a crown seldom enjoyed

by onemilliongoldstars

Summary

To maintain the fragile peace between north and south, Clarke of House Tyrell is sent to live in Winterfell as an act of faith between the two kingdoms. There, she is put under the protection of the first queen in the north, Queen Lexa of House Stark, Daughter of Wolves. A woman draped in steel and silver, wolves at her heels and rumoured to be a manifestation of the fury of the old gods; Clarke refuses to be awed be her quiet violence and cold smile. Instead of fostering unity, the meeting of the wolf and the rose lights a spark that spreads through the rest of Westeros, threatening to burn it to the ground.

Notes

Hello! Welcome to my Game of Thrones AU! To be clear: this fic draws only upon the world of Game of Thrones and the lore, none of the characters from the books are in this, it's all 100 characters. It should be totally coherent to people who don't know GoT (congrats for staying out of the wormhole).

A huge thank you and credit goes to chey (@decalexas) for brainstorming the (huge ass) plot for this with me, this is half her baby as well <3
That being said, if anything confuses you or isn't clear (or if you're a huge nerd about the show and want to berate me about something) feel free to talk to me in the comments here, or over on tumblr: @onemilliongoldstars.
Book One: Chapter 1

My crown is in my heart, not on my head;
Not decked with diamonds and Indian stones,
Nor to be see. My crown is called content;
A crown it is that seldom kings enjoy.

Henry VI (3.1.62-65)

Book 1: Chapter One

She jerks awake when the wheels of the carriage rattle over a violent pothole in the middle of the road. Her head bangs hard against the shuttered window and slippered feet scramble against the rug on the floor for traction. The carriage is dark and she blinks, rubbing blearily at her eyes as she struggles to see in the dim light of the lantern that rocks on an iron hook against the ceiling.

Cool morning light spills in through the slight cracks in the shutters, cold air whistling against the walls and Clarke shivers and pulls the furs further about her shoulders. Her dress is thin, a light gold and green silk imported from the eastern islands and offers little protection from the harsh northern temperatures. There are velvet and soft woolen shifts in her trunks, but she is too stubborn to admit that she needs them. Instead, she wraps the velvet cloak closer around her shoulders, adjusts the furs draped across her knees and runs cold fingers over each other in an attempt to find some warmth.

Outside, the horses stamp and whinny as their carriage is pulled relentlessly onwards, and she stares resentfully at the carriage wall across from her. She’s tired from weeks of sleepless nights in roadside taverns and the castles of lesser lord, and cold to the bone from the chill, but she wishes the journey was never ending. Carefully she digs into the pouch of her dress and her numb fingers curl around the piece of parchment, soft from the touch of tender fingertips. She doesn’t pull it out, doesn’t need to to see the slanting, apologetic script and the green seal of a curling rose.

The sounds of the road have morphed and changed as she slept, and she inches herself further up in her seat to peer through the window, pulling aside the shutters and thick curtains to look out at the landscape. Snow coats the ground; they are fortunate that the King’s Road is clear enough to travel. Around her is the beginnings of the city that she is travelling to, huts and homes constructed in the harsh landscape of fading winter in the North. They are trading away the vast fields of nothing, save for the occasional farm house, in favour of crudely designed streets made of packed mud and filled with traffic that slows their pace.

The carriage draws attention, surrounded as it is by a battalion of armed guards for her protection. They form a caravan with the two carts behind them, which carry her personal effects and each member of the party bears the Tyrell seal: a golden rose on a field of green, declaring their southern loyalties for all of the northerners to see.

It has not been so long since the northern kingdom split away from the south, only five years, easily enough time for those they pass to recognise the banners that stream from her flag bearers. She is unsurprised to see that they are being stared at by those who travel on foot or by horseback, carrying their wares to the castle in time for the morning market. They are all wrapped in layers of fur and wool and Clarke is once again reminded that she is not built for the iciness of the northern winters, withdrawing into her carriage to retain as much southern heat as she can.
Her fingers run over the note within her pocket again, a simple sheaf of paper to extend her family’s
greeting to the northern queen. She resists the urge to crumple the parchment between her fingers and
burn it against the wick of the lantern. Her stomach turns once again thinking of her situation and she
presses herself against the cushioned walls of the carriage, staring at the flickering lantern and
longing for her family home of Highgarden with such desperation it churns at her stomach. This
place, with its alien landscape and cold, unfriendly people, is enough to make her sickened with
homesickness, though she has ignored every letter her mother had delivered to her on her journey.

It is a strange thing to feel unwanted, stranded between the home she craves but is sent from and the
home awaiting her which she does not want. Though she is surrounded by servants and guards, she
has never felt so alone.

There is a knock against the door and she inches forwards in her seat to draw back the shutters and
curtains, peering out at the guard who rides alongside her.

“My lady, we are nearing the castle.”

She simply nods in response, watching him draw his horse back to its position in the parade. They
are drawing definite attention now, people pausing in the busy streets to watch them and the ground
beneath them has turned from crude packed earth to familiar cobbles which rattle her around the
carriage like a rag doll. The houses rise up from the streets, tall and cramped and in the distance there
is a crowing of market sellers crying out their prices and wares. The smell of horses and dirt, the
grime of the city, filters in through the cold air of the window and she wrinkles her nose, drawing
back to slam the shutters again with a particularly hard rattle.

Settling back in her seat, she draws her hands into her lap, clutching them together within the trails of
her cloak. She is not nervous. She is Clarke of House Tyrell, one of the most respected houses in the
southern lands and far more refined than the northern rabble that inhabit the castle of Winterfell, seat
of the Queen of the North.

The thought of the woman to whom she’s being delivered makes Clarke hesitate and she swallows
heavily, her eyes fixed on tracing the knots in the wood of the wall opposite her.

Lessa Stark, Queen of the North, Daughter of Wolves. The name alone is enough to make her shiver.
She cannot picture what the girl will look like, though she has been told so much about her. The
fifteen year old who succeeded her father when he was killed in the War of North and South. Who
led a campaign to overcome the southern forces and break away to form her own kingdom,
becoming the first Queen in the North for hundreds of years.

Clarke had been young when the girl had first taken power, only thirteen and too bored by foreign
affairs to remember much about the politics of the war. But even she distinctly remembers the stories
about Lexa Stark that had been whispered by her friends and maids. She was a winter spirit,
summoned by the old northern gods to avenge them. She was a child of the forest, taking on human
form. She rode a direwolf the size of a horse into battle- or perhaps she gave birth to a litter of
direwolves- or maybe she was part direwolf. The tales were endless.

The carriage comes to a trembling halt, pulling her from her thoughts and she drags in a steadying
breath as the door is opened and she is offered the extended hands of her footman to descend into the
courtyard.

The first thing that hits her is the cold, a wall of chill that immediately sends shivers through her spine
and gooseflesh along her arms. The second is the overwhelming brightness that comes from the sun
reflecting on the snow covered ground. The courtyard of the castle has been mostly cleared, but there
is still some snow pushed against the walls in drifts and she has to squint after the darkness of the
carriage. The third thing is the dogs. Or, more accurately, the direwolves. They must be direwolves, as they are larger than any dog she has ever seen and larger than some miniature ponies. There are seven of them, of varying shades of white and grey and black. Some lounge to the side, watching her with curiosity, several others pad closer, as if to investigate, and the largest of the lot stand faithfully at the side of the woman who must be Lexa Stark.

The Queen in the North is smaller than Clarke expected her to be. She gets only a brief glance when she emerges from the carriage, before she is forced to concentrate on the footman helping her and the slippery ground beneath her slippered feet, but what she sees is a small girl with dark hair and a crown of steel and silver, watching her impassively. She is surrounded by advisors and members of her court, but there is no elaborate fanfare of welcome, as Clarke would expect in Highgarden. Instead it is only Clarke and these skeptical, stoic northerners. She feels a rush of ire for her mother once again.

“Lady Clarke,” Lexa Stark’s voice is clear and carries across the few paces that separate them. “Welcome to Winterfell.”

Cautiously, Clarke stares at her for a moment, appraising her. The girl wears a thick, dark velvet cape with a white fur trim over a flowing dress. She is wearing lush, dark gloves and a sparkling silver necklace rests against her collarbones. Though she knew in theory that the queen had only seen twenty years, it is still surprising to see that her face is slightly rounded with youth, though it does nothing to disguise the spark of ruthlessness in her green eyes. Dark hair is gathered at the back of her head and her crown catches the light when she tilts her head to watch Clarke come closer.

Clarke approaches a little hesitantly and pauses before her, unsure of the protocol of meeting a queen who is not her own. She feels Lexa Stark’s eyes on her as she bows her head and bobs the smallest of curtseys. “Your majesty.”

“Thank you for joining us,” Lexa Stark’s voice is cool and calm, in no way impolite but in no way friendly either. “Your journey must have been hard.”

“It was,” Clarke straightens herself upright again, but meeting the eyes of the Queen in the North is oddly unsettling. One of the direwolves comes within an arm’s reach of her and she can’t help but flinch back from the dark eyes and sharp fangs of this near mythical creature.

“My apologies,” Queen Lexa takes a step forward, her regal mask cracking just slightly, showing a slice of concern, “Faith,” She clicks her tongue and the wolf’s big white head swings away from Clarke. The wolf whines a little, but obediently trots to Lexa’s side, letting her brush a hand over its ears. “They will not hurt you.” Lexa assures her, calmly and Clarke has to swallow before she can nod, clasping her hands together in the fur lined pouch of her dress in hopes that the queen will not see how they are trembling.

Her fingers brush against the worn corners of the letter and she pulls it out, glancing at the Stark queen uncertainly before offering it out.

“I was to deliver this to you upon my arrival.”

Lexus nods, pursing her lips a little and reaches out to take the letter, fingers brushing over the unbroken seal. “Please,” She gestures back at the castle, “We should retire indoors to discuss your stay here. The wind is cold today.”

Clarke bites back a sarcastic comment and instead nods, shrugging her cloak further around her shoulders. She falls into step just a pace behind Lexa, unsure if she should presume to place herself beside a queen. Lexa Stark makes no comment, but the space beside her remains available as her
courtiers file in beside Clarke. The woman who walks to her right is tall, dressed in Stark colours and the crest stitched in silver into the white cloak she wears above her leathers is a wolf, above which sits a crown. Clarke recognises her immediately as part of the Queensguard, sworn to protect the Stark queen until she dies at her side and shivers slightly when she catches sight of the sword at her hip and the dagger strapped to her thigh. They are led through the thick oak doors of the castle, into corridors lined with stone on every side. Torches sit on notches on the walls, casting flickering light up to the high ceilings and it takes Clarke’s eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness after the bright snows outside.

The castle is cold and she feels her stomach turn, dangerously close to tears at the thought of being trapped in the frozen wasteland. She imagines herself wasting away, locked in a tower for safe-keeping, as the ice seeped into her bones and eventually gripped her heart.

Another door opens before them and they parade into a throne room with little fanfare. It is lighter than the corridors, with high windows upon which elegant stained glass tells tales of victorious battles. Spiralling marble pillars line the walkway and the room is filled with more attendants and courtiers, who turn to stare at Clarke. On a dais at the end of the room sits a throne made of steel and wood, spiked like a crown, dark and understated in its power. It is to this that the queen glides, settling into it and staring down at Clarke with an unreadable expression. The direwolves arrange themselves around her, flopping against each other as the rest of Lexa’s procession file into their places behind her. It is only Clarke who is left adrift, standing in the middle of the hall with a sinking feeling in her stomach. She watches as the white direwolf rests its head against the Queen’s bent knees and Lexa smooths a hand over its ears.

The queen is not cruel when she settles her attention on Clarke, but there is a blankness to her words, a distance that makes Clarke shiver.

“Lady Clarke of House Tyrell, it is a pleasure to welcome you into this court as our guest.”

The word sends a shock through Clarke’s body and she struggles not to clench her jaw. Guest. More like prisoner.

If Lexa notices her discomfort she doesn’t spare it any attention. “Your presence here will help to ensure that the blossoming peace between the Southern Kingdom and our own is maintained, just as the presence of our own Lady Tris of House Mormont in Kings Landing will aid our relations.” Clarke thinks she sees the queen’s eyes flicker to the captain of her Queensguard, but then she continues. “You will have every comfort here.” With a flick of her hand, she gestures forward a girl who was stood to the side. She is only slightly older than Clarke herself, with dark hair hanging in a thick braid down her back. She wears a guard’s uniform, decorated with a golden Stark crest.

“This is Octavia Snow,” Lexa explains and the name makes Clarke ripple. She knows what that means, knows what the girl with a heavy sword is. Snow, the name given to children in the north when they are born without the grace of their father’s. “She is one of our most promising young soldiers and she has been appointed as your personal escort. She will assist you with anything you need, as will the handmaidens assigned to your care.”

Octavia steps forward, meeting her eyes for just a moment and Clarke sees a flash of resentment before the girl bows lowly to her. She regards the girl who is to be her jailor and swallows heavily when she sees the heavy sword at her belt and the strength in her clenched jaw.

Queen Lexa nods, satisfied and Octavia returns to her place. Lexa’s gaze swings to her again and Clarke feels herself tremble under its force. “Is there anything else you wish to know?” She asks, politely.
When can I go home? Sits on the tip of her tongue, but she is frozen, as if the cold of this land has already wriggled beneath her skin and turned her to stone. She is only able to shake her head stiffly and answer, quietly. ‘No, your majesty.’

“Very well then,” The Stark Queen gestures to one side, but it takes a meaningful look from the woman at her side for Clarke to understand that she is being dismissed. She stumbles to the edges of the hall, slipping back through the crowd of waiting nobles until she feels their gazes slide away from her.

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It is much later when the Queen stands from her throne and dismisses them all. Before she leaves, she gestures to where Clarke has been stood, trying not to shiver in the cold and avoiding the curious gazes of the nobles around her.

“Tonight,” Queen Lexa calls above the murmuring of the dispersing crowd. “We shall have a banquet to welcome Lady Clarke.”

The words cause dread to settle in her stomach. The evening has already begun to draw in around the castle, the afternoon sun becoming slowly dimmer as time had passed and the candles had burnt down. She had hoped that the rumours of the northerners had been true, that they really were humourless and dour and she would be able to sink into a warm bath and pick food from a plate while curled beneath the warmest furs the castle could offer.

The Queen disappears out of a heavily guarded door on the dais, but Clarke is not so lucky. Though no one greets her openly, the nobles slowly filing from the great hall take the time to look her over and evaluate her. Judging by their pinched faces, what they find is not to their liking and she has only just escaped them down a narrow corridor when Octavia appears behind her.

“My lady!”

Clarke’s eyes squeeze shut and she curses softly, before her expression smooths out and she turns to give the approaching guard a wan smile. “Is something wrong?”

Octavia frowns at her, confused and a little suspicious. “I am to escort you to your room. I will be… available to you for the duration of your stay here.”

Clarke tries not to let her smile tighten irritably. “Really? You needn’t do that, I’m sure I’m quite safe.” Actually, judging by the sour expressions on the faces of some of the nobles, she is sure of quite the opposite, but the thought of the resentful guard following her from pillar to post is enough to make her consider the risk.

Octavia’s lips tighten and she shakes her head stubbornly. “I’m still to escort you, my lady.”

Sensing a losing battle, Clarke just nods, pasting a meek smile back onto her face. Octavia gazes at her for a few more moments, but then turns, confident that she will follow and guides the way through the maze of passages. Clarke walks behind her like an obedient pup, but with Octavia’s back turned she cannot see the hard expression that crosses her face. She will be soft and unassuming for now, allow them to forget about her, until she can wriggle out of Octavia’s guard long enough to make her escape.

Act the innocent flower, but be the serpent below. She is well versed in such a masquerade.

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The soft butting of a head at her thigh draws Lexa’s attention away from Maester Titus’s anxious ramblings, much to her gratitude. Glancing down, she runs her fingers over Liberty’s head. The big sandy direwolf has long been affectionate, ever since she was no more than a pup, still as large as a grown dog. The direwolf growls softly in pleasure and slumps against her leg lapping up the attention. Beside her, Lexa thinks that she sees Honor cast his sibling a dirty look from where he is sat, regal and stoic beside her, but Lexa pays him no mind. He treads at her heels most of the day, obedient and silent and still, like a shadow. Though he is not affectionate like his sister, his constant presence is a reassurance.

A few of the other wolves roam about the room. In the corner, curled up to sleep, is Sage, his light grey coat soft in the firelight. But she is more concerned with Faith. The white wolf has been out of character for most of the day, restless and whining, and now she sits curled up against the door, as if waiting for someone.

