, from other clans, then it is no longer a Woods Clan concern.”

Lexa rises to her feet. She’s composed -- Klark wonders whether there’s ever a time when she isn’t -- but with a palpable sense of coiled fury. And, tucked right behind the hard look in her eyes, the barest flicker of shame.

That’s what convinced Klark to do it this way, instead of hacking down the door to Lexa’s room and hashing it out at the top of her lungs. Lexa may not love being confronted like this, in public, but the audience means Klark is that much less likely to take out her knives. She’s pretty sure she’d still lose a fight against Lexa. But *gods*; after that letter, she wants one.

But the letter’s contents -- and the shadowy memories it dredged up, the flicker of Lexa’s face turning away, a tattooed back bared to candlelight -- made it clear that wasn’t the way to get results.

“Perhaps our ways seem harsh to outsiders,” Lexa says, and if she isn’t careful Klark will take a swing at her, “but they were understood by those who joined this Coalition when they entered our ranks. They were a known risk. What precedent does it set, if we allow the traditions of other clans to be changed on the whim of one person?”

“The other clan leaders knew,” Klark concedes. “I’m sure knowledge of the conclave reached some even within the Ice Nation.”

Genai had known. When Klark found that out it led to the worst fight they’d ever had: no shouting, no slammed doors, just a long night of strained and quiet conversation. It was the first time Klark had ever truly considered releasing Genai from her service. Even though she had decided against it, their interactions had been tentative, ever since.

But in the end Klark had to accept that, from Genai’s perspective, she had done the right thing in keeping the facts of the conclave away from her queen. Knowing Klark, Genai had anticipated her anger and resistance, how it might have affected her actions and even split her focus in those crucial months after Klark’s coronation.
And it wasn’t as if Klark could tell her, now, that Genai’s assumptions were all wrong.

“Are those the only reasons you didn’t tell me?” Klark had asked. The candles had burned down to nubs at that point, the best source of light in the room being the silvery shadows of the dawn coming through the window. “And, I’m assuming, warned the rest of the Court not to mention it?”

Genai had been silent for a long moment. Shutting her eyes, speaking with an honest and obvious reluctance (the defining factor in Klark’s later decision to keep her as a bodyguard), she had admitted: “I also didn’t want any more reasons for you to come to the Commander’s attention.”

Klark waits until she has Lexa’s full attention now -- waits until the other girl looks right into her eyes -- before saying softly: “But I didn’t know.”

Neither had her double. Lexa had decided to enlighten her. Not Klark.

Lexa’s jaw clenches. Klark can guess what she wants to say: it was Klark’s responsibility to know, to investigate and discover. Ignorance is not a shield from duty.

But Lexa also knows there was a concerted effort to keep Klark ignorant -- because she played her own part in it.

She can hardly scold Klark for being successfully tricked, can she?

“I think it’s time for Woods Clan to reconsider the tradition for their own sake,” Klark continues. “Without an enemy to unite us, it’s inevitable there will be more discord between the clans. Surely, Woods Clan wants to ensure no one can usurp the line of succession -- by stealing away and raising their own nightblood, according to their own agenda, for instance.”

And if that never occurred to any of the other clans leaders -- any except Nia -- they were certainly thinking about it now. Lexa’s eyes narrow.

“After all, if it becomes more and more possible for nightbloods to be born outside of Woods Clan, they might encounter more people who, like me, don’t know the laws of your clan surrounding them.” The effort to sound nonchalant leaves her a little light-headed as she says: “I hear every single
Woods Clan warrior has pledged to hunt down anyone who kills a nightblood outside of the conclave.”

“Yes,” Lexa says, barely more than a whisper.

“Imagine what tragedy could result from those misunderstandings.” The other clan leaders murmur their discussions. Klark can’t imagine any one of them enjoys the thought of their own subjects put to death by the Woods Clan, no matter the reason.

Because that’s the only punishment for killing a nightblood: death. That had been another shock from Genai, and even after the bodyguard left for her own rooms Klark had been unable to find sleep. Instead she spent a long time looking down at her hands in the early morning light, remembering when they had been black with blood.

How Lexa had scoured them clean.

The murmurs are rising in volume, becoming grumbling and dissent.

“Enough,” Lexa cuts through it. “Your motion has been heard and will be taken under consideration. A resolution will be reached between Woods Clan elders and clan leaders at next year’s Summit.” She sweeps the room with a cool glance. “You can trust me to stay alive until then. But this year’s Summit has officially concluded. Thank you for your presence and contributions; you are all dismissed. Not you,” she adds darkly to Klark. Her eyes are hard.

They wait until everyone else has filed out of the throne room, each still standing before the other. Wells catches Klark’s eye before he leaves, making a funny little gesture -- holding his hand flat, he touches his forehead before jerking it away. The look on his face is one of reassurance, so she nods back.

Lexa also nods to the guards at the door, who switch to their stations just outside. The sound of the double doors closing behind them feels like it echoes in the empty space.

“Have you told anyone?”

She means Genai. If Genai knows that Klark killed a nightblood.
“No.” Klark has learned some discretion in the last almost-two years. Some.

Lexa closes her eyes, and the tension in her carriage lessens, slightly. “You play a dangerous game,” she breathes out.

“Me?” Klark’s stomach twists. “It wasn’t a secret I killed Ontari. What if Genai had known what she was? What if anyone in the Court had known?”

“They might have,” Lexa says, surprisingly candid.

“Then why --”

“Because if any of them came forward they would have been forced to share the same punishment. If they knew Nia deliberately subverted the conclave, and said nothing, Woods Clan would claim their lives as well.”

Klark mulls this over. “I wondered why you didn’t have them bring back the body.”

“Truthfully, we didn’t have enough horses.” Lexa turns and makes her way back to her throne, crossing one long leg over the other as she relaxes back into it. “Not with the children, and not after the long ride they’d already had. If we wanted to get you back to camp before dawn it made sense to leave her on top of that cliff.”

“Where no one would ever find her.”

“Not before the body would be past the point of... identification.”

Klark shakes her head. “You could have just told me.”

The Commander gives her a look.
“Don’t you dare, Lexa,” Klark snaps. The other girl blinks at her, but Klark has no time to consider how easily she uses the name, still. “You weren’t doing me any favors. You left me ignorant, which made me vulnerable, and all because you knew what I would do once I heard of the nightbloods.”

“I didn’t know. But I could guess.”

“And you didn’t want to deal with it. With me.”

“I didn’t want to bind your hands and feet, tie you on a lead to my saddle, and drag you back to Polis as a prisoner. I didn’t want to leave your people leaderless, and fractured.” Lexa lets that sink in before asking coldly: “Is that what you wanted?”

Klark clenches her hands into fists. “You’re changing the subject.”

“There is no way -- none -- that we could have hidden where your new awareness of nightbloods had come from. You had already declared your intentions to join the Coalition, and then to change your mind the morning after? Everything would have been discovered.”

“Please,” Klark sneered. “You wanted a secure leader of my clan, and you wanted her fealty. Don’t pretend you did this for me.”

Lexa sighs, slumping a little where she sits on her throne. “I never have just one reason for what I decide to do,” she says, subdued. “I weigh whatever might be at stake, and I try to find the best solution from there.”

There’s an echo in her words that makes Klark pause. Lexa doesn’t say it arrogantly, or even proudly -- more like someone who is exhausted beyond the telling of it.

“Even when it goes against your own laws?” she finds herself asking, and more gently than she meant to.

“Her existence went against our laws. Nia withheld her from the last conclave to give her that much longer to train, to prepare. None of the current nightbloods are older than twelve. If I’d died, she would have slaughtered them.” Her expression is a careful blank. “She was already dead. There was nothing to be gained, and too much to lose, by seeking justice.”
Klark can’t fault her reasoning. But even in the face of such practicality, she can just about remember -- amidst the pain in her head, the cold of the falling snow -- Lexa’s words: _never been two nightbloods of an age alive, like this._

The moment passes, and Lexa straightens. “It’s been decided and done for a long time.” She casts a gaze up at Klark through her eyelashes. “Don’t think you can use it to your advantage.”

Anger flares up in her as fresh as when the letter first set it alight. “You talk like you want those children to die.”

She regrets it as soon as she says it. Even before she sees how Lexa takes it. Klark isn’t sure what she’s seeing on Lexa’s face, but she is sure she never wants to see it there again.

“I am the Commander of the Woods Clan and the head of the Coalition,” Lexa says, low and terrible. “Very little of my life is about what I want.”

“You can’t -- do you honestly believe that? You make it sound like you have _less_ power, in the end.”

“No,” Lexa says reluctantly. “It’s not that. But I can’t destabilize my people’s lives on a whim. You’re talking about traditions that have defined and sustained them since the fall of the old world.”

Klark thinks back to Lexa illuminated by firelight, her own face stinging with the newness of her tattoo. “You can’t build a new world out of blood.” Lexa knows this, she told Klark -- why is she still --

Lexa raises her chin. “Sacrifices have to be made.”

-- oh.

Oh. Lexa is never going to admit, on her own, that this is an unacceptable sacrifice. Because it was asked of _her_. And she will never admit it was too much.
That’s not how she sees the world.

Klark has to harden her heart before she continues. “I’m not letting go of this. I managed to sow enough doubt among the other clan leaders after just a few days of learning the truth. Imagine what I can do a year from now.”

Wariness creeps over Lexa’s face. “A year --”

“Next year’s Summit. I’m going to be here, whatever messages you send.” Lexa flinches, and Klark takes the opportunity to press on: “We both know this has to be done. It might not be easy, but -- it has to be done. Use me, if it helps. Call me a savage who refuses to be reasoned with, if they need someone to hate. But by this time next year your people will have a new ritual of succession, or else.”

“And what?” Lexa doesn’t appear to be angered at the pronouncement. Curious, more like, as if Klark were handing her a puzzle-toy she had yet to solve.

“Or I’ll cede from the Coalition and declare Ice Nation to be a sanctuary for any nightblood who claims it.”

Lexa props her chin in her hand, fingers tapping her cheek. “They are -- we are raised to put leadership above our own safety. I doubt they’d take your offer.”

Klark quirks an eyebrow. She knows all about being raised to claim a destiny -- and what it feels like when expectation meets the reality of command. “Really? In all the records of conclaves, not one nightblood has tried to run?”

Lexa’s face betrays nothing. But her fingers stop tapping.

Oh. Oh, there’s something there. And whatever it is, Lexa kept it from Klark’s double as well -- Klark knows immediately.

She’s more than a little pleased to think she ferreted something out of the Commander even her other self didn’t catch.
“I’ll inform my generals,” Lexa says abruptly, sitting back in her throne. “None of this will be easy, you understand.”

Easy. Klark thinks of the past few days -- what she can remember of them, that is -- and has to swallow down a fairly bitter laugh. “I understand.”

“How --” Lexa cuts herself off, shifting in her seat. She looks uncertain. “How did you find out? Who told you about the nightbloods? You said it had only been a few days.”

“She did.” Klark gives a wry grin and points at herself.

Lexa blinks. “I... what?”

“She wrote me a letter and asked a friend among the Sky People to deliver it.”

“She... wrote...” Lexa is pure confusion. “You can’t read their language.”

“No, but her messenger could.”

And it’s worth it. Oh, it’s worth how manipulated Klark felt, once she figured it out, to see Lexa’s epiphany. The way her mouth falls all the way open.

In that moment, Klark forgives her double quite a bit.

“What else did she tell you?” asks Lexa, keen-eyed in her quick recovery.

“N-nothing.” Klark lies badly, caught off guard. Lexa doesn’t press her, but she doesn’t look convinced.

“How much do you remember, then?” she asks.
“I...” She’s not sure how to explain it. Everything, but nothing -- it’s all there, somewhere, she can tell, as if all the things that happened when someone else was in control of her body left the memories as a courtesy gift. Only they put them into a box: a box which rattles and growls but doesn’t open, and Klark isn’t sure she wants to let out whatever lives inside. “Not much.”

“Do you remember her at all?”

Klark doesn’t know how to talk about that either. How sometimes she’ll catch a corner of her own reflection and startle, as if... as if she’s expecting it to resolve into someone else. Or the itch of loneliness, after.

Which is ridiculous, and she’s not going to talk about that to the Commander of all people. It’s ridiculous to be lonely inside your own head.

“I’m sorry she’s gone, for your sake,” Klark says instead. “She was a powerful ally.”

Lexa frowns. “As are you,” she says after a moment.

“But in the same way. I don’t understand the Mountain or the Sky People like she did.”

“No, but neither of them are... as great a concern, now.” Lexa clears her throat, places her hands on the arms of her throne. “Which brings me to -- I didn’t think I would be asking you under these circumstances, but... you might stay a few days longer, even with the Summit concluded. I know your journey is far and you have to reach your Court before the snows begin,” she presses forward, when Klark would have spoken, “but because it is such a rare opportunity, having you this far south, we should take advantage of it. The Ice Nation has been part of my Coalition for almost two years, but I know so little of your ways. I thought -- I hoped -- you might take time to correct that.”

Klark thought she was in control of herself, but bitterness pulls the corner of her mouth down even as she struggles for composure. “Your ignorance is your own fault, Lexa.”

Lexa jerks a little, stung. “I know that. I only thought --”

“Do you?” Klark interrupts. “It was your choice to -- we were always there,” waiting, wondering, abandoned, “it was you who kept yourself apart. It doesn’t matter,” she says, a little too loudly, when it seems like Lexa would break in. “It’s done. You can’t make up two years in two days, and we’re
leaving tomorrow morning.”

She turns on her heel and heads for the double doors. The moment her hand touches the battered wood to push them open, she pauses.

Klark was sometimes so lonely growing up her whole body ached with it. She would lay down, frozen ground at her back and above her endless sky, and let the weight of it pin her in place. It felt like the only way to keep herself from flying into a million pieces.

And yet. She was never asked to kill her closest companions, or grew up knowing she would be their death or they would be hers. She thinks that must be a kind of loneliness beyond even her comprehension.

The glimpse of Lexa’s face she caught before turning would confirm that.

So Klark turns back.

“I meant what I said before,” she tells Lexa, who’s standing in front of her throne now. “I know the two of you shared a lot. I know you were close.”

She also knows, from what Genai has told her, that Woods Clan believes... things, about those souls which travel. She knows who Lexa thinks she sees when she looks at Klark, the way she is now. It makes her angry, so angry, and she isn’t even sure why. What do the stupid superstitions of a southern clan matter to her?

Her words give Lexa pause. “I know there are rumors among the warriors,” she says. “I never assumed you would think they were true.”

“I don’t, but.” Klark draws a deep breath. “Costia came to talk to me.”

Lexa closes her eyes, her head falling back. “I’ll kill her,” she says quietly.

“No, she didn’t... she didn’t say anything. But between that and. Other things. I guessed.”
“Klark,” as Lexa raises her head, “I didn’t fall in love with -- with the person you think of as your other self.”

Something changes in her demeanor. Her stance isn’t as formal, and for the first time -- for the first time ever, with Lexa -- Klark has the feeling she’s seeing the other girl with her guard truly down.

“Oh.” There are too many emotions coursing through Klark right now to parse them properly. Relief, mainly. Although with an aftertaste of resentment, which makes no sense. But something in her unclenches. This is... good, it means there won’t be that awkwardness between them. That’s why it’s good.

“I fell in love with you,” Lexa says.

Klark’s head jerks up, and her heart pounds so strongly she wonders if Lexa can hear it. It sinks in the next moment -- of course, that damn Woods Clan belief, of course -- and she has to fight through the sensation of heaviness to say: “Commander, don’t --”

“I’ve been in love with you since your coronation.”

Finally, all Klark can do is stare.

“I’m sorry I hid it from you,” Lexa continues. “I have a lot to apologize for. I’m not proud of what I did to... to try and protect you, and others. Good intentions are no excuse for any hurt I might have caused you.” Her mouth twists. “That I have caused you.”

Klark is frozen, netted and pinned like prey.

“I know now that you deserve the truth more than anything. I’ve been in love with you since... I don’t know the exact moment. But once I did know, I felt I had to promise to stay away from you.” She doesn’t say to who, but Klark doesn’t need the hint to conjure up Costia, her air of an opponent relinquishing the field. “I thought that would make things better.”

“You thought you could stop loving me?” Klark asks haltingly.
“No,” Lexa says. “But I thought I could live a life apart from that love.” She swallows. “I failed. I thought... but when I knew I would see you again, I...” She raises her eyes to Klark’s. “I’m not asking anything of you. I know I don’t have that right.”

“What are you saying?”

Lexa shrugs, smiles: a beautiful, slow-blossoming thing that transforms her entire face. “That I love you. Not because our souls are tied. Because... because you’re foolish, and stubborn, and proud, and are incapable of being graceful in the face of defeat. Or even victory.”

This at last manages to unthaw Klark. “Hey --”

“And because you will fight for what you believe is right until your body drops. Because the world has given you so much anger, and instead of being crippled by it, you make it into a weapon. Because,” her breath hitches, “loving you has undone my entire life, and I don’t regret it. As long as you are in my life.”

Klark opens her mouth, closes it. Tries to brings some moisture to a mouth gone dry. “I...”

Lexa waits, attentive.

“I have to go,” Klark says, and flees.

It’s early evening, and when she walks into her rooms she finds Genai packing the last of her things into their bags. All that remains are the necessities for the morning.

“The last audience ran later than expected,” she says as Klark comes into the room, not turning around. “Did Broadleaf try to sneak their trade sanctions through again?”
... they had, actually, but: “Lexa wanted a private audience.”

She watches Genai’s back go rigid, her movements halting. She resumes packing a second later. “You really shouldn’t use that name where other people -- people who don’t know you -- might hear. They might jump to conclusions.”

Like they had done, these past weeks when someone less apt to be guided by Genai had been living in Klark’s skin.

Or before that, if she’s being honest with herself. She’d been cold and concussed, and it’d been easier to forget her foggy memories of it, but: Everyone sees the way you look at her. Everyone knows.

How Echo had made her offer only after the entire Court heard Lexa’s message to stay away.

“Genai,” and waits for the warrior to turn around. “When you said you didn’t want me brought to the Commander’s attention.”

“Yes?”

She still feels a little dizzy from Lexa’s confession, and it makes her blunt. “What were you really afraid of?”

Genai scowls down at her hands.

“I can handle unwanted advances. You know that.”

“I do.”

“So, why?” Why treat Lexa like she was diseased, why scowl and mutter in the corners, why be so damn cryptic about her concerns? Why did Genai -- fearless Genai -- almost seem scared of the Commander?
Genai chews on the inside of her cheek for a long moment. “I know you didn’t feel it. But you were very young when you came to us. You were little more than a child.”

“I was a blooded warrior. I killed twenty-six of Nia’s agents, twelve raiders, I survived Queen’s Combat —”

“You knew next to nothing of people,” Genai breaks in. “And even less about -- yourself, among others.”

“I know myself.” She looks Genai right in the eye. “I didn’t fall in love with Lexa.”

Genai meets her gaze. “I know that.”

“I didn’t.” She barely had the wherewithal to breathe, back then, to eat more than once a day, to catch a full night’s sleep before she had to be up and dealing with the next crisis: this settlement was scraping the last of their food reserves and it would be another two months until the snows lifted, this other settlement was warring with that one over which of them was over-hunting the area, this last settlement’s warlord fled with her coronation and now its population was terrified and divided. With Nia’s crown had come a passel of crises as her tenuous networks of fear and bribery fell apart. And then there had been those actively trying to harm Klark: she’d stopped counting after the ninth assassination attempt, and that had been before Lexa had arrived for the coronation.

“I just...” To her dismay she can’t force back the tears coming into her eyes. “I liked her. I liked her so much.”

Genai doesn’t hesitate. She steps forward and wraps her arms around Klark, bringing her in so that Klark can bury her head in Genai’s front, hiding the hot tears that are beginning to escape down her cheeks.

“I know,” Genai soothes. Her arms bracketing Klark feel strong enough to keep the whole world at bay, and it’s nice to pretend for a moment that Klark believes it’s true.

*Very little of my life is about what I want.*

Klark understands that. Even before becoming Queen she’d known she was being raised for a purpose. Hidden away from civilization, training every day -- none of that had been what she
wanted. It prepared her for more of the same when she became the queen: knowing what she could and could not ask of her people, what she could and could not ask for herself.

Lexa of the Woods Clan loved Costia. That was the first thing Klark learned of her, after the fact she was the Commander.

And she was... where should Klark begin. She was the leader of a clan whose enmity with Klark’s was legendary -- Nia had made it worse, but Ice Nation and Woods Clan had always been too much strength with too little space between them. But even “too little” space translated to too far away. There was no chance to share each other’s lives. They were both needed -- so badly needed -- by others, elsewhere.

Klark had known that. She’d known it before unfriendly green eyes met hers, and the hand around her forearm tightened as Klark had lifted her head that inch farther, the day of their first meeting.

It was so much easier, if you knew what you couldn’t have, not to want it to begin with.

Chapter End Notes

Again with special thanks to blindwire, all remaining mistakes and typos (aaargh) being my own.
It doesn’t matter, Klark tells herself the next morning. What could be, or what might have been -- what matters is what’s happening now. And that is: she’s leaving Polis as soon as the sun is directly overhead, and going home.

Which means she has to get a move on in saying her goodbyes.

She’s surprised to find Raven and Wells doing their own packing when she arrives at their rooms. The Tower at Polis is like its own, self-contained city; there are rooms and hallways and depths she hasn’t even had a chance to explore, having busied herself only with where her own warriors and the Sky People were quartered since arriving. She squashes that flicker of regret as she knocks on the frame of the open doorway, thinking: you were never here to enjoy yourself.

“Hello,” with a little surprise at the near-empty room they shared. “I thought your people don’t leave for two days.”

Her English has gotten much, much better with conversational practice. It makes her head hurt, but it gave her something to throw herself into while she prepared to face off with Lexa at the last audience.
“They don’t.” Raven looks over at Wells, who becomes very absorbed in trying to fit a pair of boots he traded for at the Polis marketplace into his bag. The boots are beautiful, tooled and dyed leather, and he got them for one of his older jackets, covered in patches from Before. Klark had almost been disgusted the vendor had handed the boots over for so little, even if she did negotiate on Wells’s behalf, but anything Sky Person was at an all-time premium after the victory at the Mountain. “You said you asked her,” she directs at him.

“I said I didn’t think it would be a big deal,” he corrects, and grunts as the boots finally fit inside. He begins to tie the bag shut -- or tries. It’s fighting him.

Raven rolls her eyes as she turns back to Klark. “I’m sorry, I should have -- we want to come with you.”

“I... what?” Even with all the words she knows, sometimes they use them in an order that doesn’t add up to sense. “You want to come with me? To the Ice Nation?”

“Yeah. Well, maybe not forever, but as a visit.” The other girl’s face darkens, minutely. “Neither of us are crazy about going back to Camp Jaha. We already received word from Chancellor Cartwright; she says we deserve a vacation if we want it. And if it’s okay with you.”

Klark’s not sure about the word vacation, and she’s even less sure about these two travelling north with her. That’s not their fault -- she likes them. She feels the most comfortable around them recently than anyone besides Genai or Trest, to be honest; they look at her and see her, not some soul-traveller with visions of the future. Or the power to make the Commander of the twelve clans abandon her lover after years of such faithfulness it used to be the subject of story and song.

But she’s listened to their stories of their lives on their ship, and they were hard lives, but hardship of a specific sort. She struggles to put it into words, the ice storms so brutal their cold turns right back into burning, the winds that scream across the emptiness of the plains.

“It’s going to get colder,” is the best warning she can manage in their language.

“You’re kidding,” Raven says, mild. “It’s cold? In a place called the Ice Nation?” She turns around. “Hey, Wells. Did you hear if we head north, it’ll get colder?”

The ties on Wells’s bag snap: he jerks away with a yelp. “Up by the Ice Nation?” he says, popping his thumb into his mouth. “Never would have guessed.”
Raven turns back to Klark with one eyebrow barely raised, and Klark grins back. They still seem like soft animals robbed of their protective shells to her, these Sky People, but they’re not timid. She has to honor that.

She has to exhibit that, is what she reminds herself when she goes to the next set of rooms.

Roan jerks his door open before she’s finished knocking. When he sees her on the other side of it his eyes widen, and he immediately drops into the same obsequious bow that set her teeth on edge whenever he was at Court. “Your Majesty. To what do I owe this unprecedented honor?”

... she does usually send someone else to deal with him, but does he have to --

_I tried to leave anything that was just Ice Nation business to Genai, the letter read. The only real change I made was reaching out to a man called Roan. I’ve never met him in my world, and I know you don’t like him. But he did good work. I think he wants to do good work._

Klark grits her teeth. “I wish to speak with you, if you have the time.”

He bows even deeper as he steps aside and lets the door fall open. His room is also clear, his bags piled and ready in one corner. There’s a table in his room as well and Klark sits without asking.

“I want to ask you something,” she says as he takes the opposite chair, clearly hesitant. “I have nothing to leverage your honesty, but I would advise it. It will dictate whether or not we ever talk like this again.”

The former prince’s eyes narrow. “If you are accusing me of ever being less than candid with my sovereign --”

“Stop,” Klark interrupts. “Let’s not pretend you haven’t tried to undermine my standing with foreign leaders for years--”

“Your Majesty gave me a mission. You sent me away from the Court. You asked me to curry favor.” His dark eyes are snapping. “Are you complaining about how well I performed my duties?”
Klark sits forward until her elbows are on her thighs, twining her hands together in lieu of reaching out to strangle him. “You might have been successful, but it was never in my name, or to my advantage.”

“Perhaps if you had been less eager to send me as far away as possible, you could have been more specific in your instructions.”

Klark clenches her hands so tightly she feels the strain in the bone. “Just tell me, Roan: did you resent that I named Echo my heir, instead of you?”

As smooth as newly-oiled leather: “I would never dream to second-guess my queen’s --”

“That’s not what I’m asking. Were you unhappy about it?”

The first time she heard the section of the letter about Roan, she rejected it outright. Or she tried to. She ended up stewing over it, thinking about it, tossing and turning at night to realize: he had never actually lied to her. Misled her, sometimes, and often made her so angry he managed to distract her from her original intentions. (She felt a little sick to realize where he must have gotten so good at that, and why.) If she wanted the truth, she might just be able to ask him outright.

He’s stone-faced for a full breath, and then two, before saying: “No.”

“... no?” Klark prods. “You were a prince of one of the most powerful clans, and I took away your throne. Then I promised it so it would never, under any circumstances, return to you.”

“Echo was a good choice for Heir. She’s young enough to be trusted by the next generation of warriors, and to be seen as molded by you and your reign. But she’s known: her family has always been at Court. She’s not an outsider.”

Klark ignores the jab, takes another deep breath. “Does any part of you still want the throne for yourself?”

He takes even longer to respond this time. When he finally does so, it’s after a massive sigh.
“No,” he says.

“You understand why I might find it hard to believe.”

“Do you?” he lashes out. “Forgive me, I didn’t know you were so familiar with what Court life was like under my -- what a man might grow tired of, or wish to finally be free of, even if it means giving up all that power as well. Power,” he says, quietly and bitterly, “is not worth the whole of a man’s life. Or living forever in the shadow of a woman who valued nothing but.”

Klark sits back, considering him. “I thought you resented being sent away from the Court, but you’re talking as if...”

“I resented being treated as if I had nothing more to offer than my absence,” Roan steps in. “I resented being treated as if I were not part of the Ice Nation as well. I didn’t miss being seen, first and forever, as my mother’s son.”

... huh.

“I did that,” Klark says. “I’m sorry.”

His head snaps up, but he looks as wary as if she’d pulled one of her knives.

“I didn’t dislike you just for that,” she continues, “but that was a big part of it. That was a bad place to begin. I’m sorry.”

Still tense, he asks: “What other reason did I ever give you for dislike or mistrust?”

Oh, this one’s hard. This one requires her to take a few deep breaths to calm the remembrance of anger and impotence. “I felt that you, more than anyone, were in a position to warn me about Ontari. You didn’t, and we nearly lost the fosterlings.”

The official story had always been raiders taking the children. But the innermost circle at Court could
not be blind to the rescue mission coinciding with Ontari’s disappearance. Apparently she hadn’t been well known outside of that society -- no friends, no tutors besides Nia -- and most assumed she had moved on to another settlement. But Klark had suspected there were a few people who had guessed the truth, Roan chief among them.

“I see.” Roan is quiet for a second. “Was she really a nightblood?”

Klark gapes at him.

He puts up a hand. “No, don’t tell me, I heard what you did in yesterday’s hearing, and I... but you should never admit to anything.”

“You didn’t know?”

“My mother dropped very specific hints. But I never knew if it was a test of my loyalty -- would I try to get rid of her by reaching out to Woods Clan, only to discover it was a ruse, and so on.” His mouth tightens. “She was fond of those games.”

“... but if she wasn’t a nightblood, why would she have so much of Nia’s attention?”

“Ontari was declared her heir. You didn’t know?” he asks, on seeing Klark’s shock. “Ten years before you appeared. My mother came back from a raid with a girlchild she said was orphaned by Woods Clan warriors, proclaimed she had decided to take this poor orphan into her home and raise her to be the next Queen.” He shrugs. “I never imagined Ontari had anything to trade on besides my mother’s whim, and so with her death... I suppose I owe my own apology. I thought I was sparing her unwarranted mistrust and derision by letting you think I was the Heir. But I was wrong.”

It’s very like, Klark thinks to herself, the long and varied sessions with the needle she has to sit through for her more elaborate tattoos. For so long it’s just abstract shapes and lines that never connect. And then, all at once: the details fill in, the shapes emerge, and she wonders that it’s taken her this long to know what she’s looking at.

“You were never Heir?” she has to ask, one more time.

Roan gives her a bitter smile. “No. You never took my throne from me, or bestowed that honor away. If anything I’ve had more power in your court, not less.”
Huh, indeed.

“I have a new mission for you,” she says slowly. “One that will send you even farther from the Court, and for a very long time. In fact, you might not ever have a chance to come back.”

His mouth thins with displeasure. “I see.”

“No, it’s not...” She sighs and straightens. “You know, if you didn’t want to be given the really difficult tasks, then you shouldn’t have been so obvious at being good at the other ones.”

She can see him turning this over in his head, considering it and her. “What do you have in mind?”

“Delphi. They’re the center of trade, but I don’t think they’ll ever make a real effort to establish a base within the Ice Nation. For what it’s worth, I don’t think they should -- you know our people don’t value city structures or permanence the way most other clans do.” She looks him right in the eye. “Which is why I think we should establish ourselves within Delphi.”

“... I’m listening.”

“If we make them come to us, we’ll lose their interest. They want certainty, a known return on their investment on the trade and materials brought to our border -- not travelling every season with the Court, or searching for settlements that might possibly want their wares. I think... I think we should establish our presence in their capital instead. A small fraction -- perhaps even a community -- of Ice Nation who will transport goods maybe once or twice a year, infiltrating the market through the very hub of trade among the clans.”

Roan, in contrast, leans back as he considers her. “We have no idea what goods will be in demand. Or what guild leaders we’ll need to partner with to trade. Even if we figure all that out, we’ll need an agreement with the lake people to make sure shipments across their territory aren’t raided.”

“Exactly. There’s a lot to be done.” She takes another deep breath. “I’m trusting you with a lot.”

He blinks at her. Abruptly: “You should be careful. If I succeed, and it’s profitable -- who’s to say that more Ice Nation people won’t want to have a safer, settled life in Delphi? That small community
you mentioned could grow quite a bit.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not Nia. If people want to declare for Delphi -- or if they simply want to live in their cities -- let them. They’re my people, not my prisoners.”

“The Ice Nation’s power is in its numbers.”

“It was,” she counters. “But in the future, who knows? It could be our resources. It could be the land. It could be trade.” She smiles to herself before adding: “And I think yes, there will be a few who choose to leave its borders. But I...” Answering all those questions. Wearing her furs and pride into Lexa’s presence. “I love our way of life. I don’t think I’m alone.”

“No,” Roan says quietly, and a shadow passes over his face.

“If you think it’ll be too hard, living so far --”

“It’s a venture that should be taken, and you’re right, I’m the best to do it. Besides,” and his hand comes up to lightly touch one of the scars on his face, “it might be nice to spend a few years among people who don’t know what I did to earn these.”

There doesn’t seem to be anything to say, after that, and after a few awkward seconds Klark clears her throat and stands. “Well, if you accept the position, that’s all. The representative for Delphi says you’re welcome to share his caravan.”

Roan also stands, but before she can leave, he bows.

It’s not the kind of bow she’s ever had from him before. It’s shallower, and quicker. But he doesn’t smirk through it, or lower his eyes. And he bows his head, as well.

“I look forward to serving my Queen,” he says, and for the first time, she believes him.

Genai is not happy about the addition to their party. She is not happy at all.
“We don’t have the rations to cover them,” she hisses at Klark. The Ice Nation warriors who didn’t come down with Klark to the Summit, but with Roan to fight the Mountain, had departed several days earlier. Taking the bulk of the supplies with them.

Klark shrugs as she adjusts her stirrups. Whoever used them last -- her double -- liked them to hang lower than she does. What an odd thing to differ on. “So we’ll hunt to make up the difference.”

“Hunt on Woods Clan lands?” Genai asks, waspish.

“It’s the least favor they can give in return for... well, everything else.”

“I agree,” comes a familiar voice from the ground, and Klark just manages not to jerk upright to see Lexa standing a few feet away. “Of course, you’re also welcome to make up the difference from the rations we’ll be bringing.”

“Bringing?” she asks, stupidly. She blames the eventful morning. And being on horseback. It still doesn’t feel natural to her. “Where are you bringing them?”

“To the Ice Court, of course,” Lexa says, looking up at her. Their relative positions should make Klark feel like she has the advantage. It’s not working. “I’ve decided to spend the winter there.”

“The wint--”

“You shouldn’t be worried,” the Commander says. “Of course, normally the summer would be a much better time for such a prolonged visit. But this will be our first winter where the Mountain will not terrorize us, or plan to strike when darkness and food shortages leave us most vulnerable. I think this season, at least, will be a very quiet one, where people will be happy to stay in their homes and enjoy a very welcome time of peace.”

“I didn’t --” That had been her second thought, but her first had been: “Shouldn’t you ask for an invitation?”

Lexa cocks her head to the side, eyes glittering. “Didn’t you give me one, when you said I needed more time than just a handful of days to understand your people? Or was it an empty challenge.”
Klark grips her reins hard enough to make her horse dance a bit, uneasy. She forces herself to relax, and pats at its shoulder. “Genai, go ride out of earshot for a moment.”

“Your Maje--”

“Go.”

Lexa nods off her own man as well -- the look he shoots Klark is even sulkier than Genai’s -- and then turns calmly back to Klark.

Klark has never seen her out of formal or semi-formal clothes, now that she thinks of it: all her dealings with the Commander have been structured around some form of political event. She looks... different, in simpler, less structured clothing. She holds her limbs looser, without the iron discipline of before. She looks lighter.

Klark doesn’t want to get distracted. “If this is... Commander. If this is about... if you’re trying to pursue me --”

“No,” Lexa breaks in firmly. She hesitates. “Not... I won’t pretend I’m not waiting for your answer to my feelings. But you were right, before. I took your people as my people, but I never truly treated them as such. Some of it was necessary -- I was fighting a war. Since our talk, however, I’ve been thinking I should make up for lost time.”

She raises her eyebrow slightly at the end of that, making it clear she doesn’t just mean an overdue visit to the Ice Court.

Klark, finding herself at an impasse, tosses her head back. “Fine,” she says. “But keep up or be left behind.” She spurs her own horse into a trot before Lexa can offer a counter to it.

“They’re coming with us, too,” Klark says curtly as she approaches Genai. “We still leave in an hour, I don’t care if they’re not ready.”

“To what purpose?” Genai asks, clearly thunderstruck. “To visit in winter, why would she possibly - -”
“She says she owes it to our people, not to put off knowing them better any longer.”

Slowly, Genai closes her mouth, looking thoughtful.

“Shut up,” Klark mutters. It wasn’t that much more admirable on Lexa’s part. It wasn’t.

“I didn’t say anything,” Genai says calmly.

True. She didn’t have to. She already knew what Klark was thinking.

Between the rough road ahead, the winter awaiting them, and the company, this is going to be a singular journey.

______________________________

Klark wakes up in her tent.

She lays there with her eyes closed for a long time, listening to Genai and Trest breathe next to her in their own sleeping rolls. It’s strange, sleeping with so many other people around. She has her own quarters in the Ice Court, and she and Abi used to take turns keeping sentry at night. She’s been trained to sleep lightly, and in shifts. Even just Echo in the bed with her often has her up and wandering in the silent hours of the night.

She gets up gingerly, moving slowly so she won’t disturb the First or Second as she climbs out of her roll, over their prostrate bodies, and out of the tent.

It’s still so warm here, even with the sun out of the sky. And the night is filled with this low, insistent chirping — an insect, they explained to her, that makes the sound by rubbing its legs. She makes a face as she wanders past the boundary set by the warriors standing guard for the night. They mark her, but don’t try to stop her.
She doesn’t wander too far afield. Klark picks a bit of elevated land where she can still see the banked cookfires of their encampment in case random disaster strikes and she needs to hustle back. The cool grass is a welcome relief against her skin of her bare arms as she leans back into it, tickling around her waist as it creeps under her shirt as well. The breeze picks up, and she doesn’t fight her eyes from drifting shut in the sudden comfort of it. It’s a relief to escape the bustle and energy of their traveling party, if only for an hour or so. She’s spent the last handful of days feeling hemmed-in, surrounded. Watched.

“Do you often explore unknown lands in the dead of night without your bodyguards?”

She’s felt one pair of eyes on her especially.

Klark cracks one eye open to confirm before tucking her hands up and behind her head, making a show of getting comfortable. “You left Gustus behind.”

“He has a wretched temper when he doesn’t get a full night’s sleep.”

“Is that what his problem is? I wondered if his horse had a saddle burr.”

Lexa is silent for a moment. “He’s been on his best behavior, so far.”

Well. Apparently Genai has been right all along, and Klark doesn’t know how lucky she has it with her own bodyguard.

“Why did you follow me, Commander?” She could ask why Lexa was awake in the first place, if there’s something troubling her sleep. She’s not sure if she wants Lexa to think she cares.

Lexa comes a bit closer, but doesn’t sit. “I don’t mean to disturb you, and I’ll go back to the camp if that’s what you prefer.”

“You’re not answering the question.”

She still doesn’t for another stretch of silence, until she says very softly: “I thought you might want to say what you have to say to me, and where no one else would hear.”
There’s very little privacy in their party. It’s small enough: Klark, Genai, Trest, the handful of Ice Nation warriors who first came down to the Summit, Raven and Wells, Lexa and her own tidy entourage. She knows them all by now, and they know her, after days in only each other’s’ company: meals taken together, hours riding together, nights setting up tents and sleeping under the stars together.

But despite the familiarity and overlapping activities, she’s managed to avoid Lexa. When they’re on the road she keeps her horse by Wells’s – at first to help distract him from the discomfort as he adapted to the hours of long riding, and then because she enjoyed his company. He’s not just smart: he’s funny, with a quick, dry humor that has her laughing even as she still struggles with the language barrier. Even that’s becoming less of an obstacle with practice, and now Wells feels confident enough to ask for instruction in the tongue of the Ice Nation.

At first she thought he’d misspoken. “You mean Woods Clan’s language,” she’d said. “The language they spoke at Polis.”

His forehead creased. “But that’s not what you speak, is it? Up where we’re going?” Klark shook her head. “Well, that’s what I want to learn.”

“Why?”

He’d ridden along for a bit without answering, but she knew him well enough by then to know he was turning the question over in his head, searching for the best answer he thought he could give. She’s not very patient by nature, but she’s found his best responses are worth waiting for.

“I don’t have any family, back at Camp Jaha,” he said finally. “It’s named for my father, and we think he died in the journey down to Earth. My mother passed when I was a kid.”

“My family is gone, too,” she found herself offering, unexpectedly. “My father when I was a baby, my mother two years... behind?”

“Two years ago,” he corrected with a quick, warm smile. “Yeah? I didn’t know that.” He lapsed back into silence, and by then Klark could tell he was processing this new information. “Anyway,” he resumed, “my father used to lead our people.”

Which was new information to Klark. It made several things she’d noticed about him click into
place, like beads settling into their pattern on a necklace.

“When I was growing up I was always seen as his son first, myself second.” He grimaced. “If ever. I... can see, now, that put me in a dark place. I did some stupid stuff to make my life feel like my own.”

Klark wanted to ask if he’d ever traveled for days through a screaming winter storm and then challenged the figure of a life of nightmares to a duel to the death, but she was supposed to be listening. Not competing.

“Maybe I’m still doing that stuff,” he said, a little ruefully. “But I think about things like: the Arkers, I mean, the Sky People, we’re struggling right now. We thought the Earth was uninhabited and it’s not. We’re living on borrowed land. We know almost nothing about the eleven other clans. We need to learn so much if we’re going to survive, but most of them are still in shock and dealing with trauma. So I figure: I’m not traumatized. Maybe I should be one of the people to go out, explore, learn, and bring it back.”

“A good plan. But almost no one outside of Ice Nation speaks out language. Maybe not so useful.”

“Maybe. Or maybe... maybe that’s the edge we need, knowing something not even other clans do. Maybe we can be Ice Nation-whisperers after we stop dealing in bone marrow with the Mountain.” He quirked a smile. “Or maybe it’ll just be me, and I can be the guy who travels back and forth, and is just... ready. For when I’m needed.”

Rather than waiting for life to finally give him a purpose. Klark nodded. A very good plan.

“Can I ask something personal?” Wells had wet his lips. “Were you close to your mom?”

Close. She doesn’t think he means proximity.

“I ask because, my dad and me. We didn’t get along. We... fought.” His mouth did something complicated. “I think the last time we ever spoke we were fighting.”

“Me, too,” Klark felt like she could confess. “When she died she was instructing me, but before that -- when she went out -- before that was a fight.”
“Does it ever feel better?” His voice was hoarse, and when he looked over she could see he was on the edge of tears. “Do you ever stop feeling so... awful about that?”

She knew he didn’t just mean the fact the last words were spoken in anger. He meant all of it: loving someone who had demanded of you until the breaking point, losing them before you were ready. Even with all that anger and bad feeling, not being ready to let them go. Not yet.

“No,” she said, as gently as she could when her own throat felt rough with unshed tears.

Thankfully, that was when Raven had rejoined them. Raven was much more social than Wells -- she bounced around the group at will, chatting with one person and then the next. She laughed off Wells’s disbelief at her lack of soreness, despite the fact it was her first time riding a horse as well.

“Do you know how many repairs I did upside-down, hanging by my legs around a ridge beam? Face, it, Jaha: you're soft.”

But she said it as a tease, and Wells didn’t seem too bothered. That appeared to be Raven’s gift: she could bring a smile to anyone’s face. Or almost anyone. She was trying her best with Lexa, though, spending a surprising amount of time by the Commander’s side. Klark had no idea what they might be talking about, but from what she could see, they were having their own kind of fun. Even without the smile Lexa’s expression was one of openness and interest, watching Raven’s animated face.

And then, inevitably, as if she could feel the other girl watching, turning to meet Klark’s.

She’s not trying to meet Klark’s gaze now, though. She’s staring off into the dark, away from the lights of camp. She has a set to her jaw Klark is coming to recognize as Lexa preparing for rejection.

She sighs. “Sit down. I’m getting a crick in my neck.”

Lexa does so, silhouetted by the cascading pinpricks of light that swirl over the canvas of the night sky.

Klark’s not sure how to start, so she says instead: “The stars are different here.”
“Yes.” Lexa tilts her head up to see them better, baring a long line of throat.

Klark abandons all pretense of small talk: “So, my coronation.”

“Yes.”

“Almost two years ago.” Something catches in the region of her heart, and pulls. “Why did you pretend to be my friend, that we would see each other at the Summit, if you knew then?”

“I didn’t pretend. We were -- I very much wanted to be -- friends.” Her voice lowers. “And I did think that we would meet, then.”

Klark leverages herself up onto her elbows, frowning. “What made you decide I should stay away?”

“A number of things. Since you were crowned the Mountain launched two attacks from the air that went far beyond our borders and into your territory -- I think news of your reign made them fear Ice Nation as a cohesive force. I wanted to keep you, personally, out of their range until we were sure in our plans for counter-attack.”

“What else?”

“I...” Lexa sighs, her eyes falling shut. “I told you I wasn’t proud of how I acted.” She gives her head a single shake. “I told Costia everything. She asked that you be kept away.”

Ouch. Klark’s not sure which hurts more: that Lexa looked to Costia’s needs first, or that Lexa might have ruined any chance Klark had of hanging out with the Shadow-walker. “I hope calling me an irresponsible Queen was worth making your lover happy.”

“... that wasn’t the message I sent to the Ice Court.”

“Close enough, wasn’t it?” Klark knows she’s being petulant. She knows, she just -- it’s so unfair. Everything feels like it was decided without her, around her. Lexa falls for her and runs away
without saying a word. Klark wakes up and suddenly, Lexa is hers.

If Klark wants her.

She falls back onto the grass. Her head hurts. “You should take your warriors and turn back with the first light. I bet if you tried, you could catch up with Costia and be cozy in Polis together by the winter solstice.”

“No.”

Klark sits up. Her hand darts out. Lexa is capable of blocking her, but she isn’t on guard for it, and Klark manages to get her hand inside the neck of Lexa’s shirt. Maybe Lexa realizes what she’s reaching for, because when her own hand finally comes up she only wraps her fingers around Klark’s wrist, and doesn’t prevent her from pulling out the cord and the charm hanging from it.

The stars don’t cast a light as bright as the moon, but Klark can see her prize clearly. She caught glimpses of what Lexa has started wearing around her neck during nights when it caught and glinted in the firelight, even half-hidden under her shirt. It was once a heavy ring, bearing the symbol she’s seen Lexa wear in high ceremony, now beaten flat and twisted so that it loops back on itself. Eternally.

“You still love her.”

“Yes,” Lexa says easily. “I’m not ashamed of that. Or how she is, still very much a part of my life. But we will never be what we were again. And I’m not riding back to Polis for a long while yet.”

“Because we’re soul-tied.”

... please don’t hate her for it, the letter had read. You don’t have to --

“Because I love you,” Lexa interrupts her train of thought. She tugs on Klark’s wrist -- not away, but down, so that Klark relinquishes the ring and it falls outside of Lexa’s shirt. Lexa still keeps her hold on Klark, a line of connection. “I know this is all very strange and very sudden, to you. But our shared destiny has nothing to do with that.”
She chose you, Costia said.

But...