“Are you listening, your majesty?” Despite her station, she still snaps back to attention. Titus is watching her with the air of a tutor at their wits end with their charge and she grimaces at having been caught unprepared. It’s hard to listen to her advisor’s endless concerns and queries after a glass of wine, sat in a fur lined robe with a fire blazing before her, but she forces herself to concentrate.

“My apologies Titus. I was just wondering about Faith, she seems preoccupied.”

Titus casts a distasteful glance back to where Faith lies. Though he has been Maester to the Stark family for over forty years, he has yet to learn to love the direwolves that appeared from the woods when Lexa was crowned on the battlefield, still stained with her father’s blood.

“It is probably unsettled by our visitor, your majesty.” He gives her a meaningful glance and Lexa has to drain her wine glass to stop herself from cringing.

It seems she has inadvertently catapulted herself from the boring but safe territory of trade deals with the Iron Bank, to the far more dangerous topic of Lady Clarke.

“I sense that you still do not approve of our guest?” She asks, with a wry smile. “Despite her arrival showing that she is, as I said, just a harmless girl.”

“Many of your enemies thought you were just a harmless girl, your majesty.” Maester Titus glowers at her.

“It is fortunate then, that the Tyrell girl did not appear from her carriage with 30,000 men and seven direwolves, is it not?” She tries not to sound bored, but the conversation has long been beaten to death. Her hands have stilled in their absent-minded petting and Liberty makes her displeasure known with a high-pitched whine. Obediently, Lexa returns to scratching the big wolf.

“It does not seem wise to bring an enemy into the castle, when we are only a few years into a stable reign.” Titus drums his fingers anxiously on the cane in his hands and Lexa presses her eyes shut, her patience wearing thin.

“Titus, you understand my motives, surely? The girl is a bargaining chip, nothing more. Below King Thelonious and his son, the Tyrells are the most powerful family in the realm. I couldn’t very well demand that Thelonious hand over his only son to be my act of faith, could I? But Lady Clarke in the castle demonstrates good will.”

“Good will.” Titus scoffs, “The girl has probably been sent with poison or is an assassin masquerading as the Tyrell girl.”
“Enough!” Lexa slams her goblet down hard enough that Liberty yelps in her lap, Sage startles awake and even Faith turns to investigate the noise. Only Honor stays at her side, still as a statue. “I will have no more talk of this. The decision has already been made by me, the Queen. You would do well to remember your place Titus.”

The maester cowers immediately, bowing so low that Lexa thinks his nose may touch the ground. “My apologies your majesty, I didn’t mean to question your decisions.”

“Leave me now, Titus,” Her anger still sits in her stomach, hard as iron. “I should prepare for the banquet.”

“As you wish.” Titus edges around Faith to leave Lexa sitting alone before the fire.

She watches the flames dance in the hearth, her thoughts on the Tyrell girl who had appeared earlier that day. Fearful, she thinks, but with a streak of stubbornness and wry wit to her that makes Lexa glad she chose her over one of the other nobles. She is also, as the rumours had said, undeniably beautiful. Lexa has never entertained idle court gossip, but it is one thing not to listen and another entirely not to hear. But, as the tales had promised, the girl’s hair is indeed like spun gold, her eyes like a clear summer sky and her skin as pale as precious porcelain.

Lexa shakes herself from her daydreams as Faith pads towards her, nosing at her knees where Liberty’s head still lies. The sandy wolf turns and snaps at her sister, growling against her and Faith skitters back a step but then holds her ground, a growl rumbling from her chest. Lexa breaks up the fight before it can begin, pushing at Liberty’s head to scold her and urging Faith around to her other side. Soon the wolves are once again settled, just a mass of fur and Faith gazes up at her, a low whine caught in the back of her throat.

“Yes, I know,” Lexa strokes across the wolf’s ears and Faith’s eyes shut in bliss. “You’ve been quite distracted by her too.”

A knock comes at the door, and she knows from the way that it swings inwards before she can call her permission to expect Anya Mormont, the captain of her Queensguard, stepping into the room. Anya is tall and lithe, strength built into every line of her body. Her eyes are shrewd and sceptical, and her cousin is sharply witty and fiercely loyal, a bond built between them during days spent playing together as children, and months spent on the battlefield, fighting for Lexa’s father’s crown. Her cousin is perhaps the only person she trusts save for her half brother, and when Anya made her intent to become a member of Lexa’s Queensguard clear, there was no question who would be chosen as captain.

Now, her cousin bows deeply, her white cape flowing about her shoulders, and steps into the room with a pinched, unhappy look upon her face that Lexa has learned not to ignore.

“Anya,” She welcomes her inside, pouring another goblet of wine from the decanter at her side and ushering her friend into the other chair beside the fire in her solar.

Anya accepts her offer to sit, but declines the wine with a shake of her head, and Lexa can see by the way she perches on the edge of the chair that she is uncomfortable.

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“Your majesty,” Even in private, Anya often refuses to use anything but her title. Her cousin has invested too much in her path to the crown, Lexa privately theorises, to let anyone forget that she is the queen, least of all herself. “I’m sorry to disturb you.”

“What did you need, Anya?” Her cousin is never one for small talk, so Lexa knows there is something lingering on the edge of her tongue that she wishes to say. When Anya hesitates again,
Lexa sighs and settles back into her chair. “You have concerns about our guest also, I suspect?”

Anya pays them no mind, pacing anxiously before the fire as she speaks, her words as sharp as a rain of arrows. “You know I don’t like to associate myself with Titus,” Her lip curls over the Measter’s name. “But I fear he is right in this regard. I do not trust southerners, even soft roses like the Tyrells, and this girl even less so.”

“Anya,” Lexa tries not to sound too tired, “The girl is not a threat, she’s just a girl, far from home and afraid.”

“I have heard bad things about Tyrell women,” Anya argues, fiercely, “That they are slippery, they use poison and seduce—”

“You and Gustus agreed to let Tris go.” Lexa cuts through her, and Anya’s mouth snaps shut over her words, her eyes narrowing and hardening at the reminder of her younger sister, sent as Clarke’s parallel to guarantee peace with the south. The girl is a sweet thing, years younger than Lexa, and Anya is a doting, protective older sister. Though she will not say it, Lexa knows that Anya fears for her sister’s life down in Kingslanding.

“This is not about Tris,” Anya says at last, woodenly, “You know our family have always been happy to make sacrifices for the crown.”

“Your worry for Tris does not jeopardise your loyalty.” Lexa assures her, “But I need you to trust me. The Tyrell girl is important in the south, she is the heir to one of the vastest fortunes in the south, unwed and a favourite of the king and his son, by all accounts. If she is safe here in Winterfell, Tris will be safe in Kingslanding.”

“I do not trust the southerners like you do, Lexa,” Anya tells her, lowly and Lexa’s brows twitch together with concern. “But if you are sure that the Tyrell girl is enough to keep Tris safe…” She trails off and Lexa fills the silence left to her.

“She is, Anya.” She cracks a smile, raising an eyebrow at her cousin, “And do you really think her a threat? She seems too shy to say boo to a goose, let alone plan a coup. I expect we won’t see much of her outside of the sept and the banquet hall.”

Anya’s eyes remain dark, however, and Lexa expects she hasn’t heard the last of it when Anya says, lowly. “As you say, your majesty.”

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At the sound of knocking on her door, Clarke looks up from her seat at the window. She is alone for the first time in what feels like weeks. The handmaidens had disappeared after scurrying around her for four candle marks, bathing and dressing her. She had been a surly and uncooperative subject, insisting that they dress her in one of her southern gowns, still packed away in a trunk and refusing the softer braids of the north in favour of the intricate styles of the south. Even Reya, the handmaiden she had brought with her from the south, had tutted at her choice, but acquiesced in the face of her bad temper.

Sitting her upon a chair before the fire, the kind, calm girl had run her brush through her hair, and the gentle, familiar motion of skilled fingers working braids into her hair had soothed Clarke enough to persuade her to drink a goblet of warmed wine.

“There, m’lady,” Reya’s calm voice reminded her so much of home that she had almost wept at the
sound of it. Kind, hazel eyes had met hers and Reya had allowed her to grasp her hand, squeezing comfortably. “I know it’s a change,” The girl had said, quietly, “But you’re a Tyrell, you won’t let these northern folk see you as anything but, will you?” At the shake of her head, Reya had nodded, squeezing her hand once before letting go and running a critical eye over her. “You look beautiful, as always.”

Now, draped in golden silk and gauze, she has allowed herself to be wrapped in a thick cloak with a white fur trim to keep out the cold, though the walls of her room are warm to the touch, heated by the hot springs that run under Winterfell, or so the northern handmaidens had told her. Despite refusing to unpack anything of her own- as if the snub would shorten her stay here- she had taken the time alone to palm out the vial of poison stitched into a secret pocket in her travelling cloak. Given to her by her grandmother when she was just a girl, she carries it everywhere and it now lives in the slit in her mattress, where she is sure no one will find it.

The knock comes again and she irritably puts aside the warmed goblet of wine she has been cradling. Standing from her seat, she makes her way across the room and pulls open the door to reveal Octavia and the Queensguard that had accompanied her earlier. The woman is tall and slender, her face angular and she looks down at Clarke with something approaching a sneer.

“My lady, this is Lady Anya of House Mormont, Captain of the Queensguard.” Octavia introduces them with perfunctory politeness and Clarke watches as Lady Anya’s eyes travel over her from head to foot. Her gaze is accompanied by the now familiar sensation of being evaluated and Clarke feels her chin tilt up inadvertently in response, remembering Reya’s words. “We are here to accompany you to the banquet.”

“I see,” Clarke’s eyes stay fixed on Lady Mormont, “What an honour to be escorted by two such valued members of the household.” The wine in her system does not help to mask the sarcasm in her voice.

“We couldn’t abandon you to the maze of Winterfell without assistance, my lady.” Lady Anya says, without hesitation and Clarke feels a shiver at the sight of her cool, emotionless smile. “You could disappear and be lost forever.” The chill of her words makes Clarke’s blood run cold.

She bows her head, sliding into reluctant submission and takes the hand Lady Anya holds out for her. The leather of the lady’s gloves are cold against her fingers and her grip is loose but firm, and Clarke knows that if she were to bolt the lady would catch her in moments. She is led down the steep steps of her tower room and the flames that flicker along the walls are just inches too far apart, leaving patches of darkness for them to stumble over. She wonders whether this is purposeful, whether this will reflect the rest of her time in this castle, forever stumbling between moments of understanding.

The thought sends dread down her spine and she stiffens, tilting her chin up and reminding herself, fiercely, that she is Clarke of House Tyrell, and she is not afraid.
She's a queen with a little bit of savage.

A golden cage is still just a cage.
Book One: Chapter 2

Lexa had expected Lady Clarke to settle in after only a few days. Her expectations of the lady had been that the soft, southern woman would stay to her rooms, smile and bow her head and generally fade into the background of the castle until they would forget she was there. Hopefully, she had naively thought, Titus would forget more quickly than others and stop the line up of tasters testing her food and hoards of guards on longer hours. Unfortunately, the noblewoman is making this a lot more difficult than it should be.

During the feast marking her first night in the castle, Lady Clarke had been misleadingly quiet and reserved. Seated between Lady Gwendoline and Sir Farthing, she had stayed mostly quiet, pushing her food around her plate, and Lexa had done her the kindness of not engaging her in conversation. The girl was clearly uncomfortable and missing her homeland. She had it on good authority that Lady Clarke left only moments after she did, at the first sign of respectability. Hence, Lexa had anticipated that the lady would stay mostly to her rooms. What she had not expected was to find Octavia searching for the woman on a regular basis. While she did not want Lady Clarke to feel as though she were under armed guard, it was both to appease Titus’s fears and her own worries about the lady’s safety that she had instructed Octavia to be at her side at all times. Instead, she often saw Lady Clarke from the windows of the library, wandering the battlements alone, or staring out at the wilderness. If she stayed at the window after informing her guards, and watched until the noblewoman was approached and led back inside, it was only for the girl’s safety.

The clashing of steel echoes through the courtyard and a shout draws her attention away from her thoughts. Lincoln is staggering away, rolling his shoulder and grinning good naturedly at Anya. The soldiers scattered around the training yard call out taunts and teases, and Lincoln throws a gesture their way that Lexa is sure Lady Clarke would blush to see. It makes her smile to see Anya wipe away a bead of sweat from her forehead.

“You cheated.” Lincoln calls, slotting his sword into its scabbard.

“Wars aren’t fair,” ANya informs him and the hint of sharpness in her voice catches Lexa’s attention, enough that she descends the last step into the training ground.

“It is a good thing we aren’t looking to fight any wars soon then, Lady Mormont.”

Anya spins to look at her, brows tightening for a moment, before bowing her head briefly. “Your majesty. It’s always best to be prepared. We are not like these southern knights, training for flouncing tourneys, our training is for when it is necessary to protect our homeland.”

“I know, my friend,” Lexa breaches the space between them and places a hand briefly on Anya’s shoulder. “But while we are at peace, there may be time for a brief moment of merriment.” Her hand slips down to her sword and the feeling of the pummel in her hand immediately grounds her. When
she slides it from the scabbard, listening to the ringing of metal and feeling the warm, heavy weight that runs down her arm and into her shoulder, she feels as if she has come home from a long journey. She shrugs away her cloak, passing it off to a nearby attendant, and swings her sword in a circle, loosening her wrist. “Will you fight me?”

Anya falls into a stance which is ever familiar to her, though Anya was her noble cousin, they had never shied away from sparring as children. “With pleasure, your majesty.”

They square off, circling one another. It is a tried and tested affair, they are both patient and skilled warriors, but it is Anya who eventually makes the first move, slashing forward so quickly that Lexa is almost caught short. She only just manages to dart out of the way, her feet spinning beneath her, and she blocks her cousin’s next attack with a ringing of her sword which sends a shudder down her arm. Her own strike misses Anya, as the captain of her Queensguard easily sidesteps her attack, and Lexa twists just in time to miss the strike that comes for her head, meeting Anya’s second blow with her own sword. For a moment their blades are locked and Anya grins down at her, saying lowly.

“You spend too long at your desk, little cousin.”

The taunt is enough to send her back to grey afternoons spent in the yard on Bear Island, pushing one another further than they ought to. Her eyes narrow and she uses the last of her strength to push Anya away, sending her stumbling back a few steps. The respite is enough to allow her to spiral away from Anya’s next attack, circling her too quickly for her cousin to keep up and landing two strikes on her arms and back. Anya meets her third strike, but she is visibly tiring, and it takes only a few more carefully aimed attacks to have her opponent on her back, the tip of Lexa’s sword to her neck. Her cousin drops her sword, raising her hands, and Lexa gives her a grin. The exhilaration of sparring is like nothing else, and she feels as if the cobwebs of endless hours sat at her desk have been blown away.

Stepping back, she offers out a hand to help Anya up, patting her on the shoulder and saying, good naturedly. “A noble effort, Lady Mormont.”

“I almost bested you, your majesty,” Anya grins, shaking her arm out and Lexa laughs, sliding her sword back to its rightful place at her hip.

“Perhaps next time you will get the better of me.”

“I fear I’ve taught you all of my best tricks.” Anya sighs, looking at the sky as if in despair and Lexa’s smile grows. She feels lighter than she has in months, though the cold is settling around her body again, reminding her that winter is only just beginning to recede. Without the rush of battle to keep her warm, she must make do with furs, and she accepts her cloak when the attendant runs forward with it.

“You would not be a good teacher if you did not.” As she turns to shrug the cloak around her shoulders, she catches sight of light hair and her eyes find Lady Clarke watching them from the barricades, blonde hair still piled in her complicated southern braids, a white fur cloak around her shoulders. Her brows crease and her spine stiffens. “If you’ll excuse me.”

“Your majesty,” Anya nods her head again, but Lexa has already turned to make her way to where Lady Clarke is watching, once again without her guard.

“My lady,” She greets the southern woman with a bland smile and a dipped head.

“Your majesty,” Lady Clarke, as she has every other time they have encountered one another, drops into the smallest curtsey she can imagine, her eyes burning with resentment when she looks up at
Lexa. “You are an impressive fighter.”

“Thank you,” She accepts the compliment gracefully, and glances behind Clarke in almost a pantomime. “I see that Octavia Snow is not with you.”

“Oh,” Clarke’s eyes widen almost comically and her voice is so falsely sweet when she too glances over her shoulder, that Lexa almost laughs. “Is she not? How careless of me to lose her.”