“You ran from me.” From us.

Lightly, lightly, Lexa runs her thumb across the inside of Klark’s wrist -- that had always been her habit, Klark remembers, when she’s considering her next words. “I tried, yes.”

“What changed your mind? Are you sure it wasn’t destiny?” Maybe Lexa had just given into the inevitable. Klark’s not sure she wants love as a surrender.

Not even from Lexa.

“I ran, and I’m sorry. But I never tried to stop loving you. I thought... I thought I could keep that, at least, even if I had to hide it from you. And others.” A flash of pain across Lexa’s face. “I made so many mistakes. I know I owe you --”

“I don’t want apologies, Lexa.” She doesn’t -- at least, not for trying, for Costia’s sake. That’s the easiest part to understand. In fact, it would have been a lot harder to forgive a Lexa who could easily abandon someone she’d loved for so long. “I want to understand.”

Lexa is silent for a long moment, and the only sounds in the dark night is the breeze rustling through the long grasses, the chirping insects all around them.

“I’m not used to failing at things,” she says. “I thought all I needed was... more. More distance, more time, more effort. “Even when I knew I had failed, I could not admit it out loud -- that fell to Costia.”

“When did you know?”

“When I first met -- your other self,” Lexa admits, reluctantly, and she holds Klark’s wrist just a touch tighter when Klark might pull away. Klark isn’t trying very hard, so she lets her. “Who you think of as another self. She was so... angry. She would look at me as if...” Lexa swallows.
“You had to know you made me angry, too.”

“I did. I thought it would make things easier, instead of...” Lexa closes her eyes. “I didn’t know how it would feel, you looking at me like I had already lost you.”

Klark pulls free of her hold, and this time Lexa lets her go.

“I don’t know what to do,” Klark says quietly. “I don’t know if I can trust you, despite everything.”

Lexa opens her eyes. They have a brilliant sheen in the starlight. “Do you want to trust me?”

She wants to know if Klark... if she also...

That’s what she’s really asking.

Klark stands, and Lexa watches her.

“I don’t know what to do,” Klark says again. The air has gone from comforting to just a touch too cold, and she shivers.

Lexa’s face softens. “I meant what I said, about taking this journey for the people of the Ice Nation. I’m not chasing you.” She climbs to her feet as well, brushing stray grass from her clothes. “You know how I feel, and that it won’t change. Whether you trust that or not, whether you --”

She pauses, reaches out a hand as if to touch Klark’s cheek. But just before she can, Klark catches another glimpse of the charm hanging from her neck.

Heart pounding wildly in her chest, Klark flinches away.

Lexa’s fingers curl inward to her palm, and she gives Klark something that’s not quite a smile.
“You know how I feel,” she repeats softly, and walks away to leave Klark on the cold hillside with her thoughts.

Thinking about Lexa -- what it might mean, if she and Lexa...

It makes Klark cold all over one minute and like she might burn to ash in the next. Like she’s been tumbled into a snowdrift and she doesn’t know which way to dig in order to breathe fresh air.

So she ignores it.

Not the best solution. Not a solution at all, really, and she knows that. But it’s an option, and she really, truly, is unsure about what else to do.

And part of her wants to see what Lexa does. If she meant it when she promised that she wouldn’t chase Klark, if the underlying promise -- that she would wait, that she would give whatever space and time was needed -- was true. Or if Lexa would chafe. Being unsure of love... that has to be a new state of being, for her.

But if Lexa finds it uncomfortable to be the vulnerable one, the one who now waits on Klark and her decisions, she doesn’t show it. Everything proceeds as it did before, and her interactions with Klark are the same mix of careful regard and unmistakable interest.

Klark is enjoying the journey, she’s surprised to find. Technically this is not her first journey along this road, but since she fell into a dead faint the last time and didn’t truly wake up until her head was in Lexa’s lap at the foot of the Mountain, she doesn’t remember much. She doesn’t get many excuses to travel too far outside the territory of the Ice Court, and she tries to enjoy the experience while she can.

It’s also fun, being around so many people her own age. Even with the younger warriors at court there’s a level of reserve -- even with Echo, really. Klark is their Queen, first and foremost. But Raven and Wells aren’t her subjects. Neither is Lexa. It changes things, even if they have to keep up certain appearances in front of the soldiers travelling with them. As they travel farther together their
talk becomes easier, freer.

Which backfires against her one night, when they’re all huddled around the dying cookfire. They’ve only just crossed into Ice Nation territory properly, but the skies seem darker and the air that much colder for it. They turn in earlier each night, and share what warmth they can after the last meal until then, instead of going off on their own.

Those nights are made even warmer by the liquid Raven and Wells pass around their little party. Everyone who takes a swallow from their sizeable flask gasps, and then presses the center of their chest. They call it moonshine, but Klark thinks it deserves a name more in tune with the sun and its harsh, burning power. Once the initial heat fades, though, it’s lovely.

Lovely enough that Klark doesn’t even mind when Genai tells the story of the snowcat.

“So there she was,” Genai holds court at the fire, arms wide open as she gazes into the middle distance of memory: “The girl who walked out of the storm. The girl who slew Queen Nia. And I have to be the one to defend her from an angry mass of fur and fangs. All because she couldn’t stop staring, like this,” and here she imitates Klark, or how she says Klark looked in that moment: open-mouthed and blinking.

Wells is hugging his knees, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

“I wasn’t,” Klark protests.

“You were.”

“I never --”

“Genai, do their ears always grow that big?” Genai repeats in tones of breathless wonder. She then rolls her eyes. “You were almost killed, and the Ice Nation thrown back into chaos. For ears.”

“I hadn’t seen one before!”

Raven is giggling so hard she has to wipe at her eyes. “She has a point. We were thrown off-guard
by a lot when we first landed. And she’s better now, right?”

Genai’s expression sours, and the laughter starts up again before she even says: “I took the pelt to put among the other trophies in the winter hall, and she strokes it when she thinks the rest of us don’t see. Sometimes, I think she talks to it.”

The others are howling, and Klark feels her face turn red. But she doesn’t really mind. (And Genai’s not wrong.)

Then she catches sight of Lexa.

Lexa is not laughing. She’s leaning back, relaxing slightly apart from the ring of those around the fire -- and watching Klark. She’s not smiling, but her face, her whole self, is an expression of joy. Not even the flames can account for the brightness of her eyes.

It makes Klark dizzy. Just thinking back to it over the next few days has her feeling like she’s spun around and around in place, and is now ready to tip off the edge of the world and into the boundless sky.

So she doesn't refuse when Lexa offers to keep her company on a short hunt.

Their rations hold steady, but it’s been quite a few days in a row of preserved food. Klark thinks something fresh will help keep their spirits up on the road ahead, and make the days when there’s no option besides dried and seasoned food more palatable. She gets up just before dawn, a few hours before they plan to start riding. There’s a freshly fallen snow on the ground that will probably melt before the sun is directly overhead.

Lexa is waiting when Klark exits the tent, but Klark is surprised: she doesn’t try to make conversation. They set off on foot, boots crunching in the snow as the light slowly spills over the landscape. They both carry a bow and arrow -- Klark is more used to hunting with her knives, but she’s not looking to bring down heavy game. Lexa is surprisingly good with hers, she thinks, as the other girl takes down a hare.
She’s so comfortable in their silence that she doesn’t notice the snowcat carcass until they’re almost on top of it.

“Oh,” Klark lets out, unthinking. And then she’s almost angry at herself for it. She knows she’s not supposed to be so pained at the sight of a skinned animal, even with the waste. Snowcats make for bad meat, but they’re prized for their fur. But she’s angrier at the fact of it, and she’s ready to fight whatever teasing or mockery Lexa might send her way.

But Lexa’s looking off into the distance, where a dark blot of woods rises off the land. Trees do grow in the Ice Nation, though not as thickly as down south -- they are older, darker things, with older and cunning creatures in them. A slight frown mars her forehead, eyes flickering to the carcass and back, and Klark understands: if the snowcat was being hunted, why make for the open spaces? Why not take cover in the forest?

“She was leading them away,” Lexa answers the unspoken question, and she’s moving off into the woods herself. Klark hesitates, and then follows.

By the time she catches up Lexa is kneeling in the snow, weapon sheathed, bending over a fallen tree trunk. She removes one glove and raps her knuckles on it, head to one side as she listens. She runs her hand across its length -- her fingers are already white with cold, and Klark is opening her mouth to tell her to stop being ridiculous, but then her hand disappears from sight. The trunk is hollowed out, Klark realizes, and Lexa has just reached inside.

Pain flashes across the Commander’s face as she winces, then sets her mouth in determination. She withdraws her hand slowly, raising into the air --

The kitten kicks and cries, soft paws paddling as he’s held up by his scruff.

“Just the one,” Lexa says, as Klark gapes. “His eyes are like yours.” She moves as if to hand him off, and Klark unthinkingly steps back.

“I -- I can’t --”

Lexa looks at her, expression carefully empty. “Should I put him back?”

Klark shakes her head and holds out her hands.
Whatever fight the kitten had in him, he seems to have exhausted it hissing and snarling at Lexa. In Klark’s arms he collapses into a miserable-looking heap, his fur loose over his bones from hunger. She holds him tighter, tentatively, but he doesn’t mind -- he tilts his head up and bats at her chin with an oversized paw, crying piteously.

It’s like it cracks her heart open.

Klark blinks at Lexa, feeling adrift. “He scratched you.”

Lexa looks down at the red lines across one hand. “I think I’ll survive.” She pulls her glove back on. “You should take him back to camp. We won’t catch anything as long as he’s making that noise.” She heads off deeper into the forest without another word.

In the days to come Klark quickly learns the three most important things about the kitten.

One: he eats. A lot.

At first they don’t know what to feed him -- they have no milk. When Klark comes back to the campsite with him in her arms they try to offer him the choicest bits of uncooked meat. He noses at it, and then nudges it away, looking at Klark and crying. When he’s unhappy he makes sounds that remind her almost of a wounded bird’s.

Trest is the one who comes up with a solution. When Lexa returns with game slung over her shoulder Trest takes it off her, barely waiting to greet or thank her. Lexa blinks at him, but he’s already busy skinning the animals and paring fat away from the meat.

“You did this?” Klark hears Genai say as she walks over to Lexa, jerking her chin in Klark and the kitten’s direction. Klark keeps her head down and pretends to be very absorbed in how the snowcat is gnawing on her fingers.

“I found him. She didn’t want to leave him behind.”
Genai gives Lexa such an upbraiding look, Klark is pretty sure the insolence alone would have Gustus growling -- except the Woods Clan warrior has been conscripted into service by Trest. He has a mortar and pestle in his hands, putting his brutish strength to work as he pounds the extracted fat into a thin slurry. “More, more,” Trest urges in his fractured knowledge of Woods Clan tongue, with sweeping gestures for good measure.

“You did this,” Genai repeats, this time with a note of finality. She raises an eyebrow, significantly, and pokes Lexa in the shoulder with one finger.

“Do we have a problem?” Lexa asks coolly.

Genai snorts. “We? No.” She casts a look back at Klark.

Who turns her head away just in time, seeing Trest approach her with a waterskin and a beaming smile. “Use this,” he says, showing her how to get the kitten to take the opening of the skin in place of her raw-looking fingers. Then to squeeze the flexible body from the bottom, gently, gently, so that the fatty sludge inside doesn’t dribble from the kitten’s mouth as he hungrily begins to eat.

“I mixed it with snow to keep it fresh,” he says as they both watch the snowcat settle in, flexing his paws in satisfaction.

“Like your akutaq.”

“Mnhmm.”

“... okay, but he’s not getting my share if we find any cloudberrys.”

“Clearly, you’re the one with a problem.” Genai is attempting to keep her voice down, but Klark hears her. She’s not sure she cares, though, with an armful of happy snowcat. But she does hear Genai sigh. “You’re even worse than she is. At the moment, anyway.”

When Klark can force her gaze away from the blinking blue eyes of the kitten, she sees Genai stalking away into her tent. Leaving only Lexa, who looks back.
Klark grins at her so hard, her face hurts. “He’s eating,” she calls out.

After a second, Lexa smiles back.

Two: he’s a very, very good boy.

The first few days he spends drowsing in a makeshift sling Klark drapes across her chest and under her jacket, positioning the kitten so that he can poke his head out the top and sniff around, or let her know when he needs to eat or make waste. Klark goes about her time as normally as possible like this, giving him time to get to know everyone else in their party by smell or sound before she decides it’s time for him to really make friends.

He’s so good. He’s so clever, so smart, he listens when people talk to him and loves to play with any piece of string or bit of fluff they dangle in front of him, paws still clumsy and uncoordinated. The ends of Klark’s braids are his favorite, and if she’s not careful he sneaks them inside her jacket to chew on.

“What are you going to name him?” Raven asks, letting him hop after a long twig she’s scratching in the ashes of their campfire. The kitten allows scratches behind his ears and soft strokes along his spine, but he will not tolerate being picked up unless it’s Klark, and it’s her lap he practically lives in.

“Name him?” Klark asks.

“Yeah. Don’t you have any great heroes of legend, anything like that? Something he can live up to.”

“Ice Nation legends don’t use proper names,” Lexa says, watching from the other side of the fire. “They use descriptive phrases: the one who tamed the ocean, the one who chased the sun.” Her eyes flicker to Klark’s. “The girl who walked out of the storm.”

“Huh. Well, you have to name him something.”

Klark decides to give the job to Raven, since she’s so invested. The Sky girl broods over it for a few days, then sidles her horse up to Klark as she’s feeding the kitten. He can manage scraps of real meat, now, but they don’t stop riding for the midday meal and this is easier on horseback.
“What about Barbour?” Raven asks. “After Julian Barbour. He was a physicist. You know, kind of over my head, I’m an engineer, but... my mom had a bunch of his books on her datapad. I think she used to read him a lot. When she was younger.”

“I like it,” despite, truthfully, some of those words not making sense. She takes the skin away from the newly-named kitten. He grapples with her, but he’s only playing -- he’s already making his “frrt, frrt” sound that means he’s especially content. “I think he likes it, too.”

Raven reaches out to tickle his chin and he chomps her finger. “Yowch,” but she extracts herself without jostling him. “He’s not really that tame, or a pet, is he? But I guess he’s not so bad.”

Three: except with Lexa.

The first time Lexa stretches out a hand in introduction, Barbour swipes.

The Commander jerks back with a hiss, inspecting thin, bloody lines across her hand. They intersect nicely with the first set he gave her.

An insane panic grips Klark, and she wonders if you can be tried for attempted assassination via animal. “Gods, I -- I’m so sorry, he wasn’t like this with anyone else.” She has her fingers latched around him now as he squirms, hissing and stretching out his paws like he wants another chance at Lexa. Oh, who is Klark kidding, that’s exactly what he wants, and they’re going to have to run off into the trees to keep his little kitten neck from Gustus’s sword of execution.

“It’s fine,” Lexa says with a sigh, looking askance at Barbour in Klark’s lap, where he is currently trying to both flatten himself out and puff himself up as much as possible.

She gives him a wide berth after that. Klark is grateful it isn’t an issue, except Barbour -- growing bigger, it feels, with every passing day -- attempts to make it one. Sometimes, Klark swears, she thinks he’s stalking Lexa: focusing on her feet as she walks past and following with an intensity that says she’s prey. Whenever Lexa notices she stops and turns, and Barbour apparently remembers she’s a lot more -- a lot bigger -- than just her booted feet. This always leads to a staring contest, until Barbour turns and wanders off with all the nonchalance of a creature who doesn’t know what you’re talking about, he wasn’t hunting anyone. He knows where his dinner comes from.

Every few days they try to find a stream of fresh water not too far from the road and break at midday, taking turns washing off the sweat and dirt of their journey. Klark has been keeping Barbour cleaned
daily by dint of a wet cloth and vigorous rubbing, but this, he really loves: dipping his paws into the water and then jumping in with a *sploosh*, paddling from one bank to another while she washes off. She keeps an eye on him to make sure he isn’t carried away by the current, but every time it looks like he might slip under he leaps for safety, clawing at grass and dirt until he’s free.

“He should start hunting on his own soon,” Genai tells her back at camp. “We’ll have less of a rodent problem in the hall this winter, I think.”

Klark sits on a felled log, drying her hair by the fire. She dried Barbour first, who did not appreciate it, growling the entire time. As soon as he could get free he sped off to see that Trest was cooking for their dinner. “Do you think it’s okay to keep him inside the hall? It almost feels like caging him.”

Genai snorts. “Wait until he grows to full size -- which shouldn’t be too long, now. Nothing will keep him *anywhere* he doesn’t want to be.” She cocks an eyebrow at Klark. “You’re not hurting him. He would have died if you’d left him, either from starvation or in getting eaten by another predator. If he grows up and decides to go, he will. But he imprinted on you, so I doubt it.”

Klark didn’t know you could feel happy about something and wretched, at the same time. “I just want to do the right thing for him.”

“That’s what it means to love,” Genai says quietly. Something in the distance catches her eye, and she sighs. “But you can only protect them so much. After that, they have to take their own risks.”

She goes before Klark can asks what she means. A half-breath later, Lexa takes the place where the bodyguard was sitting on the log. Her own hair is loose and wet from her own dip in the stream, and she’s shivering a bit before she can scoot closer to the steady flames. She turns her head so that the weight of her damp hair falls in a heavy curtain across her shoulder, fanned out to dry more easily. It also puts her facing Klark. Catching her eye, Lexa smiles -- a little dreamily. She’s not vocal about it, never complains, but Klark has noticed she’s a bit more fastidious about the grime of living on the road than you might expect from a warrior with a reputation for launching herself into the blood and muck of battle.

She looks... almost senseless with pleasure, now, eyes half-lidded, lips refusing to relinquish that smile. The fire’s heat has already dried the more delicate curls at her temples. A few errant droplets of water slip down into the hollow made by her jutting collarbone, exposed where she hasn’t completely done up the fastenings on her shirt.

Klark’s mouth is suddenly dry. “Lexa... I...”
“Hmm?” Lexa moves closer, leans her head into Klark’s personal space.

A yowl from across the way makes them both start and jerk backward. The next second Klark’s lap is filled with growling, spitting snowcat kitten.

“What is wrong with you?” Klark demands. Her hands are locked in his fur on instinct -- but he’s not attacking Lexa, he doesn’t seem to want to go anywhere. If anything he feels rooted in place.

She casts a glance at Lexa in time to see understanding break over the other girl’s face in a wave.

“Did you -- stop that -- were you... I’m sorry he’s being like this.”

“No,” Lexa says, focused on the kitten. “It’s alright.”

“It’s not alright, if he’s going to spend the entire winter among the Ice Court he can’t be like this.”

Lexa props her chin in her hand. “I don’t think he will be, with anyone else.”

“... what?”

Barbour, out of the blue, calms himself. He plonks his butt down on Klark’s thigh and begins to groom.

“See what I mean?” Lexa asks drily, watching him. “We understand each other.”

“What?”

“Hmm,” Lexa agrees.
It would be enough excitement for any one journey, Klark thinks; more than enough.

But then they find Echo in a face-off with more survivors from the sky.

Chapter End Notes

1. As random as it may seem, Canadian lynx kittens really are born with sky-blue eyes that darken as they get older. It’s just one of the things which make them “the coolest animals ever,” according to me aged 7 and since. And you guys have no idea HOW LONG I have been planning that scene.

2. Extra-special thanks to blindwire and meetwickedfaith, who had a harder job than usual with my hands being so bad. All remaining errors, including possibly the kitten thing, are very much my own.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

1. *T’Challa voice* “As you can see, I am NOT dead.”

2. Friendly reminder I have seen nothing of the show past the third season, have no interest past the third season. I understand Echo became more of a central character, which is good! But if that means she’s out of character in this fic... considering the show, I’m going to go with: also good.

3. The last eighteen months have been difficult, and this story became especially difficult to finish. Thank you, very much, to everyone who gave me their patience as I took the time I needed. You make it worth the hard stuff.

Also extra special love to meetwickedfaith for cheerleading and typo-hunting; all (numerous and embarrassing, I'm sure) flaws that remain are my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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It’s a shock to stumble upon other Ice Nation warriors. Klark notices the signs of a stalk before the others: the haphazard carvings that might fade into tree bark for anyone not familiar with Ice Nation patterns. When she catches a low whistle on the breeze, using the notes for Echo’s regiment, she calls their small company to a halt and pulls Genai to the side.

“Take him,” she says, handing over a squirming snow kitten. “We might be walking into trouble, I don’t want the distraction.”

Genai handles Barbour with an expertise developed over the last several handfuls of days. Everyone in their party at this point knows to grab the scruff of his neck whenever he feels like expressing reluctance at being separated from Klark. “I don’t like you going alone.”

“Unless there’s been a coup in our absence, I’ll be surrounded by loyal soldiers. I just don’t want to involve anyone else in Ice Nation affairs until we have more details.”
Genai nods her begrudging acceptance. Klark can feel everyone watching as she sets off into the woods on her own. She thinks she sees Lexa’s hands twitch on the reins, but Klark makes a point of avoiding the Commander’s searching look.

Snow crunches beneath her boots as she makes her way, winding through the scattered trees, following the signs that will lead her to a hidden Ice Nation camp. Normally she’d feel a little cranky -- she’s always felt off-balance in wooded areas, even though they’re nothing like the thickly-strewn forests of the South -- but it’s a bit of a relief to be on her own for the first time in... a long while. Without a certain pair of eyes on her.

Lexa has been true to her word in promising not to push, to wait for Klark to gather her response. And Klark should be happy about that -- she is, but not... not as relieved as she thought she would be. Instead of feeling like she can happily avoid the subject of whatever might be between them, Klark has only felt more anxious with every passing day they don’t speak about it. She dreams about what might happen -- she can never hold on to the details of the discussion itself, but the details of a possible aftermath sear themselves into her sleeping imagination: punches thrown, or the look of an unbroachable wall behind Lexa’s eyes, or even tears. From either of them.

Sometimes, the dreams are different. The touches after are soft and entreating. She has vivid sensory predictions of what it would feel like to have the skin of Lexa’s cheek against her own, Lexa’s breath across her lips.

That’s the moment she wakes up, mouth dry and heart beating fast. Those are the days the anxiety worsens, prickling at the back of her brain.

Maybe it’s not anxiety, a voice whispers as she steps into the shallow cave where the signals have led her. Maybe it’s eagerness.

She doesn’t have time to process that, as her entry prompts whoops of surprise and joy from the seated warriors inside. They rise to their feet to greet her, clasping hands, smiling with genuine feeling.

It’s so good to be home.

Echo doesn’t bother with anything like formality, wrapping her arms around Klark’s waist to lift her into a hug. Klark doesn’t struggle, even though they’ve discussed this -- Echo is a whole head taller, and sometimes insufferable about it. But it’s been months. So Klark waits patiently until she’s back
on her feet, and discreetly readjusts her jacket afterward.

Echo leans in to place her forehead against Klark’s. “Welcome back, your Majesty,” she says, with her usual one-sided grin. “I can’t tell you how grateful I am for it.”

Klark smiles despite herself. “Me, too,” she tells her Heir, and reaches up to squeeze one of Echo’s hands where they rest on her shoulders.

“I hear you had quite an adventure before the Summit even began. But Genai said she was on a schedule, and said you would tell the whole tale on your return.”

“... yes.” Oh, yeah, they did have a lot to talk about, didn’t they. Klark firms her tone: “But first, tell me what caused you to stray so far from Court.”

“They look like Mountain Men,” Echo breathes close to her ear. “But they can’t be, can they? This far north?”

The forests in this climate are different from those down south. The trees -- evergreen -- stand straight and dignified, each in their own space instead of clustering indecently together, with trunks bulging or limbs entwined. They carpet the ground with a dampening layer of pine needles, instead of allowing undergrowth to snag and trip the unwary.

Klark highly prefers her forests to Lexa’s.

The only disadvantage of superior northern forests is they make it harder to sneak up on someone unawares. The sightline is relatively uncluttered, and one can only come so close before there is no background thick enough to fade into.

She and Echo, however, are consummate warriors trained in the ancient ways and skills of the Ice
Nation, passed on through generations. They are hiding behind a big rock.

“No, not the Mountain,” Klark says. “They’re from the sky.”

“The what?”

“It’s a very long story. There was a shiver in the earth right before you discovered them, right?”

Echo nods.

“Their main force landed in Woods Clan territory; I’ve heard the stories.” Klark leans into the rough surface of the boulder muscling its way out of the earth. She’s heard other stories, from Raven and Wells, of when the dropship served as the vanguard. How scared they were of this new terrain and way of life, how limited in their resources. The camp she’s looking at now is very much what she pictured in her mind’s eye as she listened. “Have you made contact?”

“No. I ordered them watched until you returned, and then Genai and Roan rode back with news of an actual battle. I wasn’t sure if they were a part of that, so I came out here myself, just in case.” Echo rests her chin to Klark’s shoulder. “Did you really bring down the Mountain?”

“Not just me.” Not her at all, in a sense, but that can wait for later. “So, have they done anything interesting since you arrived?”

“They don’t do anything interesting at all. Except once they killed and ate a wild boar that clearly had the blood sickness; none of them died, but it was fun to watch them crawl around on their bellies for a few days.”

“Hmm.” Klark had thought it a shock to go from the silent barrens to Ice Nation territory proper, which teemed with game and human settlements. She still can’t imagine what it must be like to be confined to a ship in the barrenness of space, and land here. “They haven’t spotted you? Or any other warrior?”

“They walk too loudly to catch any of us. Even when hunting -- they never would have caught that boar if it weren’t already crazed.” Echo watches her closely. “What are you thinking?”
“I --” Klark catches herself, and then sighs out. “I’m wondering how much of this to treat as a betrayal.”

Echo does not like the idea; she insists that if Klark do this at all, they do it together. Which is fine. She speaks the Mountain’s language better than Klark, anyway.

The first of the Sky People to see them approaching -- on horseback, after having retreated and informed their warriors how to proceed -- is a group of children. When she and Echo ride into sight they freeze, staring, only to start screaming as they run back to their camp.

Klark looks at Echo, who rolls her eyes.

“Sky children are different from ours,” Klark says, mild. Echo snorts.

By the time they ride up to the camp the children have clearly informed the adults. Everyone is standing outside their makeshift shelters with varying degrees of fear writ large on their faces, as if they already knew Echo had insisted warriors hide in the trees behind them with bows drawn and waiting for any sign of Mountain-style weaponry.

Klark spares a glance for the sight of the massive, crumbling architecture they’ve based their camp around. This must be their ship, one of the stations Raven and Wells talk about. The landing on the ground looks like it was a hard one.

“Hello.” One man steps forward from the group. He’s not wearing anything that makes him stand out from the rest, but he carries an air of authority nonetheless. “I... can you understand me?”

“Yes,” Echo says.

A complex series of emotions moves over the man’s face. “You speak English,” he murmurs, as if to himself. “And you’re... here.” At last a single, identifiable reaction nudges the others aside: gratitude.
Klark shifts in her saddle. She’s not sure she wants this stranger’s gratitude, or the possible reasons for it.

“She are,” he touches his outspread fingers to his chest, “the people who -- do you remember the, the wars? The bombs?”

“We tell the stories,” Echo says.

“My name is Charles Pike,” the man says. “And we are... we’re from the people who took shelter in the sky.”

She can’t hate them, Klark thinks, letting her gaze roam over the sight of them. Part of her wants to -- it was easier to deal with the thought of these invaders when they were in Woods Clan territory. Not in her kingdom, breaking her trees with their ships and eating her game. (Game that had already sickened past usefulness. But still.) She’s not sure how Lexa stands it.

And then she thinks of that other self, growing up in the sky -- looking as pale and soft as these people, like grubs unearthed from the dirt. She tries to picture herself with one of these terrified faces, shivering in their thin clothes.

She can’t. It’s too much -- it’s an entire world, an entire life -- of a difference. She has nothing in common with these people.

But her other self... maybe she had been soft and helpless, like them, but she’d found strength. Somehow she’d managed to swallow down blood and travel across that difference. And maybe it hadn’t been her main intention, but she’d saved many of Klark’s people in the process.

The least Klark can do in return is hear these invaders out.

“My name is Echo,” her heir responds. “I am a warrior of the Ice Nation.”

The man named Charles Pike pauses, looks at Klark. “And you are...”
“That is my queen,” Echo answers, her tone becoming that much chillier. “She rules this land, and your lives are hers to claim.”

The corner of Pike’s mouth twists into his cheek. He looks *resigned*, Klark realizes -- as if being faced with insurmountable authority is not a new experience for him.

He’s watching her with the same intensity, now, taking in the details of her appearance. “You look very young to be a queen.”

“Is that strange to your people?” she asks. She can hear her own accent when she speaks English, but the talks on the road from Polis have helped.

“It wasn’t always. But then our... governments decided on an age requirement. I mean,” he rushes on, probably guessing that Klark would have trouble with the word, “that children should be given time to -- well, to be children, and nothing else.” He shuts his mouth. His eyes are on her face, but she can tell he is seeing something else; something in his memory. “Not political pawns.”

She’s not sure what he means, but she focuses on what’s important: “Are your leaders better because they are older?”

She sees him swallow. He seems caught in the grip of something -- the tension builds in his shoulders. “No,” he forces out, as if it takes effort.

There’s so much anger in him, Klark thinks. Not that he is *angry*. She can see that at this moment he is anxious, and interested, and exhausted almost beyond words -- but not angry. The anger almost seems apart from him, something he wanted to feel, once, but had to siphon off and lock away, deep inside. It’s lurking still, just behind whatever else he feels in this present moment. It could be very dangerous if he ever let it out.

But Klark understands anger. It kept her alive through the storm, and it kept her focused when she thought she had lost the hope of Lexa’s friendship. And she knows -- very well -- that anger is almost always the result of receiving a wound.

“Is this,” she indicates the shabby camp, “all of your people?”

“Yes. We’re not a threat to you. If you would let us be --”
“Is this all the people from the sky?” she interrupts. She will give him one more chance. But that is all.

She thinks he senses what lies behind the question. The way he watches her face... it gives her a sudden, and very unpleasant memory of the way her subjects used to watch her. Waiting for the twitch of an expression to decide their fate.

There’s too much about him, and these people, that’s familiar in that sense. She thinks maybe she should have encouraged those times when Raven told tales of the Ark, instead of letting Wells so often take the lead.

“There are others,” he admits. His voice is hoarse with perhaps regret, perhaps relief, she can’t tell which. “Months ago, we sent down a ship of... people your age. When we came down there were many other ships with us, but we lost contact. We don’t know where they are, or if they survived.”

“They did,” she tells him. She raises her voice so that they others can hear her. “They’re alive.”

It’s like an ember flying off into dry grass: it catches and their faces shift, the way they hold themselves. They straighten up and crane forward, hesitant but driven as if by some force beyond control.

“My name is Hannah Green, do you know -- is my son --”

“I don’t know names,” Klark cuts through the rising cacophony. “There was a war. I will talk to someone who knows. Wait. We will return.”

“A war?” Pike says quietly.

“Not with us. The enemy surrendered. Your people are part of our...” She clicks her tongue in annoyance, she can’t remember the English word for "Coalition. “They are part of us.”

“You knew about them.” He says it softly and without rancor. “It was a test.”
“Yes.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that,” under his breath.

“Be happy you passed,” Klark throws over her shoulder as she turns her horse around, Echo bringing up the rear.

“She’s not,” Echo protests. They’re still on the horses. The archers were left back in the trees with instructions to send word if the remaining people from the sky make any unwanted moves. A short detour collected the rest of the soldier’s from Echo’s camp, which was easily disbanded and any evidence of its being there scrubbed into resembling the chaos of the natural landscape. Her soldiers have no intention of letting Klark wander around on her own, much less the Queen and the Heir together, without an entourage.

It’s their presence which makes Klark wish she could have told Echo this news earlier, but when? All she can do is keep her voice down when she says: “She is. She insisted on joining us the day we set off. What could I do? Say no to the Commander of the twelve clans?” She resettles on her saddle, thinking: she should have. Things would be easier, then. “She says she’s trying to make up for two years of neglect. She has a point -- I understand the Mountain required her to stay close to Polis, their attacks were too savage to give them the opening of her absence. But they’re her people, too.” She almost turns to take in the faces of the soldiers following close behind -- familiar faces. She can name every one of them, she knows their families.

Seeing them again reminds her of what Lexa relinquished, just to avoid Klark. She is their Commander, but she doesn’t know them. Or they her. Klark can swallow down the personal insult of being asked to stay away from Lexa, and Polis, but surrounded by the faces of the people who have had only her to depend on for the last two years, she’s not sure she can forgive.

(She can think of other faces, ones she won’t find in the people with her, or even back at Court. Warriors who died and families lost because of decisions Klark made. And part of her, even as she tries to suppress it, can’t help but wonder if they’d still be alive if it’d been Lexa... if it’d been anyone else besides a child raised in isolation in the barrens who happened to fulfill a prophecy...)

But that just means she can’t deprive them now, can she. If Lexa has come to claim the people of the
Ice Nation, properly, then Klark... they’re hers. That doesn’t change. She still lives for them.

Even if in the end, they prefer to be claimed by someone else.

She comes back to herself to find Echo watching her, eyes narrowed. Klark reddens and hopes her insecurities aren’t obvious from her face -- Echo can be stupidly good at reading her. The older girl opens her mouth and Klark doesn’t let herself flinch.

“I’ve met the Commander. Did you know that?” her Heir asks, surprising Klark.

Klark frowns. “During the coronation?”

“No. Before that.” Echo nudges her horse a little closer, lowers her voice. “During Nia’s reign. She travelled down to meet the last Commander at the border between our territories, and brought most of the Court with her.” She pauses. “He brought the nightbloods with him.”

“Why? What were they doing?”

Echo gets an odd look on her face: half rueful, half disdain. “Oh, Nia liked to show off to other leaders. They had to know how badly off most were inside her territory, especially when we shared a border -- they couldn’t help knowing, with all the raids. But Nia liked to spin a tale that all the starvation and stealing was despite her efforts to bring us together, and that it was only those too stupid to follow or too lazy to do their part that ended up suffering. She’d throw lavish banquets, and do her deals, and at the end everyone in power walked away very pleased with themselves. Everyone would swear after that Nia was the most benevolent leader, very kind, and the people of the Ice Nation are notoriously ungovernable.”

That last part was not a surprise. Abi had talked at length about their history, the feuding warlords and uprisings, how generations of bloody in-fighting had left a power vacuum that Nia, as a young warrior, had fully exploited. “We became so tired of fighting we had nothing left to deal with her,” Abi would say, staring at the small fire they could afford on the barrens. “Remember that lesson, Klark: never exhaust yourself, not for any cause. Protect your own strength of purpose. Martyrs are celebrated and sung about, but they don’t win wars.” When she finally looked up, it was with the look of greatest grief Klark would ever see in her. “And there are always more wars.”

“Commander Darg brought the nightbloods for his own reasons,” Echo continues. “Maybe he wanted to show them his special brand of diplomacy. By that I mean the precise angle he would
bend down to lick Nia’s boots.” Klark grins, but Echo shakes her head. “Too close to the truth. His own generals hated him -- another reason why he brought all his potential heirs along, I think. Dissuaded anyone from contemplating a stray arrow or unexpected trouble on the road, followed by a quick Ascension.”

“What was Lexa like, then?” Klark asks before she can stop herself. Echo raises an eyebrow, but Klark keeps her eyes fixed on the back of her mount’s head. She stopped using Lexa’s name after that message about the first Summit.

“She kind of blended in with the rest, actually. They were all about an age, and I remember one girl... Rune? Luna? She was slated as the favorite to win the Ascension battles. She and her brother were very fierce.” Echo frowns. “Lexa, less so. I remember thinking she might surprise them. The quiet ones always bear watching.”

“That’s what you remember of her? That she was dangerous?”

Echo doesn’t answer right away. When Klark looks up to see a wide, white grin splitting her face. “No,” she chuckles. “I remember she was cold.”

Klark stares. “Cold?”

“Freezing.” Echo’s grin gets even bigger. “It was the end of fall sliding into winter -- like now -- and about as far south as we are now. Not too bad, right? Except she was never warm enough.”

“She complained?” Klark has a hard time picturing it.

“No, of course not. But she would always drape herself in blankets, or squirm to get a closer seat to the fire. I don’t think I ever saw her without enough clothing for two people.” Echo begins to chuckle at the memory. “And you could see it on her face, she didn’t have to say a word. She was miserable, all curled in on herself and holding back shivers. I thought she’d turn into an icicle before my very eyes.”

“She seemed fine during the coronation.”

“In the very beginning of spring. With an early thaw.”
When Klark looks over, it’s to find Echo watching her with a wry half-smile. “I don’t get it.”

“You wouldn’t.” Did she roll her eyes? It was too quick for Klark to catch. “I’m saying Lexa hated being this far north. She did her duty when you were crowned, but to come back again? She’d have to have a very good reason.”

Klark doesn’t know why Echo thinks Lexa would have any cause to complain -- she’s personally feeling very warm at the moment. “I told you why. She wants to reconnect with our clan --”

Echo nudges her horse ahead in a quick burst of speed and then wheels it around, blocking Klark’s path. Klark’s own horse startles, sidling backwards as Klark tries to calm it -- she’s never really comfortable on these things, definitely not like Echo is. By the time her horse has calmed she can see Echo had given the ‘stand back’ signal to the others, who linger behind them in the trees.

Echo pulls her horse up parallel to Klark’s but pointed in opposite directions, so that the two of them are face-to-face.

“I never thought I’d have to remind you of this,” she says. “But being Queen isn’t license to be cruel.”

“Of course n-- cruel to who?” Klark keeps her voice at a whisper.

Echo studies her face. “Me, you idiot.”

Klark reddens -- she knows it’s affectionate, and Echo is careful never to tease her like this where other people might see or hear. Doesn’t mean she likes it. So she sets her jaws and stares back.

After a moment Echo sighs. “I’m sorry. Uncalled-for. It’s been a series of shocks all day, but... it won’t happen again, your Majesty.”

Klark softens. “You’re my friend. I would never try to hurt you.”
“On purpose,” Echo adds absently.

It has been the kind of day where one thing happens after another, and suddenly Klark is dead tired - almost sick with it. “Fine. Since you’ve decided you know exactly what’s going on, why don’t you let me know when you’re tired of being cryptic about it. Until then,” and she attempts to spur her horse forward, despite their close proximity.

Echo anticipates her, reaching for the bridle and holding Klark’s horse more or less in place. Her own backs up a few steps to keep them together, placid, and Klark really needs to work on her horsemanship.

Or stop resenting her Heir’s -- but to pick one.

“I don’t think I’m asking for much,” Echo says. “What we had was borrowed time, I knew that. I was happy with that. But if it’s ending, can’t we take the time to say so? I saw you -- both of you -- at the coronation. And now the Commander comes here?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Klark asks, trying to take the reins back without her soldiers noticing she lost them in the first place.

Echo stares at her. “You mean to tell me nothing happened. This whole time -- you spend weeks down in her city, and now she follows you back, but the two of you..?”

“So what if something did happen?” Klark lashes out, well and truly trapped. “Who cares if... it doesn’t matter. Nothing has to change.”

That’s what she’s been running from, she realizes. Life in the barrens had been hard, but she had known what each day would bring -- until she didn’t. Abi’s death brought about a chain of reactions that had upended her, turned her inside-out, remade her. In every possible way.

Losing her mother meant becoming Queen, becoming Queen meant knowing Lexa, and knowing Lexa had meant losing her almost immediately. Only then had everything seemed to come to a rest, and Klark had found a precarious balance on the knife-edge that was leading an entire clan. She learned how to live as a ruler, and she had her subjects’ respect. She had Echo, which meant she had a friend and companion who loved her, but could never break her heart.
She never would be -- never has been -- safe, but when she laid down at night in Echo’s arms, she could feel something close to it.

And now Lexa... Lexa wants to take that away. Oh, that’s not how she thinks of it, Klark is pretty sure. She probably doesn’t think she’s here to win Klark’s own people away from her, either, but lack of intent won’t keep it from happening. Maybe.

Echo bursts out laughing.

Klark flinches. She’s not mocking Klark, exactly, but there’s a definite edge to her laughter which is darker than amusement.

“Alright,” she says when she’s finished. “I get it now. And,” as she tilts her head to the side, considering, “this might help.”

“Help what,” Klark mutters, eyeing the reins.

“My pride, for one. Someday you’ll understand you’re not supposed to make girls work that hard to get you into bed if you’re not actually disinterested.” Echo grins at her, maneuvers so that she can sling her arm over one of Klark’s shoulders. “But it had nothing to do with me, did it? You’re just terrible at this in general.”

Klark looks away. There’s a point of soreness over her heart, like an old wound that only aches in the right weather.

Echo leans their heads together. The horses don’t like it -- Klark’s not sure she does either -- but it’s Echo, so they comply.

Not like Klark has room to criticize them on those grounds.

“You’re not being hunted anymore, you know.” Echo’s tone is definitely mocking, this time, but Klark minds less when combined with the closeness. And how there’s no way the others can hear them like this. “You’re allowed to take a chance on something that might not work. Once in a while.”
Klark shakes her head softly. She’s not sure how to explain to the older girl: the very idea doesn’t feel like freedom. It feels like death.

Echo sighs. “Well, I suppose I’m fine with it this way, too. Why should some southern nightblood have an easier time than I did?” She smacks a kiss on the tip of Klark’s nose before leaning back and away. “But if anyone asks, let me be the one that ended it.”

“You are the one ending it,” Klark says, confused.

“Yes, exactly.” Echo walks her horse around Klark’s until they’re facing the same direction again. “Just like that.”

She nudges her mount into a quick walk, forcing Klark to follow suit.

Genai calls out to them with surprised joy as they near Klark’s party on the road. She practically drags Echo from her saddle, pounding her back in welcome.

“And you,” she says as Klark slides down to the ground, “are lucky you fetched this one, because I want to strangle you for leaving us for so long without sending word. But I’m sure it’d be the Heir’s duty to stop me.”

“Normally it would be,” Echo says, scanning the others, beyond Genai, “but I’m in the mood for a promotion.”

“Shut up. Where’s my snowcat?” Klark directs this at her bodyguard, ignoring Echo’s “Your what?”

“With the Raven girl. He tried to pounce the Commander again, so I asked she take him to the other side of the road.”
Klark sets off (“She has a what?” she hears again from Echo), stomach twisting as she searches for either Wells or Raven. They’ve helped her in so many ways. And she trusted them, brought them into her kingdom. But if they’ve known about these people in the woods all along...

She finds them together. With Lexa, of all people, everyone crouched in a haphazard ring with the snow soaking through the knees of their clothing. Klark slows, softening the crunch of ice beneath her boots, but Lexa looks up as she approaches anyway.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” she asks without rising. Without moving a muscle, really, except to raise her eyes to Klark -- and then quickly cast them down again.

Klark doesn’t answer. She draws closer, frowning, trying to see what --

“What are you doing?”

“Raven has a theory,” Wells says from where he’s kneeling, both hands buried deeply in the ruff of fur around Barbour’s neck. “I don’t get it. Something about the history of domestication.”

“Farm Station kids were obsessed with this stuff.” Raven’s hands are also firmly grasping Barbour, this time the solid trunk of his body just below his front legs. “Food and behavioral modification. It’s a proven science!”

Barbour, despite his namesake, does not seem to be interested in the theory at work. He is ignoring the scrap of dried meat in Lexa’s outstretched palm, and his eyes are fixed firmly on her, wriggling in Raven and Wells’s combined hold while he emits a low, continuous growl.

“Stop espeeri-- speramen-- exp-er-imen-ting with my snowcat,” Klark says. She steps into their loose circle to pick up Barbour, tucking him under her arm and reaching with her other hand to take the meat from Lexa. He wraps both of his massive paws around her hand before taking the treat, almost daintily, with the softer growls she’s learned are a sign of love and welcome. Every time he looks back down to Lexa his ears twitch.

Lexa stands, but her posture makes it clear she has no intention of moving within striking range. “We won’t make any other attempts if it upsets you. I was the one who wanted to see if he would take food from me.”
She’s not lying, Klark thinks, letting Barbour gnaw on her knuckles -- Lexa seems to find a way around lying, maneuvering the truth in a way that puts her square in the path of oncoming responsibility or blame, instead of out of it. Because Klark knows exactly who initiates any and all experiments in their party. That’s how she learned the ungainly word for it.

“Why do you insist on trying?” she asks, slipping back into her native language. Talking with the other soldiers and Echo has made her almost hungry for it.

Lexa’s eyes slide away from hers, coming to rest on the snowcat kitten now squirming his way under Klark’s chin. “What did you find out there?” she asks instead of answering, and in the same tongue.

“More of them,” Klark says, flickering her gaze at and away from Wells and Raven so that her meaning is clear. The two Sky people are arguing with their heads together (“...live prey would work better?” “Raven, I’m not catching a rabbit for this.”) and don’t notice. Lexa’s eyes narrow in response. They share a look, and a moment of accord so complete -- united against a common invader, not quite allied but at least known where there is an unknown -- that leaves Klark almost dizzy in the aftermath.

This is what you could have, this is who you two could be, something whispers inside her. Klark clamps down on the hope it inspires and rips it away before it can take root. She can’t lose herself in the prospect of what they might have.

Not again.

“How many?” Lexa asks.

“Maybe twenty families.” She nods at Lexa’s surprise. “Yes, not a warrior contingent -- families with children.”

“So not an attack force.” Lexa lets out a small sigh. “But not a welcome development.”

“No one among the Sky People mentioned this might happen?”

“No.” Lexa considers. “Their -- stations -- were scattered when they first came to the ground, and we had to help them reunite. But there was no mention of any missing.” Klark can actually watch her change, see Lexa shapeshift into the Commander who first met her on the shores of a half-frozen
lake, years ago: barricaded, cunning, and cold. She hadn’t realized, until this moment, how far they’d come since. “We’ll see if we can draw the truth out of them. The boy might confess something if you get him alone. I’ll draw aside the girl after the evening meal, and see how he responds if you pretend your people are not entirely united under my rule. If that doesn’t lead to anything, we can --”

“Hey,” Klark says, turning to Wells and Raven and speaking the Mountain language, “more of your people are starving to death in my forests. Why?”

They stare at her. From the corner of her eye Klark sees a flash of surprise edged with anger cross Lexa’s face.

Too bad. Klark doesn’t like Lexa when she turns cold; she likes a Lexa who hedges secrets even less.

“Farm Station,” Wells says, and he sounds breathless enough to drag her attention from Lexa. “They were never recovered after the crash.” He looks as if he’s caught between hope and terror. “You found them? What are you going to do?”