The bite of insolence makes Lexa’s blood run cold and she is suddenly sharply aware that they are surrounded by soldiers and courtiers watching them from the corners of their eyes. It makes her voice a little tighter than intended when she replies. “I suggest you try not to, Snow is there to look after you.”

“With the greatest respect, your majesty,” Clarke’s eyes sparkle viciously, and her title drips from her lips like poison. “I am in no need of a minder.”

“Octavia Snow is there for your protection,” Lexa argues, voice ticking upwards and she sees Clarke draw herself together, spine straightening as the corners of her lips tighten.

“Really? It feels more like I am under house arrest.”

“You are free to go where you please, as long as Octavia is by your side.” Lexa states, firmly, “While that may seem unfair to you Lady Clarke, while you live in my castle you are under my care, and this is how I see fit to protect you.” Without waiting for further goading, she turns on her heel and strides away, pausing only to say to a guard. “See that Lady Clarke is escorted back to her rooms.”

She cannot see the outraged expression on the noblewoman’s face, but the sharp intake of breath she hears paints a picture that will last her many hours.

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“Lady Clarke!”

She flinches at the sound of the voice behind her, now so familiar that it’s becoming grating on her ears. Around her, courtiers glance her way, draped in furs and velvets and frowning in surprise and confusion. The hallways are arched, with tall ceilings upon which wooden beams, branch and reach from one wall to the next, allowing the sound to echo up and bounce from one wall to the next. Every few steps, an arched window lets watery light spill in across the cold stone floors and Clarke quickens her pace, catching sight of the rare sunshine peering through the clouded glass.

Behind her, the sound of the clinking of weaponry and rattling buckles becomes louder and she knows, from the many times they have played this game before, that Octavia has sped up to meet her. Moments later, a hand curls around her arm, jerking her to a stop and she spins on her heel, tugging herself out of the guard’s grip with an outraged look.

“Unhand me, Snow.”

Octavia tilts her head just slightly and her voice is sharp when she says, “Apologies my lady, but her majesty has tasked me with accompanying you at all times, you cannot keep wandering off.” Her lips press together into a thin line and when their eyes meet, Clarke can see the fury burning beneath her expression.

Bitter, dark mirth lingers in her gut and she jerks her chin up haughtily. “Perhaps you should learn to keep up.”
“Perhaps you should tell me where you’re going,” There is a pause before Octavia adds, resentfully. “My lady.”

“What if I don’t want to?” She retorts, with a humph, and she’s intensely aware that they’re drawing curious glances, that she sounds like a petulant child, but her life in the north is filled with very few pleasures, one of which is riling up her guard.

Octavia seems for a moment as if she is going to snap, and Clarke watches her with relish as she gathers the fragments of her control into some tenuous patchwork. “I don’t think that matters to her majesty.”

The words send a thrill of ice down her spine, breath catching in her throat, and a corresponding flare of fury ignites in her gut. The walls feel as if they are closing in on every side, hard stone pressing against her and she has to pull in a shaking breath. Octavia’s expression flickers, as if catching her momentary break, but seconds later the guard is back to stern eyes and a grim set to her lips, and it is only the flash of smugness in her eyes that makes Clarke tighten her jaw.

“Then I suggest you keep pace, Snow.” She spits, turning to continue her path to the doors. The guards stood sentry of the towering oak seem for a moment as if they will stop her, but something about her expression must convince them that she is not be trifled with.

The doors swing open upon her approach and despite her days in the castle, the flurry of cold air that rushes in from the frozen courtyard still sends a shiver down her spine. Her fingers find the fur lined edge of her cloak and she tugs it closer around herself. Over her heart sits golden stitching, a rose shining brightly, and it is from here that she draws the strength to step out into the courtyard, her furious guard only a step behind her.

Flurries of snow are carried on the breeze, despite the watery sun fighting its way through the haze in the sky, and they land upon the fur of her cloak, lingering like glittering stars for a moment until they melt into nothingness. The snow is perhaps the only thing clean about the courtyard. It is closed in by dark stone walls, showing the white banner upon which a wolf is emblazoned. Soldiers and servants fill the space like rats, scurrying from place to place. A forge blazes with heat and noise, the most incredible din of pounding metal filling her ears and Clarke’s lip wrinkles as she descends the few steps from the covered walkway to the icy cobblestones. The training arena is empty for the day and the sight of it draws back memories of the queen, how her body had moved when defending herself from Lady Mormont, and then her voice when she had rebuked Clarke’s request to rid herself of Octavia.

Her feet carry her across the courtyard at a fast pace, carefully avoiding the worst of the ice. It wouldn’t do to fall in front of most of the north and she has long since learned to watch her step in this frozen world. She can feel eyes upon her, surveying her like she’s an exotic specimen, and her chin tilts up, her lips curling in disgust. The pride of her house burns in her core, warming her in the cold of the north.

“My lady, where are you going?” She has to stop herself rolling her eyes at Octavia’s voice, her feet not hesitating as she answers.

“The queen said that I could go wherever I please so long as you’re at my side, so that’s what I intend to do.”

“I think Her Majesty meant the library, or the sept, not the town.” Octavia fires back and Clarke lifts her chin haughtily, turning to catch her guard’s eyes.

“Then she should have been clearer.”
Octavia glances to the heavens, as if asking for help from her gods, but Clarke doesn’t pause to give her respite and instead marches onwards. The snow crunches underfoot, sparkling in the morning sunlight, and gives beneath her tread, as she wishes the people around her would. When she crosses beneath the portcullis, she hesitates for only a moment. She has not yet left the sanctuary of the Winterfell compound, and for a moment she is unsure, remembering the words of the queen and the resentful expressions of the northern lords and ladies upon her arrival. Octavia pauses one step behind her, and says.

“You could still go back to the castle my lady,” There is something distinctly mocking about her voice, “Perhaps the cooks would be able to make you something from your homeland, a nice thin broth perhaps?”

Clarke’s lip curls furiously, and she wishes she could turn and slap the girl clear about the head for her impertinence, but instead she drags in a steadying breath and makes her way into the market square.

It is little to look at. Winter Town sits in the shadow of the castle, to the south and sheltered behind its great walls from the scouring northern winds that can rush from the lands beyond the Wall. It is made up of buildings mostly of wood or stone, with thick thatched roofs. They’re squat and square, to maintain their warmth, and the earth is packed mud underfoot, slippery in the few places that the snow has begun to melt. The smell of damp hay and woodsmoke is strong in the air and the town is bustling with people. Octavia nudes her aside for two knights to make their way through the portcullis on horseback. One shouts a rude greeting to the men on watch, who laugh and gesture just as rudely in return.

Clarke wrinkles her nose, tearing her eyes away to step into the marketplace. For once, she is glad of Octavia as a shadow at her back as she weaves her way through townspeople who look at her with curiosity and uncertainty. There is a large well in the middle of the square and the stalls are set up in a vaguely circular shape around it, allowing plenty of space for the vendors to hawk their wares.

Though her home of Highgarden has no immediate town at its walls, as Winterfell does, the river barges that run up and down the Mandel and the trading caravans that traverse the Roseroad on their way west have always been known to stop at the castle and set their wares up the in one of the airy, rose covered courtyards to sell their wares to the young maidens, and later the servants of the palace. This is a far cry from her place sat at the heart of conversation in Highgarden, lounging upon velvet cushions with a plate of lemon cakes at her side and running teasing eyes over the jewels offered to her by traders.

Here, the people of Winter Town stare openly at her silks and furs, but they do not dare come close enough to ask her who she is and from whence she came, and instead as she walks the crowd parts enough to allow her to get to each stall unhindered. Whether this is because of her regal bearing, or Octavia’s heavy sword at her back, she does not know. The first stall they approach is filled with hard, heavy cheese and smoked meats and she has to swallow against the bile building up at the back of her throat.

“Not to your taste, my lady?” Octavia asks, nonchalantly and Clarke cuts her a glare as the man behind the stall narrows his eyes.

“In Highgarden the food is very different,” She explains, in a light tone, “But this, I am sure, is perfect for the long winters in the north.” She gives the man a smile that seems to disarm him. It is habit to play the warm, kind lady of the land. In Highgarden her grandmother had taught her that her role relied on the love of the people, that it was more powerful to be loved than feared, and though she knows she has no chance of getting the love of these northern folk, she cannot help but try. Before Octavia can say anything more, she moves on, wandering from stall to stall.
She hesitates again at a stall laid out with delicate jewels, her eyes caught by the sheen of a pearl earring wrapped with swirling vines from dark metal. She reaches out to touch it, fingers gentle and she is reluctantly awed by the craftsmanship. The teardrop is cradled by the metal, but the shine of the pearl is still visible, like the moon through a cloudy night sky.

“This is beautiful,” She admits in a low voice, and when the woman behind the stall does not respond, she glances back to Octavia curiously.

“Mistress Goener is one of the best craftswomen in the north,” Octavia explains and then gestures something strange and quick with her hands, “But she cannot hear you.”

“Oh,” Clarke’s eyes drift back to the woman, who is moving her hands in reply to Octavia. “She is truly talented, why doesn’t she take her trade down to the south? She would get hefty business in Kings Landing.”

Octavia frowns at her, her face drawn with disgust, “Winter town has grown considerably in the last few years, it’s one of the main trading towns in the north now. She has plenty trade here. Besides, she is of the north, she would never go to Kings Landing.”

“But if she could get more for her wares-” Clarke insists.

Octavia cuts through her, simply, “She is of the north, my lady.”

Clarke looks at her for a moment, pursing her lips thoughtfully, and then turns to begin walking again, though her attention is less on the stalls now. “Have you ever been south of the border, Snow?”

“I have been to the Eyrie, my lady,” Octavia answers, stiffly and Clarke nods.

“So how do you know you do not like it if you’ve never been?”

Octavia snorts, amused and outraged. “The people of the south are-” She cuts herself off, abruptly, but Clarke continues to watch her, waiting.

“Are?” She prompts at last, coming to a halt to watch the guard struggle.

“Are… conceited, my lady.” Octavia juts out her chin, and if Clarke was waiting for an apology, she knows in that moment that she will not get one. Unwillingly, her lips twitch up into a smile.

“I could have you flogged for that,” She remarks casually and Octavia’s expression tightens, but she does not back down and Clarke shrugs, moving again. “But I won’t.” Over her shoulder, she sees Octavia’s spine soften and adds, “Besides, northern people are unfriendly and dull, by all accounts.”

Octavia looks at her, expression unreadable but for the spark of mirth in her eyes. They continue as they had been, walking in silence, until Clarke says, “You would like Kings Landing if you went.” Her father always said she was too stubborn. The thought sends a jolt of pain through her when she thinks of her father, of seeing him for the last time before she went away, of the tears in his eyes. To distract herself, she keeps talking. “There are so many streets someone could get lost for days and turn up fed and drunk and a purse full of gold lighter. There are taverns on every corner and you could find anything you dreamed of there, silk and satin and jewels.”

“Is that all?” Octavia remarks wryly from behind her and Clarke huffs.

“You must admit that it is a better selection than what is offered to you here.”
“Forgive me, my lady,” Octavia says, though she does not sound remorseful in the slightest. “But I doubt that you really know what Kings Landing is like.”

“I’ve been there many times,” She counters, “Since I was a girl.”

“And when did you ever walk the streets without a retinue of guards?” Octavia arches an eyebrow, “I expect you and the prince had little time to be in the real streets of Kings Landing.”

“The streets are as real as they are here,” She stamps her foot on the packed earth, “The ground as solid, the walls as tall,” She considers for a moment, “In fact, much taller.”

“That is not what I meant,” Octavia’s voice is getting louder, more agitated and Clarke feels a moment of uncertainty. They have moved away from the market place now, are wandering down the busy thoroughfare filled with workshops, and homes, and though there are still people around, she suddenly feels very far from the queen’s protective reach. Octavia seems to sense her unease, and she takes a breath as if to steady herself. “I only meant,” She continues more calmly. “That there is no way that you could have seen what it really means to be a commoner in one of these towns. The queen is good to us, our taxes are not too high and she is adored, but there is still a great difference between the Winter Town that she knows and the Winter Town known to those of us who grew up here.”

“I know Highgarden better than any person on earth, even my father,” Clarke argues, fiercely and Octavia heaves a great sigh.

“But do you know it as the servants who wait on you do?” She demands, and then adds, “My lady.”

“I-” Clarke is not used to stumbling on her words, but here she does, glancing uncertainly at the people around her.

“It is not your fault,” Octavia sounds bitter, though when Clarke looks at her she offers a weak smile, “You cannot be expected to.”

“I can learn,” She counters, though her voice has lost its bite. “I am a fast learner. One day I will rule Highgarden and the Reach.”

“I know,” Octavia gives her a wan smile, “But there is no way to teach the life of a commoner, my lady. You must be immersed in it.”

“Then show me what you can,” Clarke tells her, seriously. “Please, I would like to know.”

“You are sure?” Octavia is frowning at her, clearly unsure, “The queen would not approve, or Ser Indra.”

“I don’t care,” Clarke shakes her head fiercely, “Show me, Octavia,” The use of her name draws the guard up short. “I would like to learn.”

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Octavia is sure that Ser Indra would disapprove of this. There is nothing about her appointment to guard the Lady of Highgarden that implied it would be right to take her into the Smoking Log, the largest tavern in Winter Town. It is rowdy and dark, as it has been as long as Octavia has known it, and the smell of wood smoke and ale and cooking meats are as close to a smell of home as she has ever known. Behind the bar, Niylah offers her a welcoming smile and she nods in greeting to her old friend, eyes flickering uncertainly back to where Lady Clarke has unceremoniously commandeered a rounded table. The lady is looking down at the wood with distaste and Octavia wonders whether it
has the usual level of grime coating it that she has come to expect from the Smoking Log.

“Two flagons of ale, Niylah.” She tells the barkeep and Niylah nods, her long, wheat coloured hair swinging about her face as she peers curiously at the lady.

“Friend of yours?”

Octavia snorts, “The Lady of Highgarden wanted to know what it was like to be a commoner in Winter Town, who am I to argue?”

“The Lady of Highgarden,” Niylah’s eyes widen and something twitches at her lips. “She is as fair as they say.”

“And as stubborn as she is fair,” Octavia informs her, darkly, and Niylah laughs, sliding two flagons across the bar to her.

Octavia carries them back and sinks into the seat opposite Lady Clarke, who is looking about herself distastefully. The lady has no purse with her, so unused to paying for things that she had simply assumed she would not need one, but if she had Octavia is sure that it would be swiped from possession before she could notice. Instead, Octavia can see a few people eyeing the jewels that are slung around her neck and waist and pinned into her hair. She flexes her fingers around the hand and a half sword that is strapped to her side, and sees the gazes slide away when the people watching spot the Stark crest upon her breast. Before her, Lady Clarke peers at her flagon of ale, her nose wrinkling at the murky colour, and her hands are still stuck in her lap, as if she is afraid to touch anything in the tavern. Octavia curls her hand around her own flagon and takes a hearty mouthful, wondering whether she should have bought something more refined for Lady Clarke. Gods, she isn’t paid enough to babysit.

Lady Clarke eventually reaches out to take her flagon, delicate fingers lifting it to her mouth. She inhales and cringes, but takes a small sip. To her credit, the noblewoman manages not to spill anything when she splutters and Octavia can see that they are attracting attention again as Lady Clarke slams her flagon back down, glaring at it as she coughs.

“That tastes ghastly,” She grumbles, her southern accent rounding across the words and Octavia shrugs, taking another sip from her own flagon.

“It’s what the common people drink, my lady.”

Clarke grimaces, “Well I certainly won’t be drinking it.” Waving a hand at a passing barmaid, she says curtly. “Two goblets of spiced wine.”

The barmaid can’t seem to stop staring at the noblewoman’s trinkets, but she nods and Octavia watches her go, rolling her eyes.

“So, what do you do in a tavern?” Lady Clarke settles back in her seat, looking pleased with herself.

“This,” Octavia gestures to her flagon, and then glances around, “Listen to people talk. Most of the news of the land is exchanged over mead.”