Barbour is tired of being held. He stretches down toward the ground, letting his weight tip him out of Klark’s arms until he’s solid on his own paws... and focused on Lexa again, crouched low and considering. Lexa looks to Klark, as if to ask: what is she going to do?

“I’m going to eat dinner,” she tells them both. “I’ll bring you to them after, if you want.”

She turns to head back to Genai and Echo. No one follows her, but a breath or two later she hears the soft crunch of snow under paws as Barbour catches up. She knows she has to be imagining an expression of frustration — sulkiness — on his feline features, from being forced to abandon his favorite prey.

“I know,” she finds herself murmuring to him. “She makes me crazy, too.”
Echo adores Barbour.

The feeling is mutual.

“Where did you find it? I can’t believe Genai let you keep it. Her. Him?” She bends closer at Klark’s nod, fascinated. Barbour stretches an oversized paw to bat at her cheek. “He’s gorgeous.”

Klark’s gaze drifts to the figures sitting not far from them. It’s always easy to find Lexa’s campfire by looking for the massive shadow Gustus casts. She can also pick out Lexa’s silhouette -- smaller and slighter.

... smaller than it should be. She’s not -- is she hunched over?

“Here,” she says, dumping Barbour into Echo’s lap as she stands. She ignores both her heir’s and snowcat’s protests (the latter a forlorn “mrrrop!”), striding over to the other fire.

The quiet that greets her there is a little unnerving after the crunch of snow under her boots. Klark has never sat herself down by Lexa’s personal fire, but she knows the other girl is often joined by the other Woods Clan warriors, sometimes even Raven. Tonight it’s just her and Gustus. The Commander has no trouble meeting Klark’s gaze, but doesn’t appear compelled to speak.

She is hunched, Klark thinks. Not by much -- you’d have to be familiar with the way Lexa usually holds herself, spine straighter than the ancient trees surrounding them that stretch to touch the top of the world. But right now Lexa’s cloak is drawn as tightly around herself as she can manage, the bend of her body listing toward the heat of their fire.

It isn’t even that cold. The first snowfall is almost a gentle time of year, with enough heat lingering in the Earth to inspire the droplets between it and the upper atmosphere. What’s the Commander doing to do when it’s really cold, when the air dries out and everyone’s skin with it, when both the air and earth is so frozen the wind howls in a vacuum of echoing nothingness?

There’s a tickle of irritation in the pit of Klark’s gut, and she seizes on it. Yes, anger. That’s what she’s feeling right now. She’s angry.

“Was there something you came over to say?” Lexa asks, finally.
“I declared Echo my heir,” Klark says.

Lexa raises her eyebrows slightly. “I know.”

“... how?”

Now one eyebrow climbs a little higher than the other. “It’s my place to know.”

All those months Klark felt rejected and dismissed in the Ice Court, thinking she’d been tossed aside and forgotten -- Lexa had been asking questions about her, listening to reports? Her attention fixed and unwavering, if distant, like some kind of star secure in the quiet of the night sky? Her stomach swoops at the idea. With anger, of course. “That’s why she’s here. She was investigating the invaders with her pick of the warriors at Court.”

“She sounds worthy of your choice.”

“We’ve been sleeping together since the last Summit.”

Gustus draws in a long breath before letting out an equally long sigh. He rises to his feet and departs into the surrounding darkness without a word.

Lexa never looks away from Klark. Not even as the silence stretches out between them, the only sound coming from the crackling fire.

“Well?” Klark breaks it finally, unnerved.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” There’s no outward change in her expression, or body language -- she isn’t even letting herself shiver, and Klark can see that the tips of her ears are bright red from the cold.

“Say there’s nothing keeping you on this journey. Say you’re heading back to Polis at first light.” That she’s taking herself away from Klark’s people, Klark’s life. Back to her warm southern
woodlands where the trees keep the snow from ever touching the ground, and the wind from scouring the earth -- or that’s how Klark pictures it.

“I told you before,” Lexa says, and only a little extra care in her words shows how she has to keep her teeth from chattering. “I’m here now to make up for past absence. Not because... my presence is owed. I don’t expect anything for myself in return.”

Her ears are almost completely red. Klark searches for that same, comforting anger, but all she feels now is a kind of sad tiredness. “And if it’s too late?” she asks. “You kept yourself from these people for years -- what if they’re beyond wanting you, now?”

“So I will build from there,” Lexa says, and betrays herself with the tiniest of shivers, a little hiccup as she clamps down on the reflex. “A leader serves her people as much as they do her. I don’t expect mindless loyalty. But you understand when I say that if I didn’t try, that would be failing them twice over.”

“Even if you’re unwanted?” Klark says, after a long pause.

For the first time Lexa has to break their locked gaze. “Am I unwanted?” she asks the fire.

Klark looks at her, huddled and finally hesitant. She should send the Commander home, where a soft bed and the Shadow-walker’s soft forgiveness are probably waiting. Even when they first met, even in Klark’s wildest imaginings of what they could share with each other, she’d known not to test the fantasy with the weight of their individual responsibilities, the distance stretching between their kingdoms. She’s not sure why she let it come this far, now. Lexa doesn’t belong here. Klark doesn’t belong anywhere else.

“Get inside your tent before you freeze to death,” she says instead, and has to spin around to keep from spitting out her anger at herself as she marches back to her own tent. She takes Barbour from Echo wordlessly on the way, cuddling the snow kitten close as she crawls into her bedroll for the night. He tucks his head underneath her chin and rumbles until the rest of the day falls away, and the two of them are just creatures of this beautifully barren wasteland together, curled up against the howling wind and cold.
Her instincts have dulled with complacence, two years out of the barrens, and so when Echo walks into her tent she’s awake but not on guard.

Which is how she gets a handful of fresh snow to the face before she even opens her eyes.

“Get up,” the Heir says, standing over Klark with folded arms as her queen sputters. “I want to see if these Sky People have managed to kill themselves the one night I wasn’t watching.”

Barbour yowls at them both before burrowing into the bedroll. He doesn’t mind being secured somewhere about Klark’s person if they have to be riding out, but his kind is nocturnal and he never fully wakes before the sun is directly overhead.

Klark wipes her face, flicks a bit of the remaining sludge at Echo, who dodges it. “They aren’t that helpless.”

Echo snorts. “Maybe not the ones you brought out of the Mountain.” She casts her gaze to the side, projecting an air of such violent nonchalance that Klark’s senses are immediately on full alert. “What were the names of the two strays you adopted? The ones we left at the camp last night.”

“Wells,” Klark says, eyes narrowing. “And Raven.”

“Raven?” Again, with such an air of uncaring that Klark can’t help but stare. “Is that the same as,” and here she names a kind of bird in the lower reaches of the kingdom, black-winged and coarse-throated but too clever to be caught by traps.

Klark shrugs. “I don’t know. Your English is better than mine.”

“Hmm. Well, if the chance arises,” and Klark’s eyes go round, does Echo actually think she’s fooling anyone, “you should introduce us. You’re not the only one who should get a chance to improve at the language. You’re much better now, by the way.”

Klark ignores the compliment. “There are two Sky People, you know. You could practice with Wells.”
“Oh, no, I wouldn’t want to deprive you of practice, either, so he should continue to help you. No,” raising her voice as Klark opens her mouth to say *what’s the difference which one you practice with*, even though they both know, “I can see the two of you are very attached already, I won’t come between that. Raven and I will do fine for each other.” Then she sweeps out of Klark’s tent as if that settles it.

Klark looks over at her snowcat. “Can you believe this?” she asks. “She’s supposed to still be pining over *me*.”

Barbour just noses deeper into the warm bedding.

Someone has made Lexa a hat.

And she’s *wearing* it.

Klark’s shock at the fact is down to the hat itself: lumpy, misshapen, and... grey. Klark likes a lot of things that are grey: the pale ash that remains in the morning after a blazing fire, the pelts traders bring to the Court from even farther north that once belonged (they tell her) to waterbound animals with soft black eyes that bark like dogs. She has no problem with that kind of grey.

But this is the color of things left to decay. It’s the hue of despair.

“What *is* that,” she blurts out as she and Genai draw close. Her retinue is only herself, her bodyguard, and a small selection of warriors -- she asked Echo to stay behind with the rest this afternoon. Partly because it was never the best idea to have the Queen and the Heir together when negotiating with a potentially hostile enemy, partly as punishment for how she chose to wake Klark that morning. She and Barbour wore eerily mournful looks as Klark left them behind at camp.

“A hat,” Lexa’s bodyguard informs them from atop his horse. “I carry a spare.”
“That doesn’t explain why anyone would put it on,” Genai mutters. Klark can only nod her horrified agreement.

Lexa stares into the far distance, ignoring all of them.

“The Commander and I have an agreement,” Gustus says. He’s not smug. Klark is pretty sure Lexa wouldn’t allow anyone -- not even a bodyguard she trusts, implicitly, with her life -- to be smug in the presence of that monstrosity on her head.

He’s not entirely out of that general neighborhood, however.

“I am in charge of her general health and wellness,” he continues, “and I am allowed to take whatever measures necessary to preserve them. Especially when I feel the Commander might be too busy with... other matters... to give them her personal attention.”

In other words: if he thinks she’s being very silly, he’ll make her wear her silliness for everyone to see.

“That’s brilliant,” Genai breathes. “Why didn’t I come up with something like that?”

Klark blanches, nudges her horse into a trot before the two bodyguards can start trading more ideas.

The leader of this lost contingent of Sky People (Pike) is like a different man today. He’s still scruffy, and dirty, and a little too hollow in the cheeks, of course, a day isn’t going to make a difference there. But when he meets her eyes -- he and a few others are waiting for them as they ride into view -- he stands less like a man living with one foot in the grave, and she doesn’t think it’s just down to the way he leans into Wells with a hand on the younger man’s shoulder. Today Pike carries himself like a man who can see a viable future on the horizon, not just agonizing death -- and he focuses on Klark as if he sees it in her.

Klark isn’t so sure of what to think. Wells stands with him, seems happy to do so... But Raven is
clearly relieved to see them approach, and Klark can see she wants to cross the invisible line between them in order to give her greetings.

Or pick a side.

Klark pulls her horse to a stop before the welcoming party but doesn’t dismount. She probably doesn’t need the advantage against half-starved, half-sick interlopers with no experience of fighting in these conditions of terrain and weather. But she didn’t survive her childhood by passing up every advantage.

“Hello again,” Pike says, after a moment of silence where it’s clear Klark is not going to be the first to speak. “Thank you for letting Raven and Wells spend the night at our camp. Many of us had children that were... they reached the ground long before the Ark. It’s good to know what happened to them.”

Not that they were alive -- which meant some of them probably weren’t. Klark frowns. From the stories Raven and Wells had told her, Sky children weren’t trained for battle. So why would they be treated as an advance guard in uncertain territory?

Lexa might know. Klark’s stomach twists, thinking why Lexa would know.

“Did they also explain the Coalition?” Klark asks. She practiced the word with Echo yesterday.

“Yes.” His expression shutters.

... huh. Klark sneaks a look at Lexa -- she’s noticed the man’s unhappiness, too, and her face carries the shadow of a frown. Klark has to look away quickly, though. Because of the hat.

“So you understand where your allegiances must now lie,” Lexa picks up the thread. Possibly because Klark has taken a moment, pressing the back of her fingers to her mouth to smother what is definitely not a giggle. “Your people have pledged themselves to me and our united cause of survival.”

Pike startles. “You -- you’re the Commander?”
Oh, she’s always hated that particular look of Lexa’s -- so haughty and removed, eyes giving away nothing. But Klark never imagined it beneath a hat that looks like several battle-scarred rabbits locked together in the mating season and then suddenly died.

A... sound... escapes. Lexa throws her a look that could sear flesh.

“Are all of their leaders children?” someone in the crowd behind Pike asks. It doesn’t sound aggressive -- more like mixed resignation and desperation, and it’s the familiar tone, together with the woman’s sleek dark hair, that lets Klark place her as the woman who asked about her son.

Pike turns his head back to address her, and the crowd at large: “If they are, it’s not necessarily the worst thing.” He hesitates before adding, “We’ve already agreed that we’ve seen the worst. Does this change anyone’s mind?”

Klark cocks her head to the side, watching. There’s a new tension in the way Pike holds himself now, a note of authority in his voice. It could be the result of the food rations they sent over with Wells and Raven last night. It could be something he’s deliberately kept hidden.

Interesting.

“Then, you are all agreed?” Lexa asks, when no one else responds to Pike. “You trust my warriors to escort you through this territory and back south, where your people await? You accept the new order of things?”

Pike turns back around, drawing a deep breath as he squares his shoulders. “Not exactly.”

Wells’s eyes stretch wide in shock, looking at Pike. The only sound is Raven’s quick, angry strides over to Klark’s horse, declaring her own allegiance in this, before silence fills the clearing.

Klark can’t hear the sound of over a dozen of her warriors drawing their bows from where they’re hidden in the treetops. The prickle at the back of her neck makes it as if she can feel them, though, and she would guess that Pike can say the same.

His throat bobs with a swallow. “We conferenced last night --”
“When,” Wells barks out. His hands are at his sides in fists.

“... when we were sure you were asleep, Wells.”

“I vouched for you! I trusted you!”

“And I will be forever grateful,” Pike says. “But your father is still on the Council. You still wouldn’t understand...” He trails off, letting his mouth fall shut before turning to meet Klark’s eyes. “We wanted to know if, instead of being sent back to the Ark, we could join the Ice Nation instead.”

Klark sees Raven’s shoulders stiffen in surprise in her peripheral vision, but she’s careful not to look away from Pike.

“You would abandon your own people?” Lexa asks, sounding wooden. “Your children?”

Pike’s expression darkens. “We don’t...” He expels a hard breath. “Please understand, this wasn’t an easy decision. Of course many of us are desperate to reunite with... but it was the Council that separated us from them in the first place. And we have other children.”

Not a calculation, ‘we can love others.’ No, it’s a statement with a cold thread of fear woven throughout: ‘we have others to protect.’

Wells has a response to that -- something outraged and bordering on imperious, which is a new look on him. Klark only listens with half an ear, the rest of her focus on calculations. If they send a warrior ahead a caravan could be sent back with enough supplies to last them the rest of the journey to the Ice Court, even with the added numbers. It’s still early enough in the season to hunt game, as well, although she might have to issue a decree about letting the resources in this area replenish for the next year or two.

But yes, she thinks they can manage to bring this sorry lot back to Court, let them spend their first, defenseless winter there in preparation for becoming an autonomous faction with the spring.

If she agrees.
She leans down and closer to Raven, still standing by Klark’s stirrup with her mouth hanging open as Pike and Wells shout at each other. Something about... imprisonment? Related to age? Their English is too fast for her to follow. “Do you want to sit behind me?” she asks.

Raven scans the breadth of horse she’ll have to climb. “I’m going to look pretty stupid getting up there.”

Klark lowers her voice almost to a whisper. “Not as stupid as Lexa.”

That succeeds in making Raven grin, although it’s a bit shaky. “You have to tell me how that happened.”

“Back at camp,” Klark agrees, before helping to pull Raven up behind her.

It takes some maneuvering -- Raven wasn’t wrong, but then neither was Klark -- and by the time Raven is secure in the saddle with her arms around Klark, Lexa has joined in the argument with the Sky People.

“They’re still searching for all of you. The effort they’ve made, the risks they’ve taken to try and make you safe...” A muscle in the Commander’s jaw clenches. “You can’t even imagine.”

But Pike shakes his head. “That’s where you’re wrong. I know exactly what they’re capable of to bring about the result they want.”

Raven’s hold on Klark’s waist tightens. It signals the end of Klark’s patience -- listening to everyone shout at each other over principles is never her strong point, but especially not when it causes so much distress in someone she’s come to care about. Especially when certain people have apparently forgotten this won’t be decided by a vote.

“Why should my clan accept you?” Her voice cuts across the argument and leaves surprised silence behind. Lexa’s eyes are back on her, but Klark is watching Pike and the faces of those gathered behind him.

They don’t feel like invaders anymore. She was angry at first -- having to deal with them, their mess, their distraction in the face of, well, personal developments. She almost welcomes it now. She was kidding herself when she let herself think about... anyway.
And these people are not a threat. A burden, maybe. Very possibly. But there’s something about them... the patched and tattered clothing, the thinness of their faces... and beyond that, the look in their eyes -- as if to say, “you might be the disappointment which finishes us, but we want to trust that you are not.”

Exactly like the faces of her own people in the early days of being their queen.

The familiarity is too strong to dismiss their idea out of hand.

“We can pull our own weight. We’re all farmers. We’ve lived our lives never thinking we’d have the chance to put so many of those skills to use, we want to --”

“My people don’t work the land,” Klark interrupts before he can gain momentum. “We hunt, and we follow the animals. We... what’s the word?” She turns to Raven. “Finding plants when we need them, going some place else so they grow back?”

“Forage.”

“We forage,” she tells Pike. “I have already heard of your people’s skills in those areas.”

“... we are in a new world --”

“You have no skills,” she says, firm. “And soon there will be nothing left to this land but the dark and the cold. If you do not go south, all of you will have a long winter ahead. If you do not go south, you can only survive because my clan keeps you alive. If you go south,” slowly and with emphasis, “you will have ease and rest. Your people can care for you.”

She watches a shadow pass over the assembled faces and wonders: what happened to these people?

“If we thought that was true,” Pike’s hands stretch open and first close at his sides, seemingly without his awareness, as if constantly grasping for something just out of reach, “we wouldn’t ask to... I’m, I’m sorry if we angered you. We don’t mean... we don’t think we’ll be safe with, with who you call the Sky People.”
Lexa opens her mouth. To her credit, when Klark shoots her a look she closes it.

Pike proceeds slowly, almost brokenly. “We weren’t really united on the Ark. Up in the sky. We claimed to be, but. It was cooperation out of necessity only. We thought if we couldn’t find a way to live together, we would die apart.”

Klark thinks about facing a then-unknown Commander across a fire, the new tattoo still stinging her face. “I know something of that.”

Pike looks grateful for even that small show of understanding. “That was the theory, anyway. The reality was more... divided.” He turns to Wells. “You know that when sacrifices had to be made, it wasn’t Alpha Station who made them first. You were the only Alpha kid in the Skybox -- you think that was a coincidence? And even more people died after all of you --” He sucks in a breath, visibly restraining himself. “Our leaders were not... kind. Or just.”

“Neither were you,” Raven says, low and vicious. She’s been so quiet up until this point Klark might have been able to forget her presence, except for the way her tightening arm threatens to cut Klark in half. “Listen to you, pretending you care. Finn told me everything, Pike. You helped them. They told you what would happen to the kids in the Skybox and you went along with it, you beat them up and threatened them, you didn’t tell anyone or try to stop --”

“I know, Raven,” Pike says. “That’s why we’re asking not to be sent back now. That’s why.”

Raven’s grip relaxes, but only by a fraction. “…I don’t get it.”

“I’m not as strong as you, Raven. Or you, Wells,” Pike turns to him. “You helped keep everyone alive, while I...” He shrugs. The guilt on his face is hard to look at -- Klark would be tempted to turn away, but she owes it to her people to observe every detail.

That same woman from before steps away from the crowd to put a hand on Pike’s shoulder. “Not just you,” she says. “I let them take my son. It’s been,” and she raises her head to meet Klark’s eyes, “so long, for all of us. We all gave someone up, or gave up pieces of ourselves because we thought that was how we would survive. We thought that was all we had to do -- survive, raise the next generation, just keep it going until...” Now it’s her turn to look helpless. “But it didn’t even matter, because here you all are, alive. We could have fought back at any time, and even if everyone just, just blew up, humanity would have kept on going.
“None of us are strong enough to try fighting them anymore,” she tells Klark. “We’re not leaders. We’re not... we don’t know anything except that way of life. If there’s an alternative, please. We’ll take it. We’ll take anything that isn’t... please don’t send us back.”

Klark doesn’t understand every word she uses. But she understands the plea. These people have no scars on their faces -- she’s not so sure about the state of their souls.

And a ruler doesn’t have to be Nia to bend a populace to their will.

“Life at the Ice Court isn’t comfortable. There will be no feasts for you. More work than rest.”

“Do you value everyone in your, your tribe?” the woman responds, not exactly challenging Klark, but not far off. “Do your punishments harm instead of correct? Do you tear apart families? Do you - -” She struggles for a moment to get herself under control. “Wells says you don’t. He wanted us to trust you, and we -- we think we can. Or at least that it’s worth taking a chance.”

Wells looks stricken at the idea he might have had a hand in this.

“So,” Klark asks under her breath, barely moving her lips. “Are they liars?”

Raven shifts behind her. “I don’t know. They did let all that bad shit happen.” She’s quiet for a moment. “Maybe they’re right, and they need a whole new environment to be better people.” Almost too quietly for Klark to hear: “Maybe not just them.”

“You can stay the winter if the Queen allows it,” Lexa is already telling the woman. “It’s probably too late to go south safely anyway. As for the issue of joining their clan, nothing will be decided now. We have to send back word of your survival, and your people will probably send emissaries --”

It might be the fact she spoke before Klark, for Klark. It might be that terrible, familiar attitude of confidence edged with superiority. It’s definitely one of those things which has Klark raising her voice to cut across Lexa as she says: “I accept you into the Ice Nation.”

She doesn’t feel like dealing with the gratitude she can see dawning across the Sky People -- previous Sky People’s -- faces, or with whatever is brewing on Lexa’s. She pulls her horse around
and nudges into a quick canter back to camp.

Raven is as quiet as Klark could wish on the ride back. She only speaks after Klark has dismounted and help up her arm to assist Raven’s slow descent.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” she asks, barely raising her voice above a whisper.

“How do you know that? I’m only doing what I have to do.”

“Not since before I became Queen,” Klark tells her, before retreating to her tent.

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Chapter End Notes

1. Second friendly reminder: I am your resident Farm Station/Charles Pike apologist (in terms of writing choices and ultimate depiction, not what they actually did on the show), plus TRKA is a super low stakes sequel and I have already used up all my inclination for actual plot with TWQR. There are no sHoCkInG!!! surprise twists forthcoming, just excuses to further explore Klark and Lexa’s dynamic. Promise.

2. Back when I was using my tumblr someone was literally in my inbox ten seconds after Chapter 4 went up to predict Echo/Raven. Anon, no idea where you are or if you’re still reading. But you totally called that.

3. For those of you wondering: yes, me being not-dead means the other WIPs have planned updates as well.
Echo is the first person Klark grants admittance to her tent, after. The Heir doesn’t ask questions, simply stands at attention and delivers a full report on the state of their food and supplies. Klark searches Echo’s face for any sign of derision, or incredulity -- anything that speaks to insubordination -- but the older girl gives her nothing.

Which is too bad. Klark’s hands are itching with the impulse to hit.

“Stop talking to me like I’m her,” Klark bites out, because she knows exactly where Echo and most of her courtiers learned that trick of blank-faced delivery. “Why? Because I made one decision you disagree with?”

Echo blinks and her features soften into something more human -- and more tinged with curiosity than disapproval, which sweeps Klark with relief. “I don’t think -- I was just trying to be polite. You seem...” She chooses her words with care: “A bit angry.”

Klark sighs. She can’t spar with Echo right now, as much as part of her wants to, because tumbling each other into the dirt traditionally led to... well. “Not at you.”

“Mmhmm.” Echo lifts an eyebrow. “Did I mention the person in an offensive hat waiting by your campfire?”

She didn’t have to. Klark already refused admittance to the Commander. Twice. “So. Do you agree we can make it back to the Court on what we have, with the extra mouths?”

Echo shakes her head. “I recommend sending an advance scout to fetch a caravan. Either that, or
“…having the newcomers set up their own temporary camp here, send them whatever they need through the winter.”

“They need more than supplies. If we leave them here, they’ll die.”

“Well,” Echo draws out the word, “you know that, and I know that, but I doubt anyone who isn’t Ice Nation would guess it. So, if you were looking for a diplomatic way to avoid making good on a declaration made in the heat of the moment…”

“No. I want them to join our clan.”

Echo, to her credit, barely hesitates before asking: “Why?”

Klark can hear what she isn’t asking: is it just for pity? For familiarity? For not wanting... anyone else... to make her decisions for her?

Partly. But that wasn’t all of it.

(“I never have just one reason for what I decide to do.”)

Klark shakes her head free of Lexa’s words as she pulls out a cushion to sit, indicates Echo can do the same. “Polis was enlightening. I had some very interesting conversations.”

Echo settles as well. “I guessed as much when Lexa showed up.”

Klark glares. “I had conversations with merchants. Nia never traded outside the clan --”

“Why bother bartering when you can pillage,” Echo mutters, and her mouth pulls in at the corners in a way that makes her look ten years older.

“-- and we weren’t in much shape to, either. Not until now.” Klark pulls her throwing weights off her belt. The ones Genai worked are good, but it doesn’t sit entirely right with Klark to be carrying weapons someone else made for her -- even if that someone was the person she trusted most, and she
was (reportedly) in no shape to do it herself at the time. She didn’t want to seem untrusting by re-weaving them as soon as she woke up, but she thinks by now enough time has passed. “I’ve been thinking about that since we started the journey home.”

Echo watches her fingers begin to pick apart the braided lengths of leather. “And?”

Klark is silent for a long while as she searches for the best way to put this into words. Echo, who knows her, just waits. “I think I did more than swear to help bring down the Mountain when I joined the Coalition. I think it has been slow in reaching us, but a new way of life has arrived for the Ice Nation.”

“I like our way of life.”

“As do I.” Love it. Cannot imagine... that was another reason it never would have worked between her and. Anyone who lived in structures of stone, binding themselves to one spot. To Klark that might as well be a cage. She’d take this tent and bedroll over all the riches in -- “But we’re not demanding all that owe us their fealty love as we do.” The first major knots loosen, and the first stone falls free of its bindings. The thought strikes her: it’s a stone from Lexa’s forests. “The Mountain is gone, and the world is different, now. Do you really think only the Ice Nation will remain unchanged?”

Echo sits with this for a few moments. “What did those merchants say to you?”

“I have been thinking about building a city.”

“... a what?”

“A city.” Klark doesn’t look up -- she wants to give the Heir time to process without having to mind her face. “Not a capitol, not like Polis. The Ice Court won’t stop being the beating heart of our clan. But a fixed point, a place where outsiders can come and know they will find us. Or perhaps even where those of our clan who don’t love the land like we do, but still don’t want to leave it, can settle for a more reliable way of life without having to leave our borders.” Giving them an option besides the distance of, say, whatever Roan achieved in Delphi.

She can hear the frown in Echo’s words: “None of us know how to build and keep cities.”
“These Sky People do,” she says, raising her eyes to her Heir. “To listen to Raven and Wells’s stories, they’ve been the keepers of that knowledge. Not even the rest of the Sky People, back with the Woods Clan, know all of those secrets.”

A smile lifts the corner of Echo’s mouth. “Not just a city. A wondrous city. One to rival...” She clicks her tongue. “That of other clans?”

Klark shrugs and returns to her work.

“You’re competitive.”

“I killed the last woman to try and compete with me. You may have heard about it.” Klark pulls a section of the new braid snug. “And I don’t see why Ice Nation shouldn’t have the best, just because we’re new at this.” She ignores Echo’s soft chuckle. “We wouldn’t even begin to build for a year or two, anyway. I want these people to truly understand us before we create something together.”

“I don’t even know if enough of our people would want to live in a city to make a city.”

“Who says we need to fill it up? Let’s make a city for outsiders to marvel at. Who cares if it stands more empty than not.”


“Of course you do. And if we build it big enough, once every -- What do you think, five years? Or ten? -- all of the Nation will come together there in celebration. That was another reason Nia prospered, I think. There were too many isolated pockets of us scattered across the kingdom, not enough knowing each other.”

“Maybe,” Echo muses. “Although a city is also a target.”

“All endeavors call for calculated risk.” Another section of braid finished. “And we can use it to our advantage, maybe always have one person in the city who knows where the Ice Court is camped and can bring us news. I heard Shadow-walker used to hit a village and then move so swiftly Nia could never catch up -- she knew it was a weakness ripe for exploitation”
Echo props her chin in her hand, bent elbow balanced on her knee. “I always wondered what happened to her. The Shadow-walker, I mean.”

Klark’s hands falter for the first time, and she has to undo her work or suffer a kink in the braid. “I found out who she is.”

“Who?” Echo blinks. “Shadow-walker? ... you swear to me you didn’t already bed Lexa? Only I can’t imagine how else you got that secret out of her.”

“I found out by mistake. Sort of.” Klark ignores how her cheeks heat at the joke. “I only met her briefly.”

“Better briefly than in battle.”

That make Klark pause in her work. “Didn’t you, once?”

“Chase after her? Yes.” Echo leans back on her hands. “You know my family didn’t always live at Court. I grew up in a settlement that traveled up and down the eastern sea. Shadow-walker liberated the next village over -- families we knew, and cared about. But putting food in their mouths meant dying ourselves.” She sighs, as if probing a wound so old it only contains the memory of pain. “Nia rounded us all up and said, the warrior who brings me Shadow-walkers’s head will be spared, along with their family. Everyone else will die.”

Klark stills her hands completely. She’s heard this story before, but not from Echo herself. Quite a few courtiers had pulled Klark aside and whispered why she might want to rethink her choice of Heir. “You came the closest.”

Echo’s eyes are focused on something far away, and long ago. “I think her horse is magic. Mine could barely keep its legs in the dark, with the snow coming down in a storm. I only managed to pace her because I was...” She trails off. “I remember thinking: I’d rather die here, at her hand, than at Nia’s. Better that than ending up more blood staining the snow, and a tyrant’s cheeks.” Her eyes flicker over to Klark. “You heard about that habit.”

Klark nods: Nia would paint her face with her first kill whenever she intended to rampage her own people.
“Well, Shadow-walker shot me,” Echo says. “In the shoulder. And I never, for a second, doubted she could have killed me if she wanted -- even shooting from her saddle in the middle of a chase.” She shakes her head. “All the rest had already fallen behind. None of us brought back her head.”

“And Nia?” Klark asks, even though she knows. Maybe because she feels the need to honor the memory of --

“Killed everyone,” Echo says. Her Heir doesn't meet her eyes this time.

“Echo, you can’t think I don’t know. That I have known.”

“Hearing rumors is different than hearing it from --”

“Just say it.”

The older girl draws a shaky breath. “I came closest to victory, and so Nia said to me: prove your allegiance, and I’ll spare you. I’ll spare your family. I’ll make you a warrior of my court.”

“So you killed the rest of the village.”

“Yes,” Echo says, tonelessly.

Klark resumes braiding. “How old were you?”

“Old enough to know what a massacre --”

Klark shoots her a look, and she shuts her mouth.

“It was seven winters ago? Eight?” A small frown creases between her eyebrows. “I was seventeen. Older than you were, when you --”
“Is your family still alive?”

“... yes. None of us can stand to be together anymore, but yes. They’re alive.”

Klark shrugs. “Mine isn’t.”

The frown deepens. “You know, this habit you have of picking people apart and then making pronouncements after, like, ‘see,’ only no one else sees what you are --”

“You had a lot to lose, Echo. I didn’t. It doesn’t make you weak or unworthy for trying to save what you had. I know you think I chose you because it was more important to have an Heir than to have a good one, but that’s not true. If I died tonight and you became Queen, you wouldn’t let a single one of my people suffer the way you have.”

Klark goes back to her work. There’s silence in the tent as the minutes tick by, but it’s not an uncomfortable one.

“So what is she like in person?” Echo asks, sounding considerably lighter than before. “If the Shadow-walker is pretty on top of everything else, I might throw myself into the river once the ice breaks.”

Klark can’t bring herself to smile. “It’s Costia.”

“... Costia?” Slowly, Echo sits upright. “Costia? The one who -- not the Costia that Lexa used to pine for like... not the same Costia. Not her lover. That’s not also the deadliest spy among Woods Clan.”

Sighing, Klark nods.

When there’s no immediate response Klark looks up from her hands to see Echo staring at her with wide-stretched eyes. “How are you still alive?” she breathes.

Klark climbs to her feet. “I suppose that’s as good an end as any for the night.”
“I mean it,” Echo continues to protest as Klark nudges her to the door. “How? Oh, no -- you don’t think she’s planning revenge for stealing her lover, do you?”

“I did not steal --”

“This is no time for your weird understanding of relationships because you’re a freak raised in isolation. We have to formulate a plan, we have to --” She suddenly resists at the edge of the entrance, just as Klark is about to push her out. “Wait, if you don’t want Lexa, maybe you can just give her back? With a nice apology?”

Klark pushes and pushes, but Echo doesn’t budge. Klark always wins when they’re fighting, but they’re not fighting, now, and Echo’s height means she can lean her weight into Klark and keep them stuck like this all day. “I don’t... owe anyone,” grunting with effort, “... an apology.”

Echo turns her head to give Klark a sharp look. “Because you don’t really want to give Lexa back?”

Klark freezes, heart beating fast. With a mean little laugh, Echo ducks out of her hands and propels herself safely outside.

Well, Klark concludes sourly, maybe she deserved that.

She waits until after dinner to call one of her guards inside. “Inform the Commander of the twelve clans I will grant her an audience once she hands over that thing on her head. I won’t dignify it by calling it a hat.”

When she hears a discreet cough just outside her tent’s entrance she opens it to find the Woods Clan leader in question, not-hat in hand.

Klark takes it, tosses it onto the ground in Barbour’s general direction. The snowcat looks up from
his post-rabbit grooming ritual, ears swiveling.

“Gustus will just make a new one,” Lexa says. She sounds resigned.

Klark folds her arms, watching as Barbour slides his feet and begins to stalk. “I don’t think it deserves that word, either. That thing forced itself upon the world -- no one made it.” Barbour crouches low, holding himself very still, before leaping an excessive several feet into the air and coming down on the hat. He tumbles it into a kill pose in absolute silence. “I’m surprised you allow him this petty torture.”

When Klark looks over, Lexa’s eyes are on the snowcat. “I’ve found you can’t control people absolutely, no matter how much power you have. Certainly I can command them to do whatever I want. But if I want to preserve honest, open relationships, the people I command need ways to prove their own power. Small rebellions help relieve the pressure -- and they’ll come to their senses on their own. So I wear a stupid hat for an afternoon.” She lifts her eyes to meet Klark’s. “Or wait outside a tent for hours.”

Klark’s cheeks flush. “I wasn’t trying to prove --”

“Weren’t you?” Lexa asks, her tone noticeably cooler. “My mistake. I suppose that’s also not what happened with those Sky People in the woods, earlier.”

The only sound inside the tent is Barbour’s soft little growls as he drags “dead” hat back to his favorite spot to worry it into sad, fluffy pieces. “Refusing to send those people back to a life they despised is not a small rebellion.”

“Why, then?”

Klark bites back the host of reasons she gave Echo -- it isn’t the same, telling Lexa. Klark is too afraid she’ll be met with derision, or that the other girl will find immediate fault that Klark missed in her tentative plans for the future. She knows it’s stupid of her to feel so afraid: she is Queen, and no amount of disapproval from Lexa on how Klark fills that role will change the fact.

Still, part of her hesitates, shrinks back from being weighed and found wanting.

She strikes back instead. “Why are you so concerned who claims a colony of people so useless, no
“They will eventually. The rest of the Sky People will discover what you’ve done, and there will be consequences. There will be questions: did you offer them sanctuary or were they forced into serving you? The Sky People are keenly aware they have little to offer us besides their knowledge, and now you have absorbed a faction of their clan into your own -- how is that going to affect their negotiating power with the Ice Nation? With any clan? The alliances that were struck when the Mountain fell are delicate, and you have slammed your hand down on the scales with no regard for those of us who worked to balance them.”

Klark masks her flinch with a shrug, purposefully insolent. “Send them my way if the Sky People have complaints. I’ll be happy to entertain them. If they survive the journey to the Court.”

Lexa’s lips curl as if she wants to snarl. “You can’t do that anymore. You can’t just fall back on the distance, and the cold, and... you are a part of this. You are a part of my Coalition.”

Klark just manages to keep when it’s convenient for you, you mean behind her teeth -- she knows it’s not fair, or true, even if she still feels that way sometimes. “If we are all a part of your Coalition I don’t see how it matters where these people end up -- with me in the North, or with your new friends in the South. Doesn’t it all amount to the same in the end?”

Lexa’s eyes fall shut as she sighs, pressing the heel of her hand against her temple. “It’s not the same, and you know it. It isn’t what was intended.”

“According to who?” Klark demands. She knows the Sky People have a leader -- if that person made some kind of public declaration about the people in Klark’s woods, she might have just set herself in direct conflict with them. She still doesn’t want to give up her new people. Yes, of course Lexa’s right about upsetting the power balance, but it’s in Klark’s favor and she likes that. But perhaps she should start preparing herself for this new opponent.

Lexa stills, and Klark feels a chill down her spine.

“You’re talking about her, aren’t you,” she says. “You care because she was Sky People, and you think she would have wanted all her people together.”

Lexa lowers her hand to her side, opens her eyes -- but doesn’t meet Klark’s.
“You undermine me for a girl who doesn’t even exist in this world.”

Lexa’s mouth tightens. “Don’t be obtuse. I told you why, and it had nothing to do with --”

“Fine,” Klark breaks in. Her heart feels like it’s going to hammer right through her ribs. “Not for her. But you still... you feel beholden. You’re still thinking about what she would want.”

“I won’t apologize for that.” Lexa stands straight, spine unbowed. But her eyes are focused to the left of Klark’s face. “She saved all of us.”

“No, I should... this has been a long day, and this is something that should wait for another time, when we are both well-rested and --”
“Tell me now.”

Even greater exasperation. “Klark, do you never try to make things easier on yourself?”

Klark sucks in a short breath. She knows, distantly, the question wasn’t meant to wound -- but oh, it does. “Do you never consider,” she asks, her voice shaking with the effort to control it, “how much it has hurt when you tried to be kind? A year, Lexa,” and her voice does break, she has to stop and swallow the lump in her throat. “I spent a year thinking there was nothing between us -- not even friendship -- because you felt it would make my life easier.”

Lexa doesn’t say anything, but the hollows beneath her eyes almost seem to deepen, the lines around her mouth etched and stark.

“If you want us to share anything now beyond leadership, then you owe me every bit of honesty you can give.”

Lexa’s expression turns sour.

“If you think I’m asking too much --”

“You’re not. I only... you’d think I’d get tired of having the same conversations with you, over and over again. Yet here I am.”

Something in Klark’s chest loosens, unexpectedly. “She told you to...”

“Tell you everything. And I,” Lexa sighs, sounding tired. “I thought I had, I promise. I didn’t mean to hold anything back. I...”

“Lexa?” Klark asks after a long moment, since apparently they’re both using names again.

“I didn’t think of it as not sharing the truth. I just don’t like to think about it.” Lexa swallows. “This part frightens me.”
Klark checks the impulse to step in close, to put her hands on -- “Is there still a threat?”

“No,” Lexa shakes her head quickly. “No, you’re safe now.”

But she hadn’t been. When that girl -- that other self -- had been in her body.

“The ritual you -- she -- went through,” Lexa begins slowly, “is something Woods Clan discovered. It’s only offered to those of us so steeped in blood and pain that it reaches the soul itself -- threatens to knock it loose from the cycle of reincarnation.”

Klark hesitates, but: “You know I don’t believe in that, either.”

“Yes, I’m aware.” Is Lexa’s tone slightly acerbic? “But you’re the one who has no memory of several weeks where you walked around full of knowledge you don’t have, speaking a language you’re still not very good with. I’m the one with an explanation, so perhaps you can humor me. For now.”

Klark is, actually, a very important Queen with incredible responsibility, so she resists making a face.

“The point of the ritual,” Lexa continues, “is to keep the damaged soul from affecting those in other worlds, and creating an effect where... It’s like wood rot, or mold. Maybe it’s too cold up here for that comparison to make sense. The infection spreads because every shared soul is the same soul. Although you don’t believe that either.”

She doesn’t. She believes that Lexa does, though -- she can see it in the grimness of her look, how she avoids Klark’s eyes. So even though it’s nonsense, a story, Klark still shivers.

“The damaged soul then settles. It gives up its old life and the pain of it. So it no longer cycles through lives in that world -- but its echoes and other selves are safe. You saved so much more than our warriors by bringing down the Mountain, by taking on the ritual. You saved every life you have.”

It’s the word settled that stirs unease, recalls a sense memory she doesn’t understand: the sounds of beads hitting the ground in a rain. “If she settled here, what would have happened to me?”
“Nothing.”

“... Lexa.”

“Nothing,” the other girl stresses. “If there’s already some water in a cup, and then you fill the cup completely, does the water change? Does it become wine, or ice? You are the same person.”

“I’m not a half-empty cup, Lexa!” Klark doesn’t know if she wants to scream, or cry. Or throw a punch. There’s an ache in her hands that’s echoed in her throat. “I am everything I have lived, and nothing else. I can’t be anyone but that. If it isn’t enough --”

If she’s been right in her suspicions from the beginning, and for all her pretty words and cherished memories, the person Lexa really loves is a stranger with Klark’s face.

“I am so tired of this conversation, and yet you always insist.” Lexa’s hands are clenched into white-knuckled fists. They’re held carefully at her sides, but Klark realizes with an unpleasant shock: she’s not the only one who’s angry. “So: you win. I admit you wouldn’t be exactly as you are now. You’d have different memories, sometimes, or skills and a language you never... and that’s why you’re willing to hate me? For these small things?”

“Small things have made each of us who we are.” Or course she asked Wells what he knew, how it would even be possible for a version of herself to end up cradled in the cold of the stars for almost her whole life. He told her what he knew -- lost passengers, coincidences. Tiny rocks thrown into a pond, but the ripples still traveled to the farthest shore. “I would have been changed. We would have been --” Her throat constricts, and she has to fight to say the words: “Maybe that new version of me would have been sweeter, or softer, or more open to... is that all you cared about? Would you never wonder if I would have loved you the same, if I’d just been me? Would you even miss me?”

“Of course I would have,” Lexa snaps in response, barely letting Klark finish. There’s a fine trembling around the edges of the Commander, like she’s been shaken one too many times to settle comfortably back into her own skin. “How can you -- you want me to say it? Will that make you happy? Fine,” almost vicious. “If that version of you had settled, I would have wondered if this you would have forgiven me, each and every day. I would have looked for the girl I fell in love with in everything you did, hoping my memories weren’t lying to me about what was familiar, or what was new. And I would have died a little each time. What does that matter?”

Klark stares. Lexa looks... wild, almost, and breathing too hard. Perversely, it makes Klark calmer.
“So why?” she asks.

“Because the other option was not acceptable,” Lexa says, white-lipped and every inch the Commander. “I told you: a damaged soul drags all that are connected to it into darkness. Maybe you would have survived, in this world, for a few more lifetimes. But eventually I would lose you. And I can’t.”

She swallows after she says it, small, like she wishes she could take the words back into her throat.

“Can’t?” Klark asks, even calmer.

“Our souls are tied.” It takes a minute for Klark to place Lexa’s tone, because she’s never heard her like this: reverent. “Do you know how rare, how special...” She trails off, looks to the side. For the first time she seems at a loss for words.

“You said it didn’t mean --”

“It doesn’t. There’s no promise of what we’ll be to each other. We have... choices, always.” She swallows again. “So that was mine. As long as your soul exists in this world, it doesn’t matter if you hate me for how it happened. It doesn’t matter if you send me away because of it. It doesn’t matter what I want. It *never* --” Lexa catches herself, cheeks flushed as she turns away. She doesn’t go far -- she doesn’t even make for the exit, just takes a few steps closer to the wall of the tent, as if looking for a place to hide. There is none, so she bows her head, braids falling over her shoulders to curtain her face. She takes a few moments, hands gripping her hips. She finally raises her head but doesn’t turn around. “It doesn’t matter what I want.” Her voice is still a little thick.

Klark considers her, choosing her next words carefully. “It has to matter sometimes, Lexa.”

The other girl does turn at this. She is clear-eyed. “Less often than you might think.”

“Isn’t it ever hard for you?” Klark asks. “Making such hard decisions against your own...”

She hesitates between *needs* and *desires*, feeling like either choice might be dangerous.
Lexa anticipates her anyway, with a slightly wry smile. “It used to be very difficult.”

“... until?”

“Well,” Lexa draws a steadying breath, “first, everyone I cared for in my childhood died at my blade, or each other’s. It lends every decision after that a spectacular weight.”

Oh. Yes, that would do it.

“And then I tried to unite the clans,” Lexa continues, “thinking the advantages would be obvious to every other leader I laid them to.” She closes her mouth, standing still and distant for a while before finishing: “They were not.”

“I’ve never heard of that.” Klark wonders how many soldiers she lost, how many of them had been her first friends after... “I only know the stories of incredible victories.”

“Because those times make for much better stories.”

Klark crosses her arms, hugging herself. “Our lives have been very different. You’ve suffered through making the hardest decisions imaginable, and I --”

“You’ve suffered when they’ve been made by other people, leaving you with the consequences,” Lexa says softly. “Nia’s vendetta left you without a father, growing up in the barrens. A prophecy made you a killer and a queen.” At Klark’s surprise, she’s able to manage a smile. “I have thought about this.”

“And then one day I wake up,” Klark says, holding her eyes, “to find a different version of myself has conquered the Mountain, and now the Commander of the Coalition is in love with me.”

“She now admits to being in love with you,” Lexa corrects, subdued. “But I see your point.”

“I get it, you know,” Klark says. “You’re not used to being rejected. I mean, you had Costia before, so you weren’t looking -- but other girls, I’m sure...” She runs a hand through her hair as she blows out a hard breath. “You know what I mean.”
“Yes.”

“I must seem,” Klark chooses her words carefully, “very... I’m not sure what’s the right word.”

“I told you. I never felt you owed me anything. I never expected anything.”

“No, I mean that I --” Klark looks at the ground, wracking her brain. “It’s -- it’s not easy for you, but it’s simple. Hard decisions or not, you almost always understand which is the right one. But I --”

She looks up, which might be a mistake. Lexa faces her calmly, but she can’t quite contain the devastation, deep in her eyes. She looks like someone braced for heartbreak.

It makes it a little easier, loosening the words inside Klark as she recognizes that even messy words are better than a self-protecting silence. “Almost everything in my life has been decided for me. Every important thing, anyway. And yes, I know,” she puts up a hand as Lexa opens her mouth, “that I have made these decisions on my own. Eventually. But that’s my point. After all that, I can’t... everything I’m given, everything I don’t have to scratch and claw for -- I feel like I have to fight it.”

Lexa jerks her head to the side, like she can't bear for Klark to see her face in this moment.