Lady Clarke eyes her thoughtfully, nodding and as the barmaid reappears with their spiced wine, she looks expectantly to Octavia, who grits her teeth and hands over several silver stags. The spiced wine is far more pleasant that the ale, even she can admit that, a heady concoction of cinnamon and nutmeg, warmed to create an intoxicating combination and she abandons her ale for it in moments. Together, they sit in silence, listening to the people around them conversing. The tavern is only half filled, most people are still at work in the fields or at their crafts, but it is filled with travellers. A
gnarled old man in a dark cloak is in harried conversation with a younger man, in the corner of the
tavern, and a handsome traveller entertains three young maidens with a story about being chased
from the Eyrie by the bandits that live in the mountains. They simper and sigh at his dramatics, but
Octavia can tell by the quality of his cloak and boots that the man has come no further than White
Harbour, only a day’s ride south of Winterfell. A child scampers from table to table, holding out a
cup and begging for scraps, and dogs lie close to the fire, dosing and panting in the warmth of the
tavern.

The chair beside them is abruptly filled, a body sliding into it with the grace of a child of the forest,
and Octavia’s gaze lands on the shadowy face of her friend. Raven Reyes is lithe and young, her
small frame thick with muscles from days spent working in the forges of Winterfell. The smudges of
soot that cover her clothes have extended to her cheeks and hands, and a tangle of dark hair falls
from the braid she wears down her back.

“Octavia! What are you doing here, and with such a beauty?” Raven offers Lady Clarke a charming
smile, and the noblewoman who had balked at her presence, seems to melt a little.

“Lady Clarke of House Tyrell,” Lady Clarke introduces herself before Octavia can, and Raven’s
smile ticks up slightly. Octavia knows she knew who the lady was before she even asked, everyone
knows about Lady Clarke by now, but she is gracious and gives an awkward bow from her seated
position.

“Raven Reyes, of Winter Town. My lady, forgive me I would stand but…” She sticks out her leg
from below the table and Octavia doesn’t have to look to see the metal brace fastened around it and
the stick that rests against the side of the table.

“No apology needed,” Lady Clarke seems to soften a little at the sight of the injury.

“What are you doing associating with the likes of Snow here?” Raven slings an arm around
Octavia’s shoulders, grinning at her and Octavia rolls her eyes, roughly shrugging away the touch.

“I am Lady Clarke’s personal guard for her time at Winterfell,” She tries not to sound too bitter, but
Raven clearly reads it in her face and snorts, nudging their shoulders together.

“That will surely get you a place as a sworn sword.”

“You want to be a member of the Queensguard?” Lady Clarke’s eyebrows rise in surprise and
Octavia shoots a glare in Raven’s direction.

“Yes, my lady.”

Raven steps in to her rescue, “Why has Snow brought you to this fine establishment, my lady?”

Here, Lady Clarke flushes, and Octavia thinks it’s the first time she’s seen an ounce of bashfulness in
the noblewoman. “I wanted to see what Winter Town was really like.”

“Really?” Raven is taken aback, and in the second it takes her to gather herself, Octavia sees a flash
of respect in her eyes. “I see. Well if you truly want to see what life here is like my lady, allow me
the pleasure of educating you in a game of dice.”

“Raven,” Octavia says, warningly. The girl is a skilled hand at dice, known to reduce grown men to
a weeping mess in the wake of her games. “Lady Clarke doesn’t want to play dice with you.”

“Oh?” Raven looks to the noblewoman innocently, “I’m sure she would pick it up quickly.”
“I would,” Lady Clarke insists and Octavia sighs, settling back into her seat. “Teach me,” Lady Clarke demands and Raven pulls a pair of dice from her sleeve, as if by magic.

“With pleasure, my lady.”

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It is only after two weeks of living at Winterfell that Clarke meets the young prince, Aden Snow. She has heard stories about him, of course, but only as a thread in the ever growing tapestry of the story of the queen in the north. The son sired by Lexa’s father after his wife died, Lexa’s brother in all but his bastard name, only nine summers when Lexa was named queen.

The boy shows none of the vestiges of his bastard heritage when Clarke sees him for the first time.

As the novelty of her presence had worn off, nobles had slowly trickled away from court to see to their own lands and people, and the Clarke is required to fill the space left by them, dining at the high table with the queen and those closest to her. She sits at the end of the long table, with Lord Mormont on one side. The queen only deigns to eat with the rest of her court once every few days and Clarke is thankful for small mercies, because on the days that the queen is not present she is able to stay in her warm solar and eat close to the fire, a book open in her lap.

Unfortunately, tonight she wears a green dress and pushes the suspicious looking slab of meat around her plate, thinking woefully of the sweetmeats and soft cheeses she was fed in Highgarden. Chatter continues at a low level around her, but the nobles have no interest in engaging her in conversation and so she is left to stare down at her plate and drain her wine goblet, until the door to the great hall slams open and they all jerk up to look at the commotion. It follows a boy who can be no older than fourteen summers, with shaggy, sandy hair, an open smile and the air of someone who is quite comfortable in their element. His jerkin is dark and soft, clearly made from expensive material, and his boots a fine leather, a dagger shining at his hip. He makes his way past the trestle tables filled with the households of the few bannermen that remain at Winterfell, and Clarke’s eyes slide to the queen, expecting fury at his disrespect. Instead, she finds the queen stood, beaming down at the boy approaching.

“Prince Aden, we didn’t expect you back so soon.” Though her words are formal, there is a warmth colouring her voice that Clarke has not yet heard from the royal.

Aden gives a flourishing bow, though it’s clearly more to make Queen Lexa laugh than show any sign of respect, and grins up at his half sister. “Your majesty, forgive me but we made faster time than expected.”

“How lucky that you were able to make your grand entrance during our meal.” The queen rolls her eyes, but as she does a few of the dire wolves hop down from their place beneath the table at her feet and trot to Aden’s side. The beasts are so big that when they jump at him, their front paws easily come to his shoulders, and Clarke gasps, sure that he is about to be eaten. Instead, the wolves bark and butt at him with their heads, one slathering their tongue across his face until he laughs and shakes them off.

“See to it that a hearty meal is brought for the prince.” Queen Lexa instructs and the people at the table begin to shuffle around. For a moment, Clarke is terrifyingly certain that she will have to face the shame of joining the households to make room for the prince at the queen’s side, but instead Aden shakes his head and makes his way up to the table, stopping closest to her.

“Don’t worry about that, the queen and I will have plenty of time to reacquaint ourselves.” He gives Clarke a wide, friendly smile and gestures to a servant, who immediately fetches a chair for him. After thanking them, he sinks into his seat and tucks in ravenously to the meal that Clarke has been
avoiding touching.

She eyes him curiously, unsure what to make of the child at her side. He finishes his first bite, washes it down with the gusto of a growing boy and turns to fix his smile on Clarke.

“My lady,” His manners are impeccable, “Forgive me for not greeting you before, the trip was long and I’ve not eaten since sunup. I assume you’re the Lady Clarke.”

“I am, your highness.” Clarke nods her head respectfully, “Pleased to meet you.”

“And I you, my lady.” Aden bows his head, “I’m sorry I missed your arrival. I was in Karhold, a friend of mine there is teaching me to read the stars and we became quite distracted.”

“Read the stars?” Clarke’s brows rise and she looks at the boy with renewed interest. “How fascinating.”

“It is,” the prince flushes a little, and then shrugs cheekily. “He also has a fine set of hunting dogs.”

“Ah, so you were hunting?” Her lips quirk into a smile despite herself.

“I admit,” Aden grins at her, mischievous, “I have my vices.” He pauses, considering, and then adds, “But we did have to use the hunter’s star to navigate sometimes, I think that counts.”

It’s at that moment that Clarke decides she likes the young prince.

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One of the few pleasures that she has left in her life as queen is the grooming of her own horse. When she had gone to war they had tried to persuade her to take on a warhorse, something towering and strong, but she had refused. The stallion she runs a curry comb over is getting older now, she worries that she would not be able to take him into battle again. He’s still lithe and lively, though, affectionate and fast, Lexa has ridden him for so long that they feel like one creature when she sits astride him. He stands still and steady beneath her hands, and his warmth and the smell of damp hay and horses grounds her, putting her so intensely at peace that she barely realises when someone enters the stables.

Turning, she finds Aden making his way down the stalls. He looks sweaty and disgruntled, mud on his hose. She turns to look at her stallion again, hoping to hide her smile from him, but he catches sight of her and rolls her eyes.

“You can stop grinning,” He grumbles, coming to lean against the stall and look in at her.

“Anya put you through your paces this morning?” She asks, lightly and Aden huffs, rubbing at his arm.

“Surely it’s some sort of crime to hit a prince.”

“Anya regularly knocks me to the ground in practice, and I’m a queen.” Lexa shrugs, watching as Aden leans over and pets the horse in the stable beside them, rubbing the mare’s nose and grinning when she nudges at him for more.

“She says I’ve become sloppy and lazy.”

“You probably have,” Lexa grins again when Aden lets out an outraged cry. “Don’t take it personally, she just wants you to be safe.”
“I’m not likely to be attacked any more,” Aden mutters, but falls silent when Lexa cuts him a glance. They both know that isn’t true, there is a reason that the castle is so well guarded and that they each have their food tested before they eat.

Eager to keep the tone light, Lexa says, “I’m sure you’d much rather be with the pups in the kennels. You know Richard’s bitch just had another litter?”

“She did?” Aden beams, “I’ll stop by on my way back.”

“First,” She keeps her voice soft and casual, focusing on the rhythmic brushing of her stallion’s coat, until it shines like polished ebony beneath her touch. “How was your time in Karhold?”

“Fine,” Aden leans against the stall again, so that they are closer together and beneath the whickers and stomping of the horses, they are sure not to be heard.

“And Lord Karstark?” Her stallion’s tale flicks and she runs a soothing hand down his neck, murmuring softly.

“Loyal enough, they say he’s has ravens from the south.”

“Ravens from the south,” Lexa repeats, quietly, “I don’t expect that King Thelonius would want to stir up trouble, he fought so hard for the peace.”

“The letters had no seal on them, by all accounts, just a drip of red wax.”

“Indeed,” Lexa nods thoughtfully, “How informative your time with your friend has been, Aden.”

“And how fortunate that I have friends across all of the north,” Aden pats the nose of her horse and steps back, his smile boyish again. “If that’s all, I’m going to see Richard’s new pups.”

“Enjoy,” She rolls her eyes, watching him walk down the stables again, and thinking on the significance of a drip of red wax.

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thank you so much for your wonderful response last chapter, it's really encouraging! What do you think of Aden and Raven? What do you think of the clexa interaction in this chapter? Let me know what you think either below or over on tumblr @onemilliongoldstars!
The first time she notices the white wolf, she is stood atop one of the many covered balconies that look down into the courtyard, watching the world pass by beneath her. The courtyard is not as noisy as it sometimes is, and Octavia is stood a few paces away, keeping a respectful distance. It is the first time in what feels like weeks that she has had some peace and her eyes follow the soldiers as they train with staffs in the arena below her. In Highgarden the soldiers had been stationed far away in the castle, which was so huge it had sometimes felt like a city unto itself. There, she had been able to wander the orchards and the gardens, pray in the most beautiful sept outside of Kings Landing and always there was a singer or minstrel on hand to entertain herself and her hoard of ladies. Here, the sept is a small, dank affair made for a former lady of the household from Riverrun, a week’s ride south of the border. When she prays she is always alone, the northerners instead choosing to pray in the godswood, to the old gods of the north. In the godswood sits a Heart Tree, its white trunk marred only by the ancient carving of two eyes and a mouth. The red wood below the bark makes it seem as if the face is bleeding.

There are no minstrels or singers to be found at Winterfell, and the northerners avoid her as if she is the pestilence. Though she occupies herself with trips into the town and attempts to lose Octavia, there are moments when she cannot ignore how utterly alone she is. She misses Highgarden with an ache that sometimes feels as if it will consume her, crowding in her gut and working up her throat until she is strangled by it, and her fingers curl around the railing of the balcony as she works to clear herself of the emptiness settling around her shoulders. She is Lady Clarke of House Tyrell and she refuses to be cowed by this strange and stoic place.

Her gaze is caught then, her attention diverted from her misery, by the sight of the white direwolf. It is not strange to see the direwolves in Winterfell. At least one always accompanies Lexa, wherever she goes, but the others are often to be seen wandering around the castle, or returning from hunts in the forest. The white wolf is often to be found at Lexa’s side, but today Clarke meets the beast’s eyes and feels a shock. Its eyes are so blue that she can see them even from her place on the balcony and it feels as if she is staring into the face of someone she knows, or knew in another life. So humanoid are its features that she has to fight to look away, when she hears footsteps approaching down the balcony.

Prince Aden approaches, a youthful smile on his face, and he stops a few paces away from her, giving a neat bow. He flicks his floppy hair out from his eyes when he looks back up and straightens his tunic. Clarke wonders whether he is one of these young noble boys who grows so quickly his clothes have to be adjusted every few days. He looks the type, his body too tall for him.

“Lady Clarke, how nice to find you up here.” He takes a step closer, and she turns to give him a small smile, bowing her head.

“And you, your highness.”

He gestures to the balcony, “Do you mind if I join you?”

“Not at all,” She takes a small step to the side and the prince fills the gap that she has made, leaning against the railing and looking down at the courtyard. When Clarke follows his gaze, she sees that
the wolf is gone.

“How are you, here in Winterfell?”

“Fine, your highness,” She answers, automatically, and the prince seems to think on it for a moment, before saying.

“I had to stay in Bear Island, with my uncle Lord Mormont’s family when the war was going on,” He speaks calmly, but Clarke turns to look at him with surprise, “I was younger then, but I remember it being scary. Though I was around family, and with my own people, I felt so out of place and odd and lonely, I almost wept with joy when they told me the war was won and I could go home.” He turns to give her a smile, “Not very manly.”

“You were only a boy,” She acquiesces and he nods.

“I only say this in hopes that you will see that I understand… I was lucky to be with people that I knew, and people who loved me. You must feel very far from home and from what you know.”

The words bring an unexpected shadow of the emptiness back with them, and she stares out at the courtyard for a moment, answering very softly. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry, I wouldn’t want anyone to feel that way here. It is my home, I would hope everyone would feel welcome.”

“What did you do to feel better, when you were on Bear Island?”

At her question, the prince’s face lights up with another boyish smile, and he offers his arm in a way so gallant it’s most disarming when matched with his youthful persona. “May I show you, my lady?”

Pressing down an amused smile, Clarke bobs a curtsey and takes his arm, allowing him to lead her. She knows the castle well enough by now that she realises where they are going and struggles not to balk. The prince must feel her hesitation, because he pauses and looks at her with concern.

“Are you well, my lady?”

“Of course, I just…” She looks to where they are going, the little building built up against the stable wall, and struggles not to wrinkle her nose. “The kennels, your highness?”

“Just try it? Please, my lady?” The pleading look he turns upon her is witchcraft, she’s sure, because she sighs and presses her lips together, nodding reluctantly and allowing him to lead her on.

“Of course, your highness.”

The kennels are dark and warm, filled with straw and the barking of dogs. The floor is dry, smooth earth and the loft allows a place for the dogs to lie around when the earth below becomes too wet or cold or hot. In the corner is a pile of blankets, where the dog boy will sleep to keep an eye on the hounds during the night. Torches burn on the wall, lighting the place up, and on a plump pile of straw sits a greyhound, her tongue hanging from her mouth. She lies on her side, belly exposed for the writhing pups to suckle at her teats. They are old enough to have their eyes open and they nip and yap at one another, fighting for a place, but the bitch is unfazed by their arguing. Every so often, she will lick at a passing pup, grooming them until they squirm away, but otherwise she is almost asleep.

Prince Aden gestures for the dog boy, and the boy lifts himself from his nest of blankets and approaches them. There is straw in his hair but Clarke is more focused on the pup in his arms, a
wriggling little bundle of white and gray fur. He is feeding it with a soft cloth, dipping it in milk and
holding it out for him to suckle. When Aden holds out his arms, the boy deposits the pup into his
arms. Clarke watches the prince’s face soften, his arms gentle around the small creature. The pup
squirms and whines and the prince feeds him from the rag.

“His mother rejected him because he’s the runt.” The prince’s voice is quiet, “But with the right care
he can be just as strong.” He looks up at her, “Would you like to touch him?”

She is not known for enjoying animals, apart from the beautiful white mare she had ridden in
Highgarden, but the prince’s eyes are so pleading that she feels she has to reach out and touch the
little beast in his arms, stroking its soft coat.

“In Bear Island I tried to keep busy. The kennel master let me help him, I rode a lot. Animals are the
same no matter where you are,” He meets her eyes and smiles. “They just need to be treated with
kindness.”

She runs her fingers down the coat of the puppy, touching at the soft fur and the pup squirms away
from the milk soaked cloth and licks at her fingers. The warm, wet touch makes her jump and when
the prince laughs quietly, she smiles.

“If you would ever like some company, someone to ride with you or show you the wonders of the
north, I would be honoured,” He offers her a charming smile and Clarke thinks, with a fond flutter of
her heart, that in a few years maidens will be fawning over him and he won’t even realise.

“My lady,” Octavia steps into the doorway, from where she has been lingering just outside, and
bows her head respectfully. Clarke steps closer to her, as the prince turns and deposits the runt pup
back into the dog boy’s arms. Behind Octavia, in a woolen cloak, stands Reya, the only southern
handmaiden who had stayed with her on her trip to the north. The girl has family here, so she is not
as good company as Clarke had expected, but she is a welcome reminder that she is not alone, and
Clarke welcomes her with a smile.

“Reya, what are you doing down here?”

“I have brought you letters, my lady.” She holds out the first one and Clarke takes it to run a finger
over the yellow sun and moon of House Tarth.

“Lord Finn,” She smiles, a little surprised. Lord Finn of Tarth had visited Highgarden several times.
As the nephew to the king, he had been readily welcomed, and as he had grown her father had
teased her that Lord Finn had taken a shine to her. Despite being third in line for the throne, no union
had been formed between them, but he had once kissed her in the orchard and she remembers that
his skin had been unusually smooth and his lips had tasted of apricots.

“Another letter, my lady. It came from the capital today.” Reya holds it out and Clarke reaches,
curious, until she spots the rose of House Tyrell in the blue of House Tully- her mother’s house.
She drops her hand before it can touch the parchment and turns away. “Burn it.”

Reya frowns, hesitating, “But, my lady, it’s your mother’s-”

“I said burn it.” Her voice is so sharp that Reya startles, and nods, turning to hurry away.

There is a moment of silence and all of the warmth that she had felt moments ago burns away at the
reminder of why she is here. It is easy when she is being treated kindly to forget that she is little more
that a prize to be passed around wherever it is most convenient for the kingdom, but now the
realisation has made her bones feel brittle in the cold.
“You are not reading correspondence from your mother?” Prince Aden asks her softly and Clarke feels a flare of indignation.

“No,” Before he can begin to lecture her, she gives a short curtsey and says. “If you’ll excuse me, your highness, I am quite cold. I will retire inside.”

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The councillors who stand around her war table rumble and grumble with their complaints. They are men and women of the north, and as such they are not used to playing politics, yet here they stand for her, listening to reports on grains and taxes and the situation in the south. Glancing around the table, she feels a pang of affection for her council. Each are loyal and strong, chosen for their ability to think as well as fight and so she values their opinions more than anyone else’s.

Sage sits at her feet today and she amuses herself thinking of how he almost looks as if he too could be surveying the table in thought. Running a hand over his ears, Lexa looks over to where Maester Titus is fumbling through his pile of letters to extract what he thinks is the most important. The Grand Maester is more agitated than usual, though that is no great feat, and she wonders idly whether she will be able to get in some time with Anya practicing archery today. If this meeting can end before sundown, she may be in with a chance and one glance at the Captain of her Queensguard tells her that Lady Anya feels the same.

“Here,” Titus places a scrap of parchment on the table, gesturing to it broadly. “A letter from Lord Greyjoy. He writes that the south is in shambles, that Kings Landing is unsteady and that the king is weak and unable or unwilling to keep control of his bannermen.”

“Lord Greyjoy has always been like to exaggerate if he thinks it’s in his advantage.” Anya rolls her eyes, pulling the letter closer to herself to examine. “He talks a load of horseshit.”

“Greyjoy is certain that the peace will not hold, he thinks that Thelonius Baratheon cannot hold it.”

“Greyjoy is almost as northern as us, how does he know these things?” Her Master of Ships, Luna of House Reed, has always resented the Greyjoys for their betrayal during the war. If it weren’t for Luna’s mastery of the water, Lexa’s army would have fallen the moment that House Greyjoy showed themselves as turncoats.

“The Greyjoys trade,” Lord Manderly, her Master of Coin, tells her, distastefully. Not much stock is put in the Greyjoy word around her table.

“Thelonious will not fall.” Lexa puts in, and Titus sniffs, glancing over as the door opens and Aden slips inside.

“The man is weak, your majesty, if he cannot even control those who are loyal to him, who’s to know-”

“King Thelonius fought for peace too hard to back out now Titus, trust me.” Lexa tells him, firmly. “He knows that we would defeat his forces were he to try again, and we have only recently decided on a tediously long trade agreement with each region of the south, why would he try to undo all of that now?”

“Greyjoy also reports that he has appointed a new Master of Coin, Pike of House Lannister.” Titus adds, anxiously and Gustus hums softly beside her. Her Master of Law is usually a quiet man, preferring to watch and listen, but when he speaks the room goes silent.

“Pike is harsh, I have heard. A man with a tenacity of steel. Ambitious, driven, proud.”
“There,” Lexa looks back to Titus, “Does that satisfy you? If the king is weak, at least he has made the smart decision to have a strong man at his back, to hold him up, not to mention Lord Jacob of House Tyrell as his Hand. And he has a son, a strong son who will soon take a wife and begin to have children of his own. The Baratheon line is safe and the south is stable.” Glancing at the waning sunlight through the diamond windows of the small council chamber, she steps away from the table. “I think we are quite done here. Thank you all for joining me.”

As the rest of the lords filter out, Titus inches closer, his mouth pinched in concern. “Your majesty, forgive me but speaking of Hands, I must ask whether you have decided to take your own.”

“Titus,” She cuts through him with a glare. “You know that I like Aden to run the small council while I am gone, and act as my second in command.”

“I know, but your majesty—”

“He is named as my successor, it is important that he learn as much as he can about ruling the north.” With that, Lexa turns on her heel, leaving Titus in her wake. Aden is waiting at the doors, and falls into step beside her. He is silent, clearly reading her dark mood and they walk together, the prince barely matching her strides as she makes her way to the outer battlements of the castle. She waves away the guards, and tightens her cloak around her shoulders as the winds nips at their cheeks. Together, they stand at the battlements and look out over the landscape dusted with snow and rolling out before them.

“Titus does not want me to be your successor,” Aden says, at last and Lexa’s jaw tightens.

“Titus is not the queen and I say you are my successor.”

“It is because I am a bastard.” Aden leans against the battlement and his eyes are dark when she meets them. Reaching out, she touches his shoulder and is reminded of the boy that she grew up with.

“I will legitimise you soon, I promise. When the time is right.” He does not reply, his eyes staring out into the darkening sky and she squeezes his shoulder, sighing quietly before asking. “You spoke to Lady Clarke?”

“She seems lonely.” Aden shrugs, his voice quiet against the wind.

“I know,” She has not missed the dark look on the girl’s face, the restlessness in her eyes. “Is she a threat?”

“Not a threat, I don’t think,” Aden shakes his head, “But not a comfort either. She does not read her mother’s letters, Lady Tyrell may begin to think something has happened to her.”

Lexa grunts, “The girl makes everything more difficult than it has to be.”

“She’s angry,” Aden counters, turning to look at her properly. “She feels abandoned.”

“She has every comfort here and yet still she acts like a spoiled child.”

“She’s nice,” Aden says, simply, “You should try to talk to her more.”

He turns and makes his way from the battlements, before Lexa can protest that the girl will not speak to her.

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The days soldier on, an endless march from one sunrise to the next, and Clarke watches the time pass with a misery so deep inside herself that she cannot seem to shake it. She wishes desperately that her father would write, but every letter she receives from Highgarden bears a blue seal rather than a green one, and she watches the flames lick at their edges and eat away at the ink that is spilt across them. Lord Finn writes that he was much saddened to hear of her stay at Winterfell, that if they had only become engaged that summer at Highgarden he would ride up to Winterfell himself and fight the northern queen for her. The sentiment is sweet, but misplaced, and she writes back to tell him so. A letter from Prince Wells brightens her mood considerably, and she reads it over breakfast, smiling at his tales of his father’s ever growing pressure to find a bride. Wells and she have been friends for as long as she can remember, their father’s close friends and allies. As his Hand, Thelonius often looks to her father for advice, and in their endless trips to Kings Landing the prince had been her playmate. As they grew, their friendship withstood, despite Wells near unbearable morality drawing him further and further towards the Faith of the Seven, while Clarke slipped into the deadly politics of the south with ease. She thinks he will be a great king, if a miserable one.

There is a sadness to his letters that gives her thought and she tucks it away in a pocket in her dress to reply to later.

Standing, she brushes down the skirts of her dress and steps out into the hallway. One of the Queensguard is stood outside with Octavia, to her surprise, and she blinks at him, taking in his white cloak and the way that he leans against the wall to talk with her guard. Octavia is smiling as she has never seen her do before, and Clarke had heard her laughter through the door. They both straighten when they see her, taking a step away from one another and Clarke’s eyes move between them curiously.

“My lady,” Octavia steps in before she can ask. “This is Ser Lincoln, of House Tallhart.”

“Ser, how can I help you?” She looks to him innocently, and Ser Lincoln seems flustered.

“My lady,” He bows his head respectfully, “The queen was hoping to speak with you in her private chambers.”

“The queen?” Her voice rises sharply in surprise, and she can feel the soft edge of her misery curling into a blade of fury inside her. “I’m afraid the queen will have to wait, I have a letter to respond to in the library.”

“The queen will not like being kept waiting,” Ser Lincoln tells her, after a beat of surprised silence and Clarke purses her lips.

“Then perhaps she will have to come and find me herself.” With nothing more to say to him, and before he can bodily carry her to the queen’s chambers, as he seems like to do, she marches away down the spiral staircase.

Behind her, she hears Octavia say, “I told you,” before her footsteps hurry behind her. “My lady,” Octavia pleads as they step out onto the covered walkway that leads to the library. Clarke is gratified to realise that the girl is struggling to keep up with her and entreat her at the same time. “The queen will want to see you.”

“Then the queen can come to me.” She tells Octavia sharply, and the girl sighs. Ignoring any further protests, Clarke pushes through the door into the library.

A tall, thick tower, which can only be entered by the staircase winding around its outside, or the covered walkway, leads to the Winterfell library. It is lit by candelabras and torches, wide windows letting in enough light to easily read by. The library contains many precious volumes, some of which
are the only copies known in the Seven Kingdoms, as the castle maester had told her curtly when she had last found her way to the library. There are two levels, the library is warmed by the many fireplaces, with desks allowing for study and a long table in the middle of the room over which books and parchments can be scattered at ease. It is warmly coloured, the shelves a dark wood and colourful rugs tossed across the stone floors, and she sits at a table in front of one of the great windows to read Wells’s letter again.

It takes only a candlemark for the queen to find her.

She doesn’t deign to look up at the quiet sound of the door, though she hears Octavia shift, standing straighter in her post near the door. There is the rustling of skirts as a figure approaches her and she forces herself to wait until the queen is only a few paces away from her to look up at where she is standing, waiting.

“Lady Clarke, I was expecting you.” Queen Lexa looks as poised and elegant as always, a silver circlet sitting about her head, letting a green gem rest on her forehead. Her dress is the colour of fir trees, the sleeves long in the northern style, the material thick and the collar fur lined. Other than the circlet about her head, the only other jewels she wears are inlaid into the chain that hangs around her hips. She watches Clarke with an expectant expression, and Clarke would not sense her irritation if it were not for the twitch of her eyebrows.

“I apologise, your majesty, I wanted to respond to my letter as soon as possible.” She touches the parchment on the desk and sees the queen’s brows twitch again when she sees the seal that it is signed with.

“I would not summon you for nothing, Lady Clarke. As a rule I only do so if there is an urgent matter, I expect you to answer next time.”

She feels strange sitting while the queen stands beside her, uneasy and overshadowed, and so raises herself from her chair and brushes out her own silken blue gown as the queen watches. Her anger is spitting inside her chest and it’s the only excuse she has for saying. “With respect, I cannot be summoned like a hound.”

Queen Lexa’s mouth tightens with obvious displeasure at the words. “That was not why I summoned you.”

“And yet that is how it felt.” There is a charged air between them, a rolling hatred stifling the room and Clarke can see Octavia’s eyes darting between them anxiously.

“When a queen summons you, you come.” Queen Lexa snaps and Clarke’s anger spills over.

She takes one step forward, but the short shrill of Octavia’s sword sliding from her scabbard is enough to pull her to a halt.

“You are not my queen.” She informs the woman, in a low, dangerous voice.

She expects fury, expects indignation and anger, but instead the queen’s expression crumbles into surprise, before sliding into understanding. “I know.” She answers, simply and when Clarke only stares at her, shocked into silence, she continues, more softly. “I am not your queen, Lady Clarke, I do not pretend to be. You have loyalty to your king and that is admirable.” Her eyes slide to the letter on the desk again, before looking back to Clarke. “I do not summon you to my chambers or assign you a guard to wield my power over you, I do it to help with your stay here. You are my guest.”

Clarke is so surprised that she almost forgets how to speak. When words finally do come back to her,
she asks, her voice a jot lower. “Then why did you summon me?”

Queen Lexa smiles, wanly and reaches into the pouch at her side to withdraw several letters. “I only ask that you respond to your mother’s letters.” There is a note of exasperated amusement to her voice. “She is becoming quite… insistent.”

“She can be,” Clarke takes the letters held out for her, and catches sight of a flash of amusement in Lexa’s eyes.

“Indeed,” She folds her hands at the small of her back, so much like a soldier that Clarke can picture her on the battlefield. “She is concerned for your safety, please reassure her.”

“I will, your majesty.” She doesn’t drop into a curtsey, but the queen doesn’t seem to mind. Instead, she turns to move away, hesitating at the doorway to say.

“I meant what I said, as my guest here I would like to make your stay more comfortable.”

“Thank you,” She considers for a moment, looking down at the letters in her hand before asking. “May I have a horse? I love to ride.”

A smile breaks out across the queen’s face like none she has ever seen and she looks so beautiful that Clarke’s breath is stolen away. “Of course, if you reply to your mother.”

Clarke smiles, nodding. “Deal.”
thank you so much for reading! the final scene with clarke and lexa is one of my favourite interactions, and one I had in my head from early on, so I'd love to know what you thought! let me know down below or over on tumblr @onemilliongoldstars
Lady Clarke is something of an enigma to her. As her bannermen had drifted away, back to oversee their smallfolk and livestock, bored of the new arrival to the castle, they had stopped hosting feasts every few evenings. Instead, they eat at a long table in her private quarters several times a week. The lady had inched closer to her up the table, until she was only separated by a few people. At this proximity, Lexa can freely observe her without being accused of playing favourites, and she takes the time to watch the noblewoman. Her time is so taken up by affairs of the kingdom that she sees Lady Clarke only at mealtimes and occasionally catches glances of her across the courtyard. Aden provides her with regular updates, but he is more concerned with what they did rather than what the lady is feeling. At the very least the letters from her mother have stopped, which leads her to believe Lady Clarke did what she asked and wrote her.

The fair haired girl sits a few seats down the table from her, and has been pushing her food around her plate for as long as Lexa has been looking. Though she has fire when she and Lexa converse, Lady Clarke appears drawn and sad whenever Lexa catches sight of her at the table, or in the castle. Whenever she thinks no one is looking. According to Aden, Lady Clarke has managed to befriend Octavia and a woman from the blacksmith’s forge, but she cannot seem to find any happiness in Winterfell. Lexa imagines it must be very different to Highgarden, having never visited herself, and though she grew up in the cold of the north, eating rabbit and venison, she wonders whether Lady Clarke had a childhood different to her own.

“- and so, your majesty, the crop supplies will simply have to last until next year.” Beside her, Titus is talking, and she gives him a sage nod, as if she is listening.

Around the table, close to her feet, the direwolves sit. Honor is at her side as always, Patience lounging upon her feet. She lives up to her name, happy to wait for Lexa to toss a bone her way, rather than fight over it as her siblings Valour and Liberty are doing in the corner. She clicks her tongue and the two wolves break apart, still growling. Valour, victorious, snatches his bone up to gnaw it in the corner, while his sister whines and settles near Lexa’s chair. Faith, she has noticed, is at the other end of the room, closer to Lady Clarke’s seat and though she sits a good pace back, she is clearly watching the noblewoman closely.

The time drags on, Titus monopolising the conversation despite all polite attempts to dissuade him, and Lexa is so focused on Lady Clarke that she barely realises the sun is long set, the night drawing its dark curtain about the castle. With a slight clearing of her throat, Lady Clarke looks down the table at where Lexa sits at its head and says, quietly.

“I hope you’ll excuse me, your majesty. I am very tired.”

“Of course,” Lexa stands as Clarke does and it causes a flurry of movement around the table as
everyone hurries to follow her lead. Lady Clarke stares at her in surprise, and Lexa tries to cover her embarrassment by nodding her head when the noblewoman curseys. “Good evening, Lady Clarke.”

“Good evening, your majesty.” Lady Clarke steps uncertainly around Faith, eyeing her with caution, but the wolf merely watches her go with big, blue eyes and Lexa feels similarly enamoured, somehow unable to pull her gaze away from Lady Clarke’s departure. It is only when the door is shut behind her that she falls back into her seat, the rest of her table hurrying to do the same.

“How rude,” Titus mutters below his breath, and before he can say anything else, Lexa asks him.

“Titus, how is negotiation with the Iron Bank going?”

“The Iron Bank, your majesty?” Titus blinks at her in surprise. It’s not often that she wants to talk to him about their relationship with the largest bank in the known world, across the sea in Braavos, and he almost bites her hand off at the opportunity.

When their meal is over she stands, nodding to her guests and thanking them for their company. She watches them leave her quarters, but instead of retreating back into her chambers she steps out into the corridor. Lady Clarke’s plate had been left full, and the thought of her going to bed hungry and lonely drives her onwards until she is in the warm, cosy kitchens of Winterfell. The smell of the kitchens is warm bread baking, and wood fire, and a great meat stew cooking. It is as familiar to her as her own name- as the child of a lord for most of her life, not the heir to a throne, she had spent much of her childhood between the courtyards training and the kitchens begging for scraps. Her Master Cook Leanne looks up and at the sight of her frame in the doorway clears her throat. The rest of the kitchen staff startle up at the sound, and offer her hurried bows as she moves inside.

Leanne waves a hand at them. “Carry on,” Meeting Lexa’s eyes, she smiles and bobs a small curtsy. “What do we owe the pleasure, your majesty? It’s been some time since you visited.”

Lexa thinks of tugging on Leanne’s apron strings and feels a pang of heartache. “It has, I’m sorry.”

Leanne shakes her head, goes back to kneading bread as they talk. “You’re busy now, your majesty. What can I do you for?”

She hesitates, wondering how to explain. “I am… concerned about Lady Clarke.”

“The Tyrell lady?” Leanne’s eyes run over her, curiously. “Yes, she sends back everything I give her almost untouched. I’ve tried everything- venison, beef, mutton- she’s havin’ none of it.”

“She is sad,” Lexa only feels comfortable admitting this to the woman she has known for so many years, with only loyal ears around her. Though it is no crime for Lady Clarke to be sad, there is something telling about her concern for her feelings. “I think she’s not eating because of it.”

“Mayhaps you should try to make her happier then, your majesty.” Leanne suggests, with a raised eyebrow and Lexa sighs.

“I’m trying my best but I can’t do that if the girl starves to death.” She casts a hopeful glance to Leanna, whose eyes run up and down her curiously.

“You want something to give her.”

“Please,” Lexa’s shoulders sag with relief and Leanna thinks for a moment, kneading the dough beneath her hands with rigour.

“Lemon cakes oughtta sweeten her up,” She gestures to one of the kitchen hands, “Freddy, a plate of
“Yes, that's a good idea,” Lexa can feel her lips turning up in a smile. “I'll have Freddy take them up your majesty.”

“No,” The word is out of her mouth before she can stop it and under Leanna’s gaze she feels compelled to continue. “No I mean, I can do it.”

Leanna’s eyebrows shoot up and her chest rises as it does when she's preparing for a lecture. “You certainly may be capable of it your majesty, but it's not your job to-”

“I know, I mean-” She draws in a deep breath, “I want to.”

Leanna looks at her for another second, before nodding and reaching for the plate to pass into her arms. She accepts it gratefully, fumbling for a moment until it is steady and making her way to Lady Clarke’s rooms. They are up the spiral staircase, at the very top of the east tower. Lexa chose them personally, as the warmest rooms in the castle they offer the most protection from the northern winds, the hot springs warming the walls. A luxurious suite of rooms had been set up for the Lady of House Tyrell, with heavy fur pelts and beeswax candles set about the rooms. At the top of the stairs, Lexa find Octavia Snow stood beside the doors. The girl plays with her dagger absent mindedly, until she spots Lexa and startles to attention, sliding the dagger back into its scabbard on her thigh.

Lexa hesitates, unsure how to approach the girl. She is well trained, and keen to prove herself- or so Indra says- but most valuably she owes Lexa her life, and so it was on Indra’s recommendation that Lexa had appointed her to protect the Tyrell girl. Though the castle is safe, there is many who still bear ill will to the southerners.

“Your majesty,” Octavia bows so low that her nose almost touches the ground. When she leans back up again, her eyes flicker curiously to the platter in Lexa’s hands. “Can I be of service?”

“I…” She isn’t sure how to explain herself, isn’t quite sure how she even arrived here, but the platter is heavy in her arms. “I brought these for Lady Clarke. I was hoping you could deliver them to her.”

“Deliver them to her, your majesty?” Octavia’s brows are furrowed, obviously unsure why Lexa would walk all the way up these stairs to not give her gift in person.

“I must… attend to other matters,” Before Octavia can see any further through her mask, Lexa shoves the platter into the girl’s arms, and marches back down the stairs at a pace that brings sweat rising to the back of her neck.

The mare before her is a docile, gentle beast. With a coat speckled with brown and white, and a long mane and tail, she looks nothing like her lithe, white mount from Highgarden, but as Clarke circles her thoughtfully, she admits that there is something in the horse’s stance and gaze that is pleasing to her. The mare whickers softly, and she smiles, pausing near her head to stroke a hand down her long face, laughing when the mare nuzzles at the folds of her cloak and mouths at her hair.

“She’s hopin’ for an apple,” The stable boy supplies, and Clarke’s fond smile doesn’t leave the horse. There is something about her that is warm and comforting in the heart of the frozen north, and she rubs at her nose apologetically.

“I’m sorry I can’t be of any help, perhaps next time.”
“Is the mare acceptable, m’lady?” The stable master asks gruffly and she nods once, deigning to look over at the tall man.

“Perfectly acceptable,” She admits, hands reaching to rub between the mare’s ears. “She seems to be of great stock.”

“She is,” The stable master reassures her, patting the horse’s flank affectionately, “Bred from one of the queen’s own warhorses.”

“Really?” She is impressed despite herself, gazing down at the horse’s strong legs and back. The mare doesn’t like her inattention and swings her great head around to nuzzle at her ears and face again, snorting. Clarke laughs, rubbing at her nose again. “Alright, you impatient beast.”

She nods to the stable master, “Have her saddled and ready for me promptly, I’d like to see how she handles.” Glancing back at where Octavia waits a few paces away, she rolls her eyes and adds, “And I suppose you ought to have a horse saddled for my guard, as well. It doesn’t seem fair to make her keep up on foot.”

Octavia gives her a painfully false smile and says, her voice too sweet. “Very kind of you, my lady.”

They wait as the horse is readied, Clarke sending a boy running to her room for her riding gloves and a warmer cloak, and the activity around them bustles, horses led out into the courtyard, saddled with fine leather and gleaming as if they have just been newly brushed. Clarke watches them all, her annoyance rising as the boy returns with her cloak and Octavia helps her shrug into it. As she pulls on her gloves, she catches the arm of the stable boy rushing past and has the pleasure of seeing his eyes widen at the sight of her.

“Boy, where is my horse? I asked for her to be saddled an age ago.”

“I- I’m sorry, m’lady, the horses are being- I mean to say, not your horse but other horses-” The boy stumbles and trips over his words, his cheek darkening under her unimpressed gaze.

“Spit it out,” She demands, after listening to him garble for a few moments, but the voice that answers her comes from behind, and is infinitely smoother.

“I apologise, Lady Clarke, the fault is mine.” Clarke turns, so startled that she almost jumps, and her breath catches in her throat at the sight of the queen behind her. Queen Lexa is dressed in a dark jerkin, embroidered with silver wolves, and diamond pins glitter in her hair, keeping it pinned neatly out of her face. Her cloak sits about her shoulders, dark with fur lining its edges, and a single dagger strapped to her side are the only weapons Clarke can see. To her side stands Aden, who is smiling at her welcomingly, but his friendly presence is sharply contrasted by Lady Anya, gazing down at her with cold eyes from the queen’s left. Several direwolves linger at her feet, in grey and black, but the white wolf is nowhere to be seen.

“Your majesty,” Clarke bends her knees just slightly, her curtsey more of a dip than anything else, and keeps her eyes on the queen. Though their interactions have been few, she isn’t sure how to act in front of the queen in light of the lemon cakes Octavia had delivered to her only a few days ago. It had been startling, and Clarke had almost wondered if they were poisoned, before tossing the ridiculous thought aside. The gesture, though thoughtful, had sat strangely with her and she’d eaten the treats with a mixture of delight and disgust that made her stomach curdle. Despite her initial joy at having her favourite meal presented to her, further thought, alone in her tower, had left her wondering at the queen’s kindness and by morning she had almost convinced herself that it was a plot to undermine her in some unseen way.
Regardless, since their conversation in the library, the icy tension between the two of them had eased just slightly.

“I called a hunt, you see,” The queen is explaining, and Clarke forces herself to focus. “It will have kept the stable boys all very busy. You there,” She calls out to one of the stable boys pleasantly, and the lad snaps to instant attention, bowing so low that he almost prostrates himself in front of her.

“Fetch Lady Clarke’s horse at once, it is the priority.”

“Of course, your majesty,” He takes off at a run and Clarke watches him go in amazement.

“You are welcome to join us on the hunt, Lady Clarke.” Lexa offers, kindly and Clarke startles at the words, her brows creasing.

“Oh I- no, no thank you. I do not enjoy hunting,” Her nose wrinkles a little, “While I appreciate the boar on my plate, I take no pleasure in seeing it run down and slaughtered before my eyes.”

The queen’s mouth seems to twitch in amusement, but she bows her head before Clarke can fully read the expression. “That is fair.” Her attention turns away as Clarke’s horse is led out. “Ah, is she to your liking?”

“Yes,” Clarke admits, reluctantly, unable to stop reaching up to touch the mare’s nose when the animal immediately begins nuzzling at her cloak and hair in search of treats. “I’m afraid I’m as empty handed as I was before,” She tells the horse, who ignores her entirely.

There is a soft laugh, and it takes a moment for Clarke to realise it is coming from Lexa. It seems almost incongruous to her personality that she should laugh so beautifully, and the thought makes her cheeks flush.

“I think she is searching for this.” Lexa produces an apple from the pouch at her side and passes it over into Clarke’s surprised hands. The mare whickers and immediately begins to crunch at the treat, spraying juice everywhere.

“Thank you,” She offers, haltingly and the queen simply shakes her head, turning as her horse is brought forward.

“It will do him good not to have any further treats from me,” She looks at the horse with an affection that Clarke has not yet seen before. “The stable master is always telling me I shouldn’t feed him so,” She rubs at the horse’s flank tenderly, “Or he will get so large he’ll look like a broodmare.”

Clarke smiles despite herself, and nods. “I think she appreciates it.” She says, as the mare finishes the apple and immediately begins searching her for more.

“Unfortunately that is all I have,” Lexa swings herself onto her horse, and Aden moves forward to place a hand on the horse’s flank.

“If Lady Clarke will have me, I think I should like to accompany her on her ride today, sister. If you will excuse my presence from your hunt.” Something passes between the siblings, an expression that Clarke can’t quite identify, before Lexa nods.

“If Lady Clarke would like your company on her ride, I think we can do without your skills.”

Lady Anya snorts from her place on her own horse, and Aden gives her an irritated look. Clearly, his absence will not damage the Winterfell stores too much.

“What do you say, Lady Clarke? I can show you the ruins of the old Holdfast, where the stained
glass window still stands.” Aden offers her a charming, wide smile and she can’t help but nod at the sight of it. Aden beams, “Excellent, I will get my horse and we shall be off.”

“We shall,” Clarke watches him go with amused amazement, before she turns back to the queen. “Happy hunting, your majesty.”

“Thank you, Lady Clarke,” The queen dips her head in acknowledgement, clicks her tongue, and her horse falls into a quick walk, wolves trotting along by her sides. At the sight of her leaving, Lady Anya follows behind, and the rest of the mounted knights and squires, and Clarke is left in the eerily quiet courtyard.

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“Why my lady, you must learn the rules of this game or you will lose all of your family’s fortune,” Raven Reyes grins at her from over the table, happily scooping up her winnings from their game of dice and Clarke regards her with annoyance, glowering at her smug expression.

The inn is warm and spinning just slightly, filled to bursting with the folk of Winter Town. Clarke is grateful for Octavia’s presence at her side, her hand on her sword, because she can feel the gazes of the smallfolk lingering on her, the leering of some of the men, and the women too. They watch her jewels, the movement of her silk dress and the purse at her belt, and it is only the crest of the queen at her side that keeps her from being robbed at knife point, she is sure. The mead in her blood keeps her from worrying too much about it, instead she is frowning at the blacksmith’s apprentice from across the table, watching her gold be scooped away.

“Another game,” She demands, her speech slurring just a little, but Octavia is at her side in an instant.

“No, my lady,” Octavia insists, “It is long past time that we returned to the castle.”

“Come on Snow,” Raven gives her a smug smile, “I’m paying for a new cloak with this money.”

“You don’t need a new cloak,” Octavia snaps, furiously, and Raven rolls her eyes.

“Wealth is not about need, it’s about want - isn’t that right my lady?”

“Exactly,” Clarke agrees, absent minded, as she collects the dice to roll again. They fall from her palm with a clatter, but Octavia snatches them up before either woman can see the numbers. “Snow-” Clarke begins to protest, but Octavia cuts through her firmly.

“I am insisting, my lady.” She cuts a pleading, furious gaze at Raven and the blacksmith sighs, world weary, but her eyes dart out to the side and she seems to see something that Clarke cannot, because she nods.

“I’ll accompany you back to the castle,” She tells them as Octavia ushers Clarke out of her chair, a hand catching at her waist when she sways. Chivalrously, Raven steps up to her side and offers her an arm, but Clarke looks at the way she leans on her cane and shakes her head.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” She tells her, sharply and takes the girl’s arm to wrap it through her own.

There is a beat of silence between the three and beneath the mead Clarke feels vaguely ashamed that the two would look at her with such astonishment at the sight of a kind gesture. To cover her flushed cheeks, she starts to push their way out of the tavern and into the cold night air.

Her thick cloak keeps her warm, Raven on one side, leaning against her, and Octavia on the other
and they walk in silence for a few moments, before Octavia asks.

“Why are you coming back to the castle, Reyes?”

“Perhaps I couldn’t get enough of her ladyship’s company,” Raven offers, offering a flirtatious smirk Clarke’s way, but the Tyrell lady only shakes her head, amused. She has long grown used to the blacksmith’s wiles. “I left a boy looking after the forge, I’m working on something new.” Her voice grows in excitement, before dropping again. “But I’m sure the damned creature will have let it gone cold in my absence.”

“What are you working on?” Clarke asks, with interest, and Raven looks at her curiously.

“I wouldn’t have thought a highborn lady would want to know about my work.” She tells her, surprised, but when Clarke’s expression doesn’t waver, she presses on. “I’m working on a new mechanism for our crossbows- a lever that will pull back the bowstring back rather than having to crank it. It will make reloading it faster.”

“But,” Clarke’s voice wavers just slightly, “Crossbows are only used in war, we are at peace now.”

“There’s always a threat beyond the Wall, my lady,” Octavia tells her, quietly.

“And peace can only last for so long,” Raven says, adding darkly, “Winter is coming.”

Octavia echoes back the Stark words, and Clarke feels a chill run down her spine, before Raven speaks again, naturally easing the dark tone back to something more cheerful.

“What are your Tyrell words again, my lady?”

“Growing strong,” Clarke says, and the words seem to warm her core. “They’re for the roses that grow around Highgarden.” The silence of the two women on either side of her, and the warmth that talking about her home brings ushers her to continue, “There are roses everywhere, sometimes the climbers grow through the windows and into the castle. The water smells of roses and the dancers who come to Highgarden wear dresses made of their petals.”

“Dresses?” Raven interrupts, “Made of petals? Sounds damn cold to me.”

The words pull a laugh from her as they pause for Octavia to hail the gates opened, and she explains once they move into the courtyard, “The weather is far warmer down in Highgarden. One needn’t even wear a cloak in the summer, and the dresses are rather more… revealing that they are here.”

“I can imagine,” Raven gives her another flirtatious smirk and she laughs freely. “You’re near to the sea, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” She answers eagerly, “You can get on a pleasure barge down the Mandler and be there in a day.”

“A pleasure barge?” Raven’s eyes light up with interest, “Perhaps we should visit Highgarden Octavia.”

“Of course that would spark your interest,” The guard rolls her eyes, before adding darkly. “I want nothing to do with the sea.”

Instead of teasing her, as Clarke has seen her do before, Raven only hums her understanding and untangles her arm from Clarke’s, giving a flourishing bow. “Thank you for your company, my ladies, but here I shall have to bid you farewell, for I can see that the boy hasn’t kept the forge alight.
Goodnight."

“Goodnight,” Clarke calls after her, laughing still and Octavia accompanies her into the castle. They walk in silence down the corridors, empty but for a few guards. Torches burn in the sconces in the wall, lighting up their way and Clarke feels dizzy and heady and certain that Reya will have to persuade her very kindly to get out of her dress, rather than simply sleeping in it.

The sound of footsteps is their only warning that they are not alone, before they turn a corner and find the queen walking towards them, talking quietly to her measter. Clarke feels Octavia straighten beside her, and her own footsteps stutter when she meets the queen’s surprised gaze. By the time they have met, the queen has schooled her features back into a pleasant mask of neutrality, but Clarke’s own mask doesn’t seem to be slipping into place as well as it usually does. They pause beside each other and Clarke bobs a curtsey, grateful of Octavia’s hand on her waist when she wobbles just slightly.

“Good evening, your majesty.”

“Good evening, Lady Clarke,” Queen Lexa echoes, curious eyes jumping over them. “You are up late.”

“As are you,” She answers, and feels Octavia stiffen beside her. The queen’s measter raises his eyebrows, dark eyes sweeping down her form with suspicion.

The queen only smiles though, tilting her head and saying with almost a sigh. “Matters of the country do not work to the beat of the sun and moon, I am afraid. Have you been… out of the castle?”

Clarke opens her mouth to answer, but Octavia’s elbow nudges her harshly and she shuts her mouth with a click, as Octavia says. “We’ve been for a walk around the battlements, your majesty.”

“I see,” Lexa’s gaze sweeps along them both again, and suspicion lingers at the edge of her gaze. “As always, Lady Clarke, let me know if there is anything I can do to make your stay here more enjoyable.”

“Actually, I” The words spill from her mouth before she can stop them, the mead loosening her tongue enough, “I would like something to draw with. Some parchment and charcoals, if the castle has them.”

“Draw with?” The queen blinks at her in surprise, “I see. Of course, I’m sure that could be arranged.”

“Thank you, that would be… excellent.”

“Yes,” Lexa nods, the surprise bleeding away to be replaced by another smile. “I will see to that, goodnight Lady Clarke.”

“Goodnight, your majesty.”

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The next morning, charcoals and parchment are delivered to her room, as requested and Clarke thinks of the lemon cakes. Overcast and rainy days in Winterfell keep her in the castle, but she entertains herself by dragging Octavia across half of the castle in search of a place in which the light is strong enough to draw by. Having the charcoals and parchment within her grasp make her fingers itch to sketch, and when the thin light streaming into her room proves unsatisfactory, she searches for another place to draw.
Measter Titus stumbles upon her in the hallways, and upon her insistent questioning eventually recommends the library between clenched teeth, clearly eager to see her on her way and out of his line of sight.

When she first steps through the thick door of the library tower, she thinks that she will find it deserted. Unlike Highgarden, where their proximity to Oldtown and luxurious library leads to scholars frequently descending on the castle, there is only Measter Titus in Winterfell, and so the library has been empty the few other times she has entered. Today, however, she startles as she walks to the table in the middle of the room and realises that it is occupied by a familiar figure, bent over scrolls and parchments.

The queen looks up just as her feet falter to a stop, and her surprised expression makes it clear that she had not heard them enter, so wrapped up had she been in her studies.

“Lady Clarke,” She does not stand, but offers a small smile and Clarke feels some of the tension ease from her shoulders.

“Your majesty, I’m sorry to have disturbed you.”

“Please, you didn’t.” Her eyes flicker down to the goods held in Clarke’s arms, close to her chest like a babe, and her smile grows, her expression warm. “You received the parchment and charcoals.”

“I did,” She looks down to them, somehow unable to face this soft, kind version of the queen.

“Thank you, I’m very grateful.”

“I meant it when I said we wanted to make your time here comfortable,” Lexa tells her, quietly and Clarke nods again, “What were you looking for in here?”

“A place to draw,” She answers, honestly, and tilts her head to a large window, through which the daylight streams, “I was thinking perhaps there, but there is no surface.”

“Allow me to move this table closer to the light for you.” Lexa nods at the table she is using, and Clarke’s eyes widen, her stomach flickering with some unfamiliar feeling at the offer.

“Oh no, I couldn’t let you-”

“Nonsense, you must have somewhere worthy to test out your new equipment,” Over the sounds of her protests, Lexa beckons over Octavia and together the two of them lift the old oak table. Clarke can tell it is heavy by the way they strain and stumble a little to get to the window. She follows, feeling helpless and still protesting the move.

“But you were using this table, your majesty, I can’t take your workspace.”

“Well,” Lexa glances down at the parchments spread over the library table, and hesitates, seeming uncertain for a moment. “I will use one end, and you can use the other, if you do not mind?”

“No, no of course not.” The atmosphere between them is tense, just as it always has been, but the queen’s unexpected kindness has thrown Clarke into disarray, unsure how to respond to this strange side of the woman she thought she had come to know.

They sit together in the otherwise quiet library, working silently side by side. It takes a while for Clarke to truly forget that the woman is there, intensely aware of the sound her charcoal makes against the parchment, but as Lexa continues to work steadily, making notes from parchments, she begins to forget about the ruler on the other side of the table. There is a quiet camaraderie about the scratching of quills and charcoal against parchment, in a room where only the books and Octavia can
see them, and Clarke soon finds herself lost in her work. It has been a long time since she was able to
draw anything, and the peaceful activity reminds her so intensely of home that she feels a pang of
loneliness in her heart which she tries to press away.

After a while, she begins to sense eyes upon her. When her gaze flickers up, she sees the queen’s
fingers begin to scribble again, her cheeks darkening. For a moment, she gazes at the dark, bent
head, and wonders whether she was imagining things, but when she turns back to her sketch again,
she finds that after a while the sensation of being watched returns. This time, she keeps her charcoal
moving, but glances at Lexa from beneath her lashes and finds the queen’s eyes set on her paper,
watching with fascination as the image takes form beneath her fingers. She continues for several long
moments, allowing her image to take a true form, and when she is happy with it- and is sure the
queen’s eyes are about to fall from her head- she looks up and offers.

“Would you like to see it?”

“Oh,” Lexa flushes furiously, her cheeks heating at being caught and says, “I’m sorry Lady Clarke, I
shouldn’t have been staring.”

“It’s alright,” She answers, honestly, and pushes the parchment her way. As if against her volition,
Lexa’s eyes flicker to it. “You may look if you wish.”

“Thank you,” Tentative fingers reach out to pull the parchment closer, and the queen looks at it for
several long moments, her eyes taking in every last detail, before she finally says. “It’s wonderful. Is
it Highgarden?”

“Thank you,” She tries to ignore the way her cheeks warm under Lexa’s praise. “It is, yes.”

Lesa looks down at it again, her mouth opening as if she means to say something, before snapping
shut again. She is silent, eyes roaming over the image. “It is an excellent likeness.” Their eyes meet
for a second, and when the queen slides the parchment back across the table she says, quietly. “It is
good to be reminded of home when you are far away.”

The words touch somewhere deep in her chest, and Clarke has to tear her gaze away, afraid that the
queen will see the emotion in her eyes. “Yes,” She agrees, softly. “It is.”

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Chapter End Notes

has lexa gone... soft? maybe a little, but never fear, fearsome queen lexa will return
soon! thank you so so much for your comments, I appreciate them so much, feel free to
come shout at me on tumblr @onemilliongoldstars if you want to!
Chapter Notes

sorry for the little break guys! I went on holiday and then it was my birthday!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Book 1: Chapter Five

The sky outside is hazy and dark, overcast with the shadows of clouds which threaten rain, or even hail if icy winds grip the north in their frozen handshake. After the long winter that preceded the war, and the blood that had watered the ground in the first few years of spring, it feels as if the winter has been loath to leave the north behind. It is lucky that they are equipped for such things. When Lexa’s eyes move across her kingdom from the window of her chambers, she finds first the men at arms training in the courtyard, and then the storehouses where the grain and wood is kept warm and safe from the bitter bite of the cold. Soon, Measter Titus assures her, the weather will turn and the warmth of summer will be upon them, but until that day she keeps a close eye on her coppers and stores, and welcomes the people of the north who flock to Winter Town in search of a respite from the seasons.

Behind her, her handmaiden clears her throat quietly and Lexa turns to give her a smile. It had taken time to find handmaidens who were not either terrified of her, or untrustworthy, and she is not in the habit of making those she has ended up with wait. Sliding her jerkin over her head, she puts it on the chair beside her to be cleaned and her shirt follows. Her hose are warm and comfortable, so she keeps them, but allows the handmaiden to bind her breasts again more comfortably for the ride to Castle Cerwyn.

There is a knock at the door, but before she can answer it’s swung open and her guard introduces Anya, who strides past him without a second look. The Captain of her Queensguard is already dressed in her flowing white cloak and shining armour, though she shrugs the cloak away when she steps into the chamber.

“Your majesty,” Anya gives a nod of her head, but doesn’t wait long enough to meet Lexa’s eyes in the mirror, from where Lexa watches her with a half amused smile. Anya unclips her sword and lets it fall with an ungainly clatter for a Valyrian steel blade, shooing away the startled handmaiden. “I’ll take over.”

The handmaiden meets Lexa’s eyes, and at her nod gives a curtsey and escapes the room as Anya takes a shirt and thrusts it into Lexa’s hands.

“I’d rather you didn’t scare away the only decent handmaidens I’ve managed to find.” Lexa tells her, wryly, and shrugs on the shirt as she speaks.

“Just because you’re the queen now, doesn’t mean you’ve forgotten how to dress yourself.” Anya grumbles, but passes her the woollen under-jerkin, to layer over her shirt and keep out the cold. “I assume you’ve heard the news.”

“I’m preparing to ride for Castle Cerwyn as we speak,” Lexa pulls on her thick undercoat. The material is warm and padded, making her appear larger whilst also keeping out the cold. It falls to her knees, the grey light against her dark hose and an embroidered wolf sits over her heart.
“I’m proud that you’ve kept the tradition going as queen.” Anya tells her and there’s a small part of Lexa, the part that is still a stick thin child running through the woods of Bear Island after her lanky cousin, that luxuriates in the word. “It would have been easy to give the execution of criminals over to someone else, now that you have so many other responsibilities.”

“The woman who passes the sentence should swing the sword,” She recites, and Anya bows her head once in acknowledgement. Lexa continues, picking up her dark leather jerkin to pull on over her undercoat. “I would have gone sooner, but Titus kept me in his solar all morning.”

“Titus,” Anya scoffs, ushering her to sit. “What does he want?”

“To worry, as he always does,” She sighs, smiling slightly as Anya’s hands begin to run through her tangled hair. “He says the appointment of Lord Pike to master of coin is causing some unrest down in Kings Landing. The man has such harsh views, some think he means to influence the king.”

“All advisors mean to influence the king.” Anya tells her, darkly. “Is it safe in the south? For Tris.”

Lexa thinks of Anya’s sister, sent to Kings Landing as Clarke’s parallel, a northern act of faith, and wonders on the reports she has heard of the girl. By all accounts she is happy and healthy, horse riding and eating oranges, but the reports Lexa makes of Lady Clarke are that she is content and well, so she knows little stock can be taken in letters.

“Tris will be fine,” She assures her, and hopes her uncertainty does not show in her voice. “Besides, the south is perfectly stable with Prince Wells as heir.”

Anya is quiet for a moment, dividing her hair into small pieces to braid and Lexa remembers the months after she had first become queen. Her cousin had sat her down one evening in her war tent, when it seemed they were on the brink of defeat, and braided her hair into something more becoming of a queen while she talked through strategy after strategy, never tiring.

“I hear Prince Wells is reluctant to take a bride,” There is a low note of humour to Anya’s voice now, and Lexa knows that she jests. “Maybe he prefers the company of men.”

“Maybe, though by all accounts he is the godliest prince that ever lived.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I hear he spends most of his evenings in the sept.” Lexa is content to sit back and allow Anya’s fingers to work their magic as she talks. “He will have to marry to secure the Baratheon line, however. He does not have a bastard brother to fall back on.”

Anya’s fingers hesitate in her hair, and she says, after a second of thought. “You are certain you will name Aden heir then?”

“Certain,” Lexa confirms, “A queen cannot be pregnant and I have no desire to be with child. Aden is a good man, a strong man and he loves the north almost as much as me. I am sure he will be a good heir.”

“You will legitimise him, then?”

“When the time is right.”

“I suppose I should take the brat as my squire,” Anya sighs, but there is laughter in her voice and Lexa smiles. “If I am ever able to pry him away from the affections of Lady Clarke,” She pauses and then adds, “Your doing, I suppose?”
“Not entirely, he seems rather attached to her.”

Anya lets out a bark of laughter. “Of course he is, have you seen the girl?”

“I have,” Lexa rolls her eyes, “She is as fair as they say.”

“Fairer, even,” Anya admits, resentfully, pulling her braids together into a low knot at the back of her head, and then continues, a touch more tentatively. “I wondered whether your eyes had lingered—”

“Anya,” Standing, Lexa turns to face her as she buckles her belt around her waist, clicking it together with the silver direwolf clasp. She fixes her Queensguard with a firm expression. “Lady Clarke is simply a guest here, who I would much rather stay away from at all costs, if only not to hear her whining.”

Anya’s eyes flicker over her for a moment, unreadable, and then she laughs again, “Better for it, I suppose. The guards say she and Octavia Blake have been walking into Winter Town together many a night, sometimes coming back with a third. Aden may have competition for the girl’s affections.”

“Blake and Lady Clarke,” Lexa turns to take her dagger from the table, staring down at it as she turns it within her hands. “How interesting.” The dagger slides home into its scabbard with a harsh rash of metal.

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Clarke has to fight against the wind when she turns to peer over her shoulder, laughing breathlessly. Her hair is whipped around her face, the strands tangled, but she pays it no heed as her eyes find the figure she has been searching for. Octavia approaches upon horseback, her expression drawn with discontent and her brows pulled together, and Clarke lets out a laugh that draws the attention of those passing her on the Kingsroad.

“Come along Blake!” She shouts, though her words are lost to the wind, and Octavia glowers are her as she trots up to her side, slightly breathless. Clarke gives her a smug smile, “I would’ve thought you’d have learnt to keep up with me by now.”

“You’re unnaturally fast,” Octavia tells her, her eyes flickering down to where Clarke’s dress is draped artfully about her legs. “Especially for someone riding side saddle.”

“Maybe my mount is just superior to yours,” Clarke reaches down to rub at her mare’s neck, smiling as the horse whickers.

“I expect it is,” Octavia admits easily. “I wish the queen had never given you that horse, you’re harder to keep up with than ever.”

“Isn’t it glorious?” Clarke smiles at her, widely, and gazes up at the open sky. The north is a wild place, but the land is so open that Clarke feels as if she could ride for hours and never be forced to stop. Even the thought of it allows a burst of joyful laughter to escape from between her lips.

“We should turn back for the castle, my lady,” Octavia gives her a strange look at the sound of her laughter, but she can only nod jovially. Together, they walk their mounts back onto the dusty Kingsroad, which reaches from the southern capital of King’s Landing all the way to The Wall, the towering wall of ice and snow that separates the wilds of the northern most part of the land from the Seven Kingdoms. As they begin their journey back to Winterfell, Clarke can’t help but glance back. It is strange to think that this road could take her all the way to King’s Landing, where her father sits. A pang of loneliness swells within her breast, but she is startled from the feeling by Octavia’s words.
“I didn’t know you loved to ride so much, my lady.”

“Riding here is very different to home.” Clarke pulls her attention back to the road ahead of them. “It’s nice to feel free.”

“You’re free at Winterfell, my lady.” Octavia’s lips have pulled into the stubborn line that Clarke knows she will not be able to reason with and she sighs.

“I won’t try to explain the complications of royal politics to you.” She says, but it comes out wearier and less scathing than she had hoped.

Octavia pursues her line of questioning, however, “You’re not a prisoner in Winterfell, you could return home if you wanted to. You’re not bound by chains or kept in a locked room.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m free to leave,” Clarke snaps and beneath her, her mare sidesteps nervously, feeling her tension.

Octavia’s brows furrow, and she opens her mouth to argue again, before shutting it.

“What?” Clarke demands, but Octavia shakes her head, her expression tight with concentration.

“Someone is approaching,” She says, and as she speaks the shallow rise before them is crested by two standard bearers, holding the white flags of House Stark. Behind them follows a procession of riders and Clarke spots the queen herself, with Lady Anya on one side and Prince Aden on the other, their horses approaching at a steady trot. There is no fanfare or ornament to this journey, though the people move hastily from their path and gaze at their passing queen in awe. With them ride several other soldiers, one of whom Clarke recognises as Indra Woodson, the Master of Arms at the castle, whose expression is as grim set as it has been every other time she has seen her.

“Where are they going?” Clarke asks, but Octavia simply urges her out onto the grassy verge that surrounds the Kingsroad, to avoid being trampled by the oncoming procession. “Octavia?” Clarke demands, but when her guard remains mum she huffs and calls out for the Prince as the procession passes. “Prince Aden!”

Aden hears her calls and, with a glance at the queen, spurs his horse out into the verge. He is far graver than she has ever seen him before, and gives her a bow of his head upon approach. His tunic is dark, and a sword sits at his hip where Clarke has rarely seen one before.

“Lady Clarke,” He greets her, formally and she swallows at the sound.

“Prince Aden, is everything well?” Her eyes follow the procession as they continue on their way and the prince nods.

“Well enough, we are on our way to Castle Cewryn.”

“To what purpose, your highness?”

He hesitates for a moment, his eyes seeming to flick to Octavia, before returning to her and explaining, grudgingly. “The lord of the castle has caught a man who was pillaging through the villages near Winter Town. Lexa is going to dole out the queen’s justice.”

“She is travelling all the way to Castle Cewryn to sentence a man to death?” Clarke’s brows furrow, “Surely she is not needed for that.”

Aden’s expression shifts imperceptibly, and when he speaks again he is a little clearer, “You
misunderstand me, my lady, the queen will be the one to execute the prisoner.”

“The queen?” Clarke splutters, all memory of court manners flying from her head as she stares at the young prince in shock. “Surely you don’t mean…”

“It is a northern tradition, my lady.” Octavia tells her, bluntly, “He who passes the sentence should swing the sword.”

“But that is barbaric!” Her words are oscillating quickly, spiralling higher in her outrage, and Aden looks back to where the procession is moving further away.

“I’m afraid I should catch them up, my lady.”

“Wait,” Clarke’s eyes dart to where the queen rides and her outrage hardens into something dense in the pit of her stomach. “I’m coming with you.”

“What?” Octavia demands, as the prince cringes.

“Really my lady, that is not normally the done thing—”

“I am a guest in the north, I should like to see your customs.” Her nose wrinkles, “Even when they do disgust me.”

“You won’t like to see it.” Octavia argues and she glares at the guard.

“I have to see it to believe it.” She retorts, fiercely and Aden gazes at her, his eyes solemn, before finally nodding.

“You may come, Lady Clarke. But if at any point you are too disturbed, no one will be available to escort you home.”

“I will be fine,” She assures him, with a hot determination.

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The prisoner watches her from a lean face, eyes hollowed in his skull. His hair is long and straggly, falling around his face in a tangled mess and his beard is patchy and silver, betraying his age. The rags he wears hang about him, like he is a scarecrow, and he is clearly weak enough that he doesn’t need to be held so tightly by the two soldiers on either side of him. Lexa regards him with something between pity and disgust. It is easy to pity the man who looks at her now, the man who clearly has nothing, but she can’t allow herself to forget what he has done. Behind her, Lord Cerwyn observes the man with clear revulsion. It is mostly the villages within his fief that have been pillaged and brutalised by this man, and it is he who has had to see to the weeping widows and injured children.

Her fingers roll across the hilt of her sword. It is easy to see this man as a failure on her part. He is her subject, if he has been pushed to steal it is because she has been unable to provide for him in his time of need, especially after such a harsh winter. But then her eyes skirt to Anya, the only other occupant of the hall other than the two soldiers and Lord Cerwyn, waiting silently at the door, and her expression hardens. She remembers her cousin teaching her that a leader could not be responsible for everything their subjects do, and she remembers as well that this man has left a strew of victims behind him, brutalised and murdered. Her fingers tighten around the hilt of her longsword and her voice is cold when she speaks.

“Lord Cerwyn has informed you that you are sentenced to death, is that right?” The man’s eyes skate over her, barely lucid, but he manages to nod. “And he has offered you the chance to repent to your
No answer this time, but then Lord Cerwyn’s voice comes from behind her.

“I have, your majesty.”

“Good,” She doesn’t turn to address the man. “Then we shall begin.” She gestures to the two soldiers, who haul the prisoner to his stumbling feet and watch as he is half led, half dragged from the hall. Her eyes do not leave the door once it is shut behind them, but she senses Lord Cerwyn by her side and looks to him.

“Thank you for coming, your majesty,” He is a serious, sombre man. The proximity of the castle to Winterfell means Lexa knows him as well as her own family, though he has always been a lesser lord, but her accession to queen has created a distance between them that she struggles to breach.

“It is my duty,” She tells him, seriously, and then adds. “But I wanted to see him put to death myself, after the stories you had told.”

“Yes,” His voice darkens.

“Regardless,” She continues, squaring her shoulders. “She who passes the sentence should swing the sword. I am the queen, so every sentence in the north is mine to execute.”

They move outside together, to the bailey of Castle Cerwyn. There, gathered like a flock of crows amongst the snow, stand a number of Lord Cerwyn’s smallfolk. Most eyes are fixed on the prisoner, stood waiting and silent beside an ironwood stump that is stained with the blood of past executions. The hatred in their eyes tells Lexa that these are the people the man terrorised for months before he was caught and brought to face his justice. There are men and women, even several children with eyes that hold a darkness beyond their years and Lexa feels a twinge of pain at the thought of what they must have seen. Her guards stand near the main gate, watching proceedings with cold expressions, and beneath the white flag with a dark wolf, along the raised, covered walkway that runs the perimeter of the castle, stand Aden and Lady Clarke, her guard a step behind her.

Her jaw tightens just slightly at the sight of Lady Clarke, who’s expression is hard with outrage and disapproval. This is no place for a southern lady, and Lady Clarke will surely be disturbed, but all attempts to persuade her to turn back had failed in the journey here, and Lexa is resigned to her presence.

Stepping up to the ironwood stump, she nods to the guards, who haul to man’s upper body up and across the broad stump. He gives some struggle, but Lexa ignores him. She peels off her gloves and hands them back to where Anya waits. With two hands, she wraps her fingers around the gilded hilt of her longsword and draws it out of its sheath, with a loud rasp of Valyrian steel. The watching crowd are silent and solemn, so her voice carries easily when she raises it to speak, echoing from the battlements.

“By the word of Queen Lexa of House Stark, First of My Name, Daughter of Wolves and Queen of the North, I sentence you to die.”

All it takes is a swing of her arm. The muscles there are built and strong, well used to handling the heavy longsword in her grip, and it is with practiced ease that she swings the blade down, slicing through the man’s neck with one stroke. The dismembered head lolls and falls forward onto the frozen ground and blood splatters the earth. A flock of crows startle, and take off, shadows in the white sky.

Lexa looks up at her people. She can feel a streak of the man’s blood on her cheek, but she meets the gazes of the people watching and knows that they are satisfied, that this brought them some modicum
of peace. Behind her, she can feel Lady Clarke’s eyes boring into the back of her head, dark and furious and horrified.

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They leave Castle Cerwyn shortly after. Though the days are slowly getting longer, Lexa has no desire to be caught riding in the dark and craves her own bed, and the comforts of Winterfell. They ride for many leagues, through the frozen landscape of the north, before eventually Anya persuades Lexa to call for a brief stop to water the horses and allow the riders to stretch and walk. Despite feeling the southern lady’s gaze on her most of their journey, it is only once they are stopped and Lexa has led her mount to a small pond to drink that Lady Clarke appears beside her. Lexa’s hands run down her horse’s neck and flank, her eyes fixed to him and for a moment she feels so utterly exhausted, unable to face Lady Clarke’s fury. The eyes of the man she killed are still fixed in her memory and his blood is still staining her sword. Tonight when she sleeps she will hear the muffled scream he had given as her sword came down on his neck.

Eventually, her manners overcome her and she turns with a mask of neutral pleasantness.

“Lady Clarke,”

“You majesty.” Lady Clarke gives a nod of her head, but her dark gaze stays on Lexa. The northern queen resists the urge to sigh, burying her fingers in the long mane of her mount and teasing through it with her fingers. She refuses to speak first, sure that the words are frothing on the tongue of the woman behind her, but her horse’s mane is nearly smooth by the time Lady Clarke gets the nerve up to speak again.

“I was… surprised by the proceedings at Castle Cerwyn.”

“I see,” Her eyes flicker back to the southern lady, who is smoothing down the luxurious skirt of her riding dress. Lexa can feel her resentment burning in her gut. “You do not have execution in the south?”

“We do,” Clarke concedes, after a beat of silence.

“So, it was not the sentence that you were opposed to?” Lexa’s eyes do not leave her horse again. It is easier to look at the beast before her than Lady Clarke.

“It was not, I only-”

“You only meant to criticise the manner in which it was carried out.” Lexa turns at last to fix Clarke with her gaze, her hands coming to rest at the small of her back, eyes cold and serious.

Lady Clarke’s expression flickers with surprise, and for a moment she seems lost for words, until she gathers herself and nods, jaw tightening. “Yes. For the queen herself to carry out the execution seems… unnecessary and barbaric.”

“Barbaric?” Lexa echoes, her voice lilting up in surprise. “It is traditional, it allows a ruler to be closer to the sentences they pass.”

“Surely a leader should not be striving to be closer to their people.” Clarke counters and Lexa is reminded, abruptly, of the chasm of thought between the north and the south.

She pulls in a breath of icy air, her eyes flickering up to the slowly darkening sky. When she speaks, she is proud of the steadiness of her voice. “Perhaps that is the difference between you and I then, Lady Clarke. In the north a queen who understands her people is a good queen.”
“In the south a queen who is able to rule their people with dignity and the distance to make logical decisions is a good one.” Lady Clarke counters, sharp as a blade and Lexa feels her mask slip just a little.

“Are you suggesting I am ruled by my emotions?”

“I am suggesting that you are opening yourself up to the possibility, which is dangerous.” Lady Clarke’s eyes flash with fury.

“And I am sure you would do things differently if you were queen?” Lexa snaps, her manners momentarily forgotten and Lady Clarke’s breast heaves with anger.

“I would, and my rule would be better for it.”

Movement to the left of them startles her gaze away from the depths of furious blue, like the raging seas around the Sapphire Isles, and she sees Faith padding towards them, her tongue hanging out. The direwolf inches closer to Lady Clarke, sniffing at her curiously, and though the southern lady doesn’t flinch away as she might once have done, she remains very still, her hands slipping up her body slightly.

Lexa is jerked back to reality at the sight, and she abruptly remembers that they are not alone. “Faith,” She calls, and the direwolf casts one last long look at Clarke before padding back to Lexa in two long strides, butting her head at Lexa’s hand until she rubs at the beast’s ears as if she were still a pup. “I apologise,” Her voice is stiff and formal. “She will not hurt you.”

“I know.” Lady Clarke swallows, her hands clasping together in front of her, and there is a moment of long, uncertain silence between them.

“We should get back to Winterfell,” Lexa offers at last, and then says, awkwardly. “Can I assist you back onto your horse?”

“No,” Clarke’s voice comes too quickly and at Lexa’s startled look she seems to remember her courtesies. “No thank you, your majesty. One of the stable boys will help me.” She drops the smallest of curtseys, her pretty southern manners sounding empty and false after their argument, and Lexa is left to watch her go with a strange, hollow feeling in her chest.

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Letters from Lord Finn proclaiming that he will entreat the northern queen for her return to the south are overshadowed by letters from Prince Wells. They are troubled in tone, with a splintered, uneven quality where the pain her friend is feeling seeps through the cheerful mask he tries to show her. It makes her feel powerless, and miss dearly the days when she could have a carriage take her to the capital in a matter of days to comfort him. Instead, she writes long, heartfelt letters in return, filling them with only the most amusing anecdotes and cheerful puzzles and poems, in hopes of lifting his spirits. Her hands cramp and her eyes are sore from staring at the parchment for so long when she is done, so when a maid brings her lemon cakes and sweet mead she sends her running back to the kitchen and sweeps a heavy cloak around the floating southern dress she wears, striding from her room at such a pace that she leaves Octavia scrambling to keep up.

It is good to be in the fresh air, though the troubling thoughts of Wells do not leave her as she walks the battlements. Instead, they only remind her of her home and her family, and she wonders again why she hasn’t heard from her father. Octavia must see the thundercloud on her face, because she makes no attempt to start conversation and walks a few paces behind. Clarke almost feels as if she is alone. On the battlements she can see for miles across the bleak northern landscape, a wide white sky
that seems to stretch on forever and beyond the wide turrets of Winterfell, there is nothing to see but
the dark forests of the Wolfswood to the west and the rolling land of white and green. The land is cut
through only by the Kingsroad, reaching for the capital to the south and The Wall to the north. It
feels distinctly empty and open, and when she lays her hands palm down upon the cold stone of the
battlements and pulls in a breath, it is so cold in her throat that she wonders whether it has come from
the lands beyond the frozen Wall.

The sound of clashing steel breaks her from her reverie and she turns, expression tinged with
irritation, to look down into the castle. From her place on the battlements, she can see soldiers
training in the courtyard, and with a sigh she leads her guard down to the covered walkways to
watch, half set on going into Winter Town to drown her spirits. She finds the captain of the
Queensguard sparring with the queen herself in the courtyard.

Only once before has she seen the queen fight, and she cannot help but admit that the woman is
skilled. It isn’t surprising, her cousins in Highgarden are all knights of one sort or another, though she
could inflict more damage with a flick of her wrist than they could with their lances and swords.
Many had fought in the War of North and South, several had died and those who had returned had
spoken of the savagery of northern fighting. Now, watching the two warriors fight, she has to admit
that they were wrong. There is nothing savage about what she sees, but it is certainly a far cry from
the pomp and circumstance of southern fighting. Gone is the gleaming armour and highly decorated
banners she is used to seeing, and in their place is rough leathers and chainmail. The two use
Valyrian steel swords, clear from the shine of the rippling steel. The sight makes Clarke think of her
father’s blade, named Justice and at his side at all times, she remembers sitting at his knee and
watching as he cleaned it. When she tried to touch it, he told her of its creation, forged on the fiery
breath of dragons of old.

The Valyrian steel screams as it meets between the two fighters before her, but the brutality she
would expect from this sort of fight is utterly absent in face of a sort of raw elegance. The two move
around each other as if they are one, and Clarke wonders whether Anya had a hand in training Lexa,
so in step are the two. Anya swings her blade toward Lexa’s face, close enough that it would have
sliced her cheek had she not turned in time. As it is, the queen’s back arches as she twists backwards
and slashes at Anya’s feet. The captain jumps, darting out of the way, but in the time it takes her to
readjust, Lexa has found her feet and is aiming for her arm. Lady Anya swings backwards just in
time, and when their swords meet she exerts enough force that it throws Lexa back. The queen
stumbles, but Lady Anya doesn’t give her time to recover, twisting to kick her square in the chest
and with a thump the queen falls to the floor, coughing. Lady Anya’s sword swings out, close to her
neck and Lexa’s eyes flicker down to it, before she gives up her own blade, her hands thrown up.

Clarke thinks she hears her say, “I yield.”

“My lady,” The words make her turn, and she smiles with pleasant surprise, her mood lifting for the
first time when she sees Raven Reyes, upon the covered walkway beside her.

“Raven,” She welcomes her with a nod, and Raven takes that as her cue to come a little closer.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but you seemed morose up here alone.” Her words are more formal for the
sake of the people who may pass them, but the flowery language gives away her jape and Clarke
rolls her eyes to hide a laugh. “I thought my lady may desire company.”

“If you’d like me to rid you of her company, I’d be happy to.” Octavia offers, grumpily, and Clarke
laughs, shaking her head.

“No, I’d be happy of the company, but I’m not morose