“No, wait, that was the wrong word,” Klark says, almost stuttering in haste. “Not fight, I’m not fighting against the thought of...” She bites her lip. “It’s more like testing,” she says eventually. “It’s not that I don’t want it, but... I have to prove it’s mine. Even if it’s something good. Even if it’s something I want,” she finishes.

Slowly, Lexa turns back. “But you do want it?” she asks quietly. Her eyes are clear with hope.

Klark looks at her helplessly.

“I’m sorry,” Lexa says. “Maybe I shouldn’t ask. Not after you told me about Echo.”

Oh.
She’d told Lexa about Echo because... she should know, shouldn’t she? If she were under the delusion that Klark was just, well, sitting around and *pinning*, then she didn’t really know Klark at all. And it would be better for everyone concerned if she knew her mistake as soon as possible, and headed back home. As soon as possible.

Except she’s still here. She’s still asking if Klark wants...

And Klark hasn’t lied. She was very careful about that.

But maybe she’s feeling a bit more guilty than can be explained with complete and total honesty about her current romantic... arrangements.

“I don’t want you to think I don’t respect your decision in partners,” Lexa continues. “I *do*.”

“But maybe she’s feeling a bit more guilty than can be explained with complete and total honesty about her current romantic... arrangements."

“Um,” says Klark.

Lexa casts a look at her up through her eyelashes -- which is cheating, and how did Klark never notice how nice they are before this? Is it possible to turn eyelashes into a *secret weapon*? “I only want you to know what your options are. If you were unsure.”

Klark feels her eyes widen. She tries to swallow, but her mouth is dry. And Lexa is looking at her like --

See, *this* was also why Klark failed to mention how Echo had dropped her. She knows Lexa -- maybe not very well, but enough. And she knew hearing that she was already partnered up would force Lexa’s calm but constant campaign on Klark’s emotions to halt in its tracks.

Except then Gustus put her in a stupid hat, and Klark let her guard down and maybe they both shared some intimate revelations, and now Lexa is *looking* at her like that.
All Klark has to do -- she can tell -- is stretch her hand out. She won’t even have to explain what she left out about Echo; it’ll work itself out. It can be easy.

She locks every muscle in place.

She’s not even sure what exactly is holding her back. She does know that anything she and Lexa will have -- if it happens -- won’t ever be easy. Until she can put into words the reasons for her remaining hesitance, she refuses to pretend otherwise.

If this happens, it has to happen for real. Not because she was tired of fighting what she wanted.

After a long pause, Lexa casts her eyes back down to the ground. She doesn’t look upset -- maybe a little rueful, though. “Sorry,” she says. “It’s been a while since I courted someone. I just hope I’m not making you uncomfortable.”

Which is another thing, because Echo’s version of “courting” was making the kind of plain suggestions that Klark still has nightmares about someone from Court having overheard. But she could deal with that. She did deal with that. She was fine.

Meanwhile Lexa can make Klark weak in the knees with just her eyes, she hasn’t even gotten to the words part, really, and Klark has the sinking suspicion that whatever happens next she will have zero defenses against.

So it’s better to put that off for a little while longer yet.

... it is.

Something on Klark’s face makes Lexa grin, as if to herself. (Klark’s stomach sinks to see it. Lexa doesn’t know her effect, does she? This is just unfair; in all of Abi’s grueling education on how Klark could stay alive and in control, they never covered flirting.) “I’ll leave you,” she says, and then briefly drags her teeth across her bottom lip, as if she was going to follow up with something but thought better of it. Klark frowns at her -- maybe a little too fiercely, to cover how much she liked seeing it. Lexa’s eyes linger on her face as she makes her way out of the tent.

Klark sits -- she does not collapse -- onto her bedroll. Barbour makes his way over to her from the shadows a second later, the remnants of Lexa’s hat hanging from his mouth. She reaches for it, but
he twists out of reach with the tiniest growl. It’s really just a scrap. He doesn’t even seem interested in chewing what’s left to pieces, but a couple more attempts reveal he’s just as uninterested in relinquishing his toy to anyone else. Unwilling to let it rest, just as unwilling to give it up.

“Well,” Klark sighs, folding her hands into her lap, “I guess you are my natural son.”

Barbour settles down beside her with a mouth full of defeated hat, and looks smug.

“It’d be easy.”

“It would not be easy.”

“You think that. Because you’re thinking about it wrong.”

Klark honestly -- honestly -- doesn’t know how she even ended up thinking about it, except Echo has a way of winnowing out whatever she wants from a conversation, and today, of all things, she’s decided to talk about --

“You’re barely needed in Court in the winter,” Echo says, the two of them riding along and a little apart from the others. “Everyone’s tucked in during the heavy snows, and it’s so dark no one can see enough to start picking fights. You’ve spent almost the last two years making sure everyone has their own territories and hunts, anyway, you set up rules, and treaties --”

“And no one ever violated a treaty when their queen wasn’t around to enforce it.”

“I’ll be around. That’s the easy part, just making sure everyone does what they’re supposed to do. Figuring out what they should do and the best way to do it is the hard stuff, which is why I never seized the throne by slitting your throat when you were...” Echo takes an exaggerated pause. “Distracted.”

Klark tries to kick at her heir from her saddle, which makes Barbour wriggle in his sling. Echo lifts
him out of it, and manages to avoid Klark’s boot at the same time -- she really is much better on a horse. Whatever, Klark is better at killing things. “If you want to be Queen now you should just say it. Easier than trying to persuade me I can just leave once a year and no one will care. Or attack.”

Echo snorts. “Who is going to attack in winter? Who’s going to forge through ten-foot snow drifts to find us? Not even Nia tried to move in or out of the Ice Nation past the equinox.”

“Exactly.” Nia had holed up in the Court and ignored messages about supplies running low, or running out. Nia had sometimes even accepted another clan’s invitation to spend the season in a warmer, softer climate.

“Is that what’s bothering you?” Echo asks. “Please. You’re not Nia. You can spend a few months of the year in Polis without... don’t shush me, she’s way over there.”

Klark refuses to look in the direction Echo vaguely indicates. She knows what she’ll see. She started talking with Echo to stop throwing glances over at Lexa, to keep her eyes off that straight back as she rides and the curve of her jaw whenever she turns her head to speak to someone beside her. Echo was supposed to be helping with that.

She’s not helping.

“No one’s going to think you abandoned us,” Echo continues, almost cajoling.

“Because I won’t abandon you.”

Echo makes a noise of strangled frustration.

Klark doesn’t understand what her problem is. Or what her problem isn’t -- “Since when are you such a fan of the Commander?” Klark hisses. “And I thought you were supposed to be mad at me about... all that.”

“Not mad, so much,” as Echo makes a face. “Anyway, it’s hard to hold a grudge when she’s so pitiable. And you’re so... you.”
“She isn’t pitiable.”

“She’s turning blue around the edges. Genai and I have a bet going on how many fingers she’ll have left by spring.”

“And what do you mean, I’m so *me*?”

“My queen,” after a pause. “I will follow you to the ends of the earth. But I think we both know we worked as well as we did because *I* was not in love with you. Or you with me.”

Barbour is tucked up under Echo’s chin, nuzzling her exposed throat. He truly adores her, which makes Klark almost certain he’s not scenting a vein. She reaches for him anyway. “Genai makes herself scarce,” she says as she tucks the snowcat back into his sling, which he is all but too big for. She ignores that last bit.

“Genai said watching someone in such a state and unable to do anything about it was like watching a rabbit limp around with no bow to shoot it. She felt uncomfortable with the urge to draw her weapon on someone who might lead her in battle one day.”

“... since when would that be the Commander instead of me?”

“I think she was talking about both of you, actually. Anyway, she’s found new strays to feed and patch up among those Sky People you stole.”

Klark sends her a dark look. “You don’t seem to have the same trouble.”

“Oh, I’m of the same mind as Genai. But I’m having fun with it. Which is why I’m not mad,” with a smile.

Klark sighs. “I’m not in love with her.”

Echo makes a face so exaggerated there’s almost a sound to it.
Echo nudges their horses close together again, reaches out to put her hand on Klark’s. “You are as
sweet as the first snowfall, sometimes,” she says, a saying popular in the Ice Court for the innocent
and fairly foolish.

Klark’s mouth is already open to tell her Heir off when her eyes snag on Lexa, looking back at them.
Or -- looking at their joined hands, resting just below the neck of Klark’s horse. Klark jolts, pulling
her hand away, and Lexa meet her eyes briefly before turning away.

All of Klark’s words are dried up and gone at the soft yearning in Lexa’s face. Her throat feels thick
when she tries to swallow.

“Oh, yes,” Echo says. “I wouldn’t give up my seat to this, not for the world.”

“What are you still angry with her about, anyway?” Echo asks that night by the fire.

Klark doesn’t answer right away. The real cold of winter is just beginning to make itself known,
especially after the sun slips under the horizon -- on the road like this they have to do their best to
soak up the flames’ warmth before bundling themselves into bedrolls and hoping it’s enough to let
them sleep comfortably. Klark, of course, has a reputation to maintain: the savage queen who grew
up far away from what even the Ice Nation considers civilization, tough as the barrens that bred her.
So she doesn’t sit too close to the fire. No one should be able to guess that she currently can’t feel her
toes.

She lifts the front of her face from where she’s tucked it into the fur lining of her vest, ignoring the
bite of cold air on her nose and lips. “Can’t you think why?”

“I guess.” Echo holds her hands out, flexing white-tipped fingers. “I thought you’d forgiven that
whole thing about the Summit. Well, how she first made eyes at you in front of everyone, invited
you personally to the Summit, and then dis-invited you by messenger.”
She has. It was an awful time -- it remains an awful memory -- but the ache behind it, like the feeling of a surprise slap to the face, is beginning to soften into something less... personal. Lexa had genuinely done what she thought best. For both of them. For all of them. “No. Not that.”

“Hmm.” Echo puts her head to the side, considering. “That soul-traveling thing wasn’t her fault. I can understand how much of a shock it was. It sounds almost like a violation.”

It was, in a lot of ways. Klark thinks she understands the need for it with each passing day, though -- seeing the desperation that still lingers in her adopted Sky People, realizing how much more free Lexa must feel with the Mountain defeated. Free enough to brave the Ice Nation in winter, free to truly be the leader of a Coalition of clans.

Klark can be angry about being used without her knowing, her permission, at the memories she’s not sure she ever wants to reclaim, at the fact of how much truth wasn’t revealed until she was literally out of her own body. She finds she can’t be angry with the result. She definitely can’t aim that lingering, almost restless resentment at Lexa, whose only reward is a new crop of responsibilities.

Not when Lexa is acting like that’s some kind of honor she’s been fighting to be granted all her life.

“That’s not it, either.”

Echo stares at her across the fire for a long moment, forehead creased. “You’re not angry over how she handled being in love with you. Are you?”

Klark finally lets herself look across the way to the campfire nearest theirs -- near, but too far for voices in conversation to carry. Gustus towers above his Commander even sitting down, legs crossed in front of him as he bends his head to listen to Genai. (Who stood up with a deep sigh as soon as Echo made it clear what she came over to talk about, and moved to their neighbors. Klark isn’t sure how she feels about the two bodyguards in cahoots, but it was less embarrassing than an audience for Echo’s teasing. In the short term, anyway.) Lexa seems to be listening as well, although every now and again Klark can make out the sound of her voice, if not the words. Klark has to fight the urge to crane her head and see if that helps, or better yet, go over there herself and tell Lexa she’s going to get heat rash from sitting that close to an open fire.

Klark isn’t the only one with a vested interest. Barbour has been pointed in that direction this whole time, focus locked and unwavering. He remains silent, though, until Klark looks -- then he huffs little growls of discontent, hindquarters wriggling. A hand on his back brings him fully back down to the
ground, but he’s still grumbly.

“When did you know?” she asks, instead of answering the question.

Echo settles back on her elbows. “I don’t think anyone but the Commander herself knew how serious it was -- and I doubt even she did, at first -- but we all noticed something was happening during your coronation.”

“I didn’t.”

Echo grimaces. “Yeah, I noticed that, too.” She opens her mouth but then hesitates, frowning at the fire. “Did you like her then?”

Klark thinks back to their first meeting: the icy fog coming off the water, the boats jostling behind them in the dead quiet as the gathered crowd waited to see which of them, Commander or Queen, would greet the other first. It’d been Klark -- it had actually been her responsibility to indicate a foreign leader was welcome in their territory by welcoming her, formally, something Genai had reminded her in the moment with an elbow to her ribs. She remembers the shock of Lexa’s warm hand gripping her forearm, the contrast of the cold and remote look in the other girl’s eyes. How much she had wanted, even then, to make Lexa feel the same turmoil that came with that touch.

“I didn’t want to.”

It’s not really an answer, but Echo only nods. “If you’re wondering, not many people thought anything would come of it. You, obviously, had other things to concern yourself with. And Lexa...”

“Had Costia.”

“Yes.” Echo is quiet again for a moment. “Is that why? Is it just hard to believe she might love you enough to leave her? Give up the legend of it?”

It had been, at first. It’d seemed like a particularly cruel joke to care for someone so thoroughly claimed. And Klark wasn’t allowed to want it, for more reasons than Costia. She’d survived the last two years -- Abi’s death, killing Nia, being Queen -- by sidestepping any distraction from her purpose. To be loved means being known, and to be known for who she really is means she’s more than just a vessel for the needs of others.
And part of her is still unsure she wants that.

She’s no longer unsure of Lexa’s feelings, though. Not after that last confrontation. Funnily enough, Lexa’s willingness to sacrifice her -- even if it was, in a sense, for her, or the preservation of her soul -- was more convincing than declarations or even braving the cold. It was an ugly admission, which meant it was honest. Which meant the reasons for it --

(“And I would have died a little each time. What does that matter?”)

-- were honest. Lexa, she’s learning, is always most honest about the ugliest things.

“If it helps,” Echo says slowly, “I always knew something would come of it. Someday.” She raises her eyes from the fire to meet Klark’s. “That’s why I propositioned you after the messenger arrived. I understood things would resolve themselves eventually. So I had to make use of what time I had.”

Klark narrows her eyes. “You know, I could be insulted by that if I wanted. Considering how careful -- how slow -- you’re being with Raven.”

It really is fun to watch. Klark doubts anyone else knows what Echo is doing, as she really is trying to step softly. She and Klark both listened to Raven’s story of her last lover’s tragic death, the danger he’d put himself in to make sure she didn’t come to the ground alone. Raven didn’t tell it very gracefully. It was clearly a struggle to find the words, her voice clipped and her eyes on the ground the entire time. But when she was finished it seemed she breathed easier, her shoulders a little looser.

Echo was the first one to speak, after: “He loved you very much.”

“Yeah.” Raven’s throat moved as she visibly controlled herself. “More than anyone else in my life. I didn’t... I didn’t know I could be loved like that, until I met him.”

“That doesn’t mean there won’t still be chances to be loved, now that he is gone,” is what Echo said with a soft smile, before excusing herself from Klark’s fireside. Klark watched her walk to sit beside Wells, who spent a lot of his time recently deep in conversation with Pike, and join their conversation. She missed Wells’s company on the road, but she could see he was working through some important, if uncomfortable, revelations, and she wanted to give her friend all the time and space he needed.
“Do you want to be alone?” she asked, turning back to Raven. It was her fire, but she’s a magnanimous ruler.

“No,” was the quick and sure reply. “I…” Raven trailed off, eyes distant. “I know this sounds weird, but I feel like I’ve been waiting a long time to tell you all of that.”

“You could have told me anytime.”

Raven smiled, but her expression was still pained. “Sure. But you wouldn’t have been the one listening.” She took a deep breath. “And I really wanted it to be you. To know -- to know for real -- that you wanted to hear it.”

Klark stretched out a hand, let Raven grab and hold it almost to the point of pain.

She hadn’t been entirely truthful with Lexa. That other Klark... she didn’t bring Raven, or Wells, into Klark’s life, but she had looped their lives together like the beginning of something greater, and then allowed them to weave their own tapestry. Klark is grateful for that, at least.

Not least because it gave her the chance to watch Echo -- Echo -- act like an unblooded warrior on her first hunt, jumpy at the sound of Raven’s voice and shying away every time Raven rode up along beside them. Klark could almost see the urge to flirt rising in her, sometimes, but after the story of heartbreak and loss Echo knew better than to let it loose. Not if she really wanted anything to come of it.

“Maybe nothing will,” Klark warned her. “Ever. She’s allowed to be alone after all that. She might only ever want you as a friend.”

“I’m wasted as a friend,” Echo grumbled, pouting down at her saddle as they rode apart from the rest. “Can’t you tell her that? Explain exactly what I have to offer to those who are more than my friends. Be detailed. Or, nevermind,” she said before Klark could open her mouth. “The Commander might hear you, and I don’t feel like risking my life just to impress a Sky girl.”
A few minutes later she added: “Not yet, anyway.”

Despite the bravado, Echo really was being careful. And terribly sweet. She offered to clean and oil Raven’s tack after particularly rough days that left even seasoned riders (as in, not Klark) sore. She made the unending travel more bearable by telling Raven stories about the Ice Nation, or the happier times of the Ice Court. She told Raven and Wells, but Klark watched her Heir. It wasn’t Wells’s face Echo couldn’t look away from during a story where -- coincidentally, of course -- Echo came off as especially self-sacrificing and brave.

(She was, of course -- it was a true story. Which is why Klark didn’t interrupt.)

Right now Echo -- Klark stares at her -- blushing. And then she hunkers down until her face is half-hidden in her coat, like she can pretend Klark didn’t just see the redness in her cheeks that definitely wasn’t from the heat of the fire. “That’s different,” she says, muffled.

“I’m getting a new Heir.”

“No you’re not,” still speaking from inside her coat. “No other Heir will be too busy seducing a Sky Person to enact a coup while you’re enjoying your own seduction in the warm southlands.”

Klark aims a kick at her. It connects this time because Klark really is faster when she’s not on a horse. Echo yelps and scoots out of range.

“Why should I be the one to go to her, anyway? Do you really consider your own queen less important than she is?”

“I never said that,” Echo says from her defensive huddle. “You just never listened to the second half of this plan, where she returns here every summer.”

Klark stares at her, then shakes her head. “She never would.”

Echo is wary, but when no other kicks are forthcoming, she relaxes. “Why not? Our clans aren’t all that far apart from one border to the next. The roads are clear and easy in summer. She could ride out anywhere with the message of any trouble. And since you’re probably going to spend many summers to come in one convenient place...”
Klark makes a face -- she never expected the dream of city-building to be used against her like this. Well, not so soon. “She still wouldn’t. Aside from... everything else... she can’t show that kind of preference.”

“We’re the only clan as of yet who can truly challenge hers, at least in battle. It actually makes sense for her to try and repair our bad history by making an extra effort.”

Klark looks into the fire, willing the knot of ache and longing forming in her stomach to go away. “Say she does. She owes our clan that, but... if any of the other leaders from the Coalition found out it was anything more -- not that it would be, but if she and I... and we were discovered...”

She has to close her eyes against the wave of nausea at the thought of just how much politics that would inspire. Klark’s gotten pretty good at governing -- but that’s a different animal from currying favor, forming alliances, running to and fro to secure any advantage. Roan almost cut her legs out from under her because of that avoidance.

“A year ago I would have agreed with you,” Echo says. “I won’t pretend that was part of why I thought to offer myself as an alternative -- that and other reasons,” with a lascivious little grin. “I hoped to spare you the inevitable mess.”

“What’s changed in a year?”

“What hasn’t?” Echo answers, unhelpfully. “The Ice Nation are a different people. The Mountain is gone. Will there be leaders who fear a special alliance between us and the Woods Clan, should you and the Commander finally stop enacting this fascinating piece of theater for the rest of us? Possibly. But isn’t it time for us -- for all of us -- to move past things like that? To start thinking of ourselves as something beyond twelve, or thirteen, pieces of a whole?” When Klark doesn’t reply, Echo narrows her eyes. “You never did say why you’re still angry with her.”

Klark sighs gustily, gathers Barbour before climbing to her feet. “It’s difficult to put into words.” Barbour weighs heavily in her arms -- he’s growing, she thinks, running a hand down his back as he bumps her chin, and soon he’ll be too big to carry. “You sound like Lexa.”

“I do not. When?”

“When she first wanted me to join the Coalition. She talked about the same things. That there had to
be a different way of living once the Mountain no longer united us as a common enemy.” Klark shakes her head. “But I don’t think it’s enough. The world doesn’t shift like that for one event, or two, or three.”

“Maybe not.” Echo climbs to her feet, brushing off snow. She waits until she has Klark’s eyes on her, and holds her gaze. “Maybe we have to carve out the world we want, and discard the rest.”

“You have a lot of faith in me to think I can do that.”

“More in you than anyone else, my queen. You’ve done it once before.” She hesitates. “And all this about stealing those extra Sky People, sending Roan to the West, this first city... I haven’t just served you, I served by you. I know how you work. You could have very easily fooled me into thinking that’s what you were planning already.”

Klark opens her mouth, heart pounding so hard she suspects she might be shaking with it. The words crowd up inside her so thick and fast, though, she finds herself biting them back, as if terrified what saying something -- anything -- out loud could unleash.

Echo reaches over to squeeze her arm before leaving Klark alone with the dying fire, the stars above her, and an affectionate snowcat.

And her own thoughts.

She doesn’t find the words for her anger until they reach the Court.

They reach it just before the first real snowstorm, where snow doesn’t just fall but comes with gusts of wind that try to swallow the world in flurries of white. They should have had a grace period before the worst of the season set in, but that fault was entirely Klark’s, and her adoption of the slow-moving no-longer Sky People into her clan. Although she’s tempted to suspect Echo was slowing their caravan in order to win that bet with Genai.

(Shes keeps an eye on Lexa, makes sure she can see the Commander flex feeling back into all ten of
her fingers after dismounting from a long ride. So far she seems fine, but Klark is not taking chances.

Echo has been messaging back and forth with the Court as they rode, making sure all the preparations are in place for their arrival. There is no surprise or concern when they arrive with several dozen unknown families in tow, a tame(ish) snowcat, and the Commander of the twelve clans (thirteen, soon, she keeps forgetting) swaddled in enough furs for two warriors.

(Gustus frowned when he saw Barbour still playing with the remnant of the hat he’d managed to make last. It disintegrated into a pile of sad-looking tufts soon after.

“My bodyguard wants to know if you’re training your snowcat to stalk my scent,” Lexa said, pulling her horse up alongside Klark’s a few days later. She, like everyone else (or so it felt), was a much better rider than Klark.

“He doesn’t really think that,” Klark said after a moment. “He eats rabbits -- you’ve all seen, he can hunt them on his own, now. The hat was made from rabbit fur. That’s why he... you had nothing to do with it.”

She pushed away the memory of how he’d jealousy guarded the leftover scrap. He was in the habit of trying to share his meals with Klark, actually, but he’d refused to let her take the patch of grey fur out of his jaws.

“Gustus tends to see threats where there are none,” Lexa said, but then both of them turned their heads to find Barbour. He still isn’t much more than a half-grown kitten, so his stealth left something to be desired and he wasn’t hard to spot. He had gone ahead of their party and then climbed up into a tree, was perched at perfect pouncing height. On Lexa’s side of the road.

Lexa made a show of switching to the other side of Klark’s horse, putting the queen between her person and the waiting snowcat.

“He eats rabbits,” Klark emphasized. She ignored what sounded like a disappointed yowl from Barbour as they passed him in his tree.

“Did I say anything?” Lexa asked, before nudging her horse into a trot. “Anyway, it’s gotten me out of more hats. For now.”}
Klark is whisked away from the main hall almost immediately, informed in whispers that several messengers or representatives from settlements have been waiting for her return for days. It’s nothing urgent -- Echo was right, very little happens in the Ice Nation once the snows start -- but she’d rather deal with it now than later. She casts a final look back as she exits, and the sight of Echo supervising introductions calms any anxiety about leaving everyone. She thinks Lexa is the only one who notices, giving Klark a slight nod as she goes.

There’s more than enough to keep her busy for a few hours. She knows there’s a feast already in progress -- it’s a standard welcome whenever Klark returns after a long trip, but it’s less about Klark and more about celebrating the monarch being safely reinstated at Court, so they won’t wait for her. She should be eager to lose herself in the celebration, but instead she hangs back from joining the crowds: going over everything that happened while she was gone in detail, asking about the preparations for their clan’s unexpected growth.

“Almost every household has said they can host a family for the season,” one of her advisors assures her. “Perhaps those with very young children can stay in the main hall, at least until the drifts begin to melt. But there is more than enough room for the people you have brought us.”

She’d hoped, but she hadn’t been sure, that her people would be excited and happy about these new people. Their clan is large, but it used to be so much larger. Hardship and starvation and desperation have pared it down in ways even Klark’s new policies couldn’t immediately remedy. She didn’t accept these families just because they seemed so badly in need of acceptance, or to tweak Lexa’s nose, or even because of how she might benefit -- she’d prayed, in her secret heart, that seeing people want to join the Ice Nation would bring her subjects a kind of joy she hadn’t yet been able to provide.

She’s happy to see, from her advisor’s looks and the cheers she can already hear coming from the main hall, that her hope wasn’t misguided.

“And we have enough food.”

“Yes, we think so. Several settlements have heard of the new families and sent their surplus.”

“They didn’t have to --”

“They said it was their honor, your Majesty.”
“As long as everyone has enough.” She fidgets with the hem of her jacket, still too cold from the ride to take it off yet. “And accommodations for the Commander and her entourage?”

“We thought that would be best left to you, your Majesty.” He blinks at her expression. “Wasn’t that correct? We thought you’d want to decide—”

“No, no, it’s fine. It’s, um. We have empty rooms in the southern lodge, right?” She names the second longhouse, neighbor to the main hall. “You can set those up for the Woods Clan warriors the Commander brought with her.”

“... and the Commander..?”

“Yes. Right.” Tug, tug. “I think it’s best for... diplomatic relations... if I ask her myself.” Then she turns and marches for the main hall before he can ask more questions.

They’ve laid out tables, long benches loaded down with food and drink. She can smell it all, even from the balcony that wraps around the room and gives entry to the rooms on the second floor: meat in rich sauces, fish steamed on the bone, sweet and spiced wine. It smells like happiness, and home.

She stays on the balcony instead of making her way to the feast, content to fold her arms on top of the railing and observe from the shadowy corners. Pike is deep in conversation with her minister of trade, with Wells recruited to translate between him and the older woman. Every now and again Wells laughs, his hand going up to rub the back of his head -- she knows now what it looks like when his knowledge of the Ice Nation’s language fails him, but he learns with admirable determination. She’s pretty sure she won’t have her conversation partner for English much longer.

Genai takes a little longer to find among the boisterous gathering -- true to form, she’s chosen a seat that allows her a vantage point to look over the crowd. Even less surprising is seeing Gustus with her; Klark supposed when you’re almost solely responsible for the survival of your leader, you develop predictable habits. She is surprised to see them deep in conversation with each other, each with one hand wrapped around a cup she’s sure contains extremely watered-down wine. Although maybe “surprised” is the wrong word -- she winces to think of what kinds of common ground they might discover. And she can’t even claim she didn’t see it coming.

She looks for Raven next, knowing that will lead her to Echo, and she’s right. The two of them are in another corner with relative privacy, and from the way Raven laughs -- shoulders loose, head thrown back so that it carries beautifully, even above the regular commotion -- she thinks there’s a lot more wine than water in their cups. She searches inside herself for even the barest hint of resentment. But looking at Echo’s flushed, happy face, the way her eyes follow Raven’s every move with
something close to wonder, Klark really can’t manage it.

“I’m sure she would stop, if you asked her.”

Klark doesn’t jump -- somehow she knew her presence would be noticed by one person in particular, no matter how quiet or hidden she kept herself. She turns her head to watch Lexa settle on the railing across from her, just beyond the sharp corner as it followed the larger shape of the room. It leaves them almost facing each other, heads close together. “Which one?”

“Both.” Lexa considers. “I think Raven isn’t afraid to fight for happiness, but your friendship is a gift she never thought she’d receive. And Echo loves you, of course. Even before you’re her queen. She would give up anyone else, if you asked.”

“And why would I ask her to do that?”

Lexa doesn’t answer right away. Klark keeps her eyes on the crowd below until she can’t anymore, feeling heat along the back of her neck and in her face as she finally meet’s Lexa’s eyes.

She’s expecting anger, maybe even a little accusation. Except Lexa is -- she’s wearing this small, private smile, like someone told her favorite joke and it’s so familiar she doesn’t laugh, but...

“I’m usually good at figuring out when you’re not being entirely truthful with me,” she says. “Or at least know to expect it.”

Klark frowns at her. That... doesn’t sound promising, actually.

“This time, I was distracted. And you,” she points, having changed from her thick riding gloves to ones that end below the second knuckle, “took advantage of that. Ruthlessly.”

Klark scoffs. And then Lexa reaches out and --

And pokes her cheek.
“Admit it.”

“No,” Klark says immediately, feeling herself turn even redder. Another poke. Completely inexcusable, unprofessional and unacceptable, which is why Klark is not moving away from that single touch -- she’s not even going to acknowledge it’s happening. Which will show Lexa. “I told you the truth.”

“Not the whole truth.”

“I --” She bites off the end of her protestation, gives a little sigh. “We’re not together anymore. Echo and I.”

“Hmm.” A brief caress, like maybe the backs of two fingers sliding over her skin, but Lexa takes her hand back too quickly for Klark to be sure. “I suppose it made me easier to deal with, besides testing to see if... You never had a problem challenging me on anything -- everything -- else. I got too used to it to think you might be shy, about... did I make you nervous?”

“No,” Klark mutters.

“I think I did, a little.” Lexa props her chin with her hand, still smiling that odd, fond smile. “You make it easy to forget you aren’t always fearless.”

“Yes I am.”

That prompts a soft laugh from Lexa, and Klark can see that finger entering her peripheral vision again. She acts without thinking, left hand coming up to catch Lexa’s wrist. Lexa doesn’t resist her hold, or try to draw away. She keeps smiling, almost helplessly, looking at Klark like --

Klark’s heart is in her throat, but suddenly, she knows what she has to say.

“It wasn’t just that,” she says, hoping Lexa will see this is serious. “That wasn’t the only reason.” Klark swallows hard. She has to say this. She has to. “I don’t know if I can forgive you.”

Lena searches her face, and her playfulness falls away. “Tell me.”
Klark should let go of her wrist.

She slides her hand up to weave her fingers with Lexa’s, gripping the other girl’s hand, hard. Maybe this is the last time she and Lexa will touch outside of combat, and if that’s the case, she doesn’t want to let go yet.

“You abandoned them,” she says, hoarse.

Lexa doesn’t protest. She only frowns a little, sweeps her thumb across the back of Klark’s hand. “Who?”

Klark indicates with her chin: the crowd of people below, all their intent or animated faces. “My people. They’re supposed to be our people, you were the one that promised that. I could forgive you for pretending there was nothing between us. Maybe. And maybe they’ll forgive you for neglecting them until now. But I... when I think of how much suffering,” tears sting her eyes, “you could have spared them, if you hadn’t left everything to a new, untried queen --”

“Klark --”

Klark shakes her head violently at the soft insistence of Lexa’s voice. “I will never say this where anyone else can hear,” she says, fierce. “I will -- I will do something awful to you if you ever breathe a word of this, maybe I still can’t beat you in a fight but promise you, Lexa.” She takes a shaky breath. She’s still gripping Lexa’s hand, and her own is almost numb from equal, returned pressure. “But you and I don’t pretend. Not with each other. And we both know I’m not the leader you are.”

“... no. You’re not.”

There’s a sickening swoop in the pit of her stomach and she almost cries out -- in shame, in anger, in reflex of being hit so hard after showing her belly. She opens her mouth, and she’s not quite sure what’s going to come out of it, but --

“You’re the leader they needed.”

Klark squeezes her eyes shut. Somehow, this might hurt even worse. “Don’t condescend. I won’t --
you think this will make me like you? Pretty words won’t change...”

“Change what?” Lexa asks as she trails off.

“I’ve made so many mistakes,” Klark whispers.

“Maybe.” Lexa shifts, but closer, not drawing away like Klark is braced for. Their hands come to rest on the railing between them, still clasped tight. “But that’s what it means to lead. It’s hard, and it takes hard lessons to force us into the shape of whatever they need. You don’t think I’ve failed, over and over? I told you a days ago that I had, and badly. It’s just not what they tell stories about.”

“Still.” It literally hurts to admit this -- every word scrapes like she’s scratching away a thick layer of self-doubt and resentment that has hardened and settled into the cracks of her soul. “If I had your help, even in the smallest ways, I can’t help but think it would have made me a better queen.”

“I don’t.” Lexa tugs on their joined hands, once. “These people needed to learn how to be governed almost as much as you needed to learn how to be a leader. I saw that soon enough. After so many years of being beaten down, they needed something new. Something different.” Out of the corner of her eye, Klark sees her smile again. “Someone who would bring down a nest of whitechicks for crying children. You told me yourself you could be no one’s vision of a queen but your own.”

“I did say that, didn’t I.” She can barely remember it now: how nervous she was waiting for Lexa before the fealty ceremony. The look in Lexa’s eyes as she reached for Klark’s face. “It’s... been a hard two years.” She swallows. “I forgot.”

“So let me remind you.” Lexa leans in close. The fact that each of them are on either side of a cornered railing preserves the illusion that they’re not in each other’s space, but the reality is that when Lexa speaks her face is very, very close to Klark’s. “I knew... almost as soon as I met you, I knew you would do every possible thing to be the best Queen you could be,” here she smiles ruefully, “and maybe a few impossible ones, as the Mountain can attest.”

“Wasn’t really me.”

“Hush,” Lexa says, soft. “And I knew you wouldn’t do these things just because you felt responsible, or because of some old prophecy, or because you thought you didn’t have another choice. But because... living like this, carving a better world out of this one through wit, and skill, and sheer force of will -- that is what makes you.” She brings up her left hand in a fist and touches it
to her sternum. “I knew because I recognized it in you. It’s what makes me.

“And so I would never,” her breath catches, “I could never turn my back on those who pledged their lives and happiness to my care. They are our people, mine and yours. I will always do what I think is best for them before I consider myself.”

She closes the gap between them, pressing her forehead to Klark’s. “I didn’t abandon them; I left them with you.”

Klark kisses her.

She’s close enough to get the jump on Lexa, who only manages to make a small, surprised sound before Klark puts her mouth on hers and swallows it. But Lexa catches on quick, other hand coming up to sink her fingers into Klark’s deep fur collar and draw her closer, deepening the kiss.

“Wait, we --” Lexa pulls back. Her lips are wet, her breathing a little ragged. It makes Klark’s hands twitch toward her, and when Lexa sees that her pupils blow wide. “We were talking,” she gasps out, sounding desperate. “We were talking things out, it was important to you that we --”

“We’re done,” Klark interrupts. “We did it, we’re finished. We can do this now.”

“Oh,” Lexa says, soft and happy, and Klark decides she’s tired of waiting for Lexa to come back within reach, rounds the corner of the railing and crowds her up against the wall.

“I want you here,” she blurts out, which is not -- she really did want to stop the talking part, but -- “You’re wanted. I want you.” Such a bad idea. She’s so much better at kissing. “Okay?”

Lexa has a couple inches on Klark, and no one’s under any misapprehension that she couldn’t break the hold Klark has on her right now. But she looks pretty happy to be in it. “Yes.”

“Good.” She threads her hands into Lexa’s braids like she’s wanted to do for years, pulls her down.

Lexa lets out a muffled noise -- Klark has a half a second to think see, I am good at this -- before she realizes that’s the sound of pain. Klark pulls away. Lexa is still clinging to her, lips pressed together
in restrained emotion.

“What’s wrong?”

Lexa turns enough to show Klark her back. Something -- *claws* -- have ripped through her several layers of protective clothing. It didn’t draw blood, but when Klark moves the scraps of fabric aside she sees the skin has been scored with angry pink lines.

She looks up.

Barbour, who has climbed his silent way into the rafters just above, dangles his paws and chirps at her.

Klark narrows her eyes.

“I need a favor.”

Echo and Raven turn as Klark speaks. Wells turns, too -- he had joined them, and joined their drinking. His fingers are curled around his cup as he leans his head into his other hand, elbow on the table, smiling at everyone around them. Beaming, really.

He laughs when he sees Klark -- probably at the way she’s carrying Barbour, arms around the trunk of his body like he’s a doll. His paws almost touch the ground like this, long body stretching as he cranes his face upwards and makes the “frrt, frrt” noise that means he’s ready to play.

Klark is not having it.

“Can you guys watch him for me? Just make sure he doesn’t wander off on his own?”
“So what if he does?” Echo brings her cup to her lips but finds it empty. Her hand starts to inch toward Wells’s. “He’s not in any danger here. Even if someone was stupid enough to try and skin him, I mean, good luck.” Wells figures out what she’s doing and yanks his cup close to his chest, protective. Echo makes a face at him. “And I thought you’d stopped feeding him yourself. Don’t you want him to go off and hunt on his own?”

She had. But very different prey. “No. I mean, yes. I mean... it’s his first night at Court. I just don’t want him getting his nose into something he shouldn’t.”

Echo squints. “So why can’t you watch him?”

“It’s okay,” Raven interjects. She’s been watching Klark’s face instead of the snowcat. “We can babysit him for one night. C’mere, cuddle-toes.”

That takes a bit of explaining -- “You sit on children? ... well, then how did your people arrive at that saying?” -- before Klark hands over her wriggling prize. Barbour stops trying to climb back onto Klark once Echo and Raven barricade him onto their laps, settling his muzzle onto his dangling paws for a good sulk.

Klark thinks she’s free to sneak off just as Raven asks, with a glint in her eye: “He get the Commander pretty good this time?”

Which means Echo’s eyes go wide. “Is that why--”

Wells guffaws. Echo slaps a hand over her mouth, because to be seen laughing openly at her Queen is probably not great policy.

“The Commander is fine,” Klark says. “I’ll be sure to pass along your concern.”

Raven just smirks at her.

“Poor Lexa.” Echo recovers herself, scrunches up Barbour’s beautiful, fluffy face between her hands. “She made a gross tactical error when she rescued you. Here, at last, is an adversary she cannot kill.”
Klark turns and walks away with the sound of their laughter still following.

Klark wakes up with the pale light of early morning making its way into her room, shining through the grease paper window. It’s how she usually comes out of sleep: registering first the shadows lightening, the coldness of the air, the deep comfort of her bed and how much she doesn’t want to leave it.

The warmth of the body curled behind and half over her is a lot less of the usual.

Lexa rouses the second Klark does, shifting sleepily -- pressing herself along Klark’s back and putting her (cold!) nose into Klark’s neck. “Don’t get up,” she murmurs.

“Have to.” But Klark turns around, loving the feeling of Lexa’s skin under her hands as she puts her own nose on the other girl’s cheek, see how she likes it. Lexa flinches but then presses back even closer. “Have to make sure all the living arrangements for the new members of the Ice Nation are working out. If anyone’s uncomfortable I want to know now, before we’re all well and truly snowed in.”

Lexa makes a grumpy little huff. Klark hates herself for thinking it’s adorable. “I hope you get tied up in endless bureaucracies because of that little power play. Would serve you right if you barely had a minute to breathe this winter.”

Klark grins against Lexa’s jaw, sets her teeth to it before changing to a quick kiss. “You don’t actually want that.”

Lexa ducks her head down to return the kiss, slower. “No, I don’t,” she says against Klark’s mouth, arms going around her.

There’s an irritated yowl, and a heavy weight settles at the foot of Klark’s bed.

Lexa’s eyes open, but she doesn’t turn her head. Her arm around Klark tightens, though.
“What the --” Klark can just make out the shape of her snowcat in the low light, his hair all fluffed out in outrage. “Oh. Well, I guess it was too much to hope Echo and Raven could contain him. We’ll just have to figure out something else tonight.” She tries to sit up, can’t. “Lexa, I really do need to get up.”

Slowly, slowly, Lexa relinquishes her hold. She has far too much self-control to pout, of course.

The cold air hits her like a shock to the system. She slips out from her blankets and into a first layer -- silk, for comfort and warmth -- with practiced ease. Lexa remains in bed, locked in an unblinking glare-off with a bristling snowcat. The two of them radiate the same air of bloodthirsty animosity.

Klark has to hide a laugh, pulling on the next layer of clothing. For some reason the sight brings to mind that letter the other Klark left for her. She hasn’t thought about it in so long -- since Polis. Maybe one day she’ll tell Lexa its contents.

_(I don't know how to write this letter. I want you to know, the only thing getting me through is that you probably feel the same way about reading it, the letter had read.)_

Lexa shifts just enough to prop herself up on her elbow, the furs slipping down to reveal the dark lines of a tattoo on her upper arm. Last night left her with a pretty awful case of bedhead, braids twisted out of order. “Next lifetime,” she directs at Barbour, “I’m leaving you in the tree.”

He yawns in her face. Lexa reels back and claps a hand over her nose, too late to protect herself from the scent memory of a dozen too-slow rabbits.

_(I don’t know how you’ll feel about this when you wake up, but: thank you. Thank you for giving up a part of your life. If you’re reading this, it was exactly what I needed.)_

Klark finishes dressing, pulling on her weapons belt and reaching for her boots. “You plan to stay in bed all day?”

“Why not?” Lexa asks idly, rolling onto her back. It’s a good thing she’s still under the covers. Klark almost unbalances as she pulls on her second boot, anyway. “As we covered -- at length -- this is your territory. Unless you bring me in, I won’t have much to do this winter.”
“Does that bother you?” Klark puts her hands on her hips, giving them something to grip, instead of... She really, really wants to take the three steps between her and the bed. She really shouldn’t. She does have things to do.

“I...” Lexa shivers suddenly, pulls her arms back under the blankets and furs, and those up to her shoulders. She turns on her side to better face Klark. “I don’t think so. It might be nice, for a while, to just be. Like what we talked of the last time.”

She sounds every inch herself, even as she contemplates setting down her official duties in everything but name. But she’s hunched a little, drawing the blankets in tight for warmth, and her nose is already pink from the cold.

Klark walks forward three steps. Barbour sneezes in clear disgust at his mother’s lack of self-control, not to mention commitment to her queenly duties. He thumps off the bed to slink away.

(I tried to leave anything that was just Ice Nation business to Genai. The only real change I made was reaching out to a man called Roan. I’ve never met him in my world, and I know you don’t like him. But he did good work. I think he wants to do good work. You have to find someone to tell you about the nightblood tradition in the Woods Clan. I don’t have time to do anything about it here, but please, see what you can do.

You might hear some rumors about you and the Commander. None of it is true. A lot of it was about the ritual that helped me stay here, helped me save my people. So please don’t hate her for it.)

“Echo thinks I could have some time to myself, as well,” Klark says, standing over the bed. She lets herself draw an errant curl away from Lexa’s face, one finger only, careful not to touch her skin. “That she could handle things here, and I could spend winters with you in Polis.”

Lexa draws in a short breath, eyes widening. She hooks Klark’s finger with her own, curling around and trapping it where her neck joins her shoulder. “Seems unfair to let you have all the fun.” She sounds a bit breathless.

Klark pushes her hand deeper into Lexa’s hair instead of fighting the hold. It’s beautiful even when it’s a mess. She is. “There might be a way for you to come back up and waste your days in the summer. A place which doesn’t take you too far from the border. Someday soon.”
A place where we can be together, she doesn’t say. My new home -- to make yours, as yours can become mine.

Even unspoken, it feels like it hangs in the air between them.

Lexa -- smiles, huge and fond, eyes bright. Nose getting redder.

Klark will never find the words to tell Lexa how she makes her feel, doesn’t know if there are words for this sensation that expands inside her to swallow up all doubt and fear.

“I forgot,” Lexa admits, almost laughing: “Even with your soul where it should be, you always find a way to surprise me.”

(You don’t have to love her like I do. I know what Lexa says, but our lives have been so different. Sometimes I think she’s optimistic about how much we could really have in common. Each of us get to make choices going forward.)

Klark’s not good at soft words. Never has been -- probably never is, going by the directness of the letter her other self left behind. Maybe there’s just something in her core -- her soul -- that resists where it should yield.

Well. Lexa loves her anyway.

Klark wonders if Lexa understood how much that other Klark loved her back, sliding between worlds to save their people. She thinks she did. It’s a pretty impressive gesture. Maybe some people would think it even better than the right words, said in the best way.

(I’ll make my destiny, if you make yours.)

Klark can’t do that. As she bends down to kiss Lexa, hard, fingers tangling in the other girl’s hair, she knows she has too many anchors to this world to leap between them and prove her love.

She’ll just have make Lexa a new one.
Chapter End Notes

1. Some people have asked so I feel I should inform everyone: Lexa and Barbour never really end up getting along, she suffers perennial scratches and a few ankle bites because of it, likes to tell people who don’t know about her girlfriend’s pet “those scars are where I survived a snowcat attack.” It always impresses representatives from the more far-flung clans. Klark does her best to mitigate the situation, but there’s only so much she can do with Barbour, he’s an animal, only one of you is open to things like reason and logic, Lexa, so maybe a little help, here. And the unstated truth of it all is that Lexa really does allow all of this to happen, doesn’t ever really lay down the law with Barbour, and part of it is that she sympathizes too much, treats him with a bit too much - - not respect, but understanding? Like, who wouldn’t want to spend their days laying across Klark kom Azgeda’s lap, playing with her hair, rubbing her face with your face, and summarily disemboweling anyone else who even tries to get close? I mean, she gets it.

2. Happily, Klark and Costia do end up getting along. (How do they become friends? It involves a lot of fangirling on Klark’s part. At some point she makes a gift to Costia of a piece of Nia’s skull. Costia makes it into a necklace.) In fact several years later when everyone has mellowed the fuck out Costia has this trick she likes pull, where she like leans in reeeaaaaaal close to Klark or puts her lips riiiiight up against her ear and then shoots these looks at Lexa like, I know exactly what you are thinking, now watch me put my hand like waaaaaaay too low on her back. And Lexa is just so overwhelmed at seeing the only two women she’s ever thought of that way in that kind of scenario and goes into FULL-ON SYSTEMS FAILURE, like NOT COOL COSTIA NOT COOL. But Klark is completely unfazed? Literally could not care less, she knows what’s going on and she knows Costia and it’s a non-issue. Except I think sometimes she sort of whispers “you should be nicer to her” when she’s also leaning in a little too close, and Costia is like, “are you kidding this is the most fun I have ever had in my life, also that’s not my job anymore it’s yours and good luck with it.” and Klark sighs and goes to do her best.

3. And maybe there are bad times among the good, maybe there is unhappiness, but they have each other.

Thanks for coming along with me on this one.
Works inspired by this one: *Cover for "The Red King Awake" by KL_Morgan* by Amiril

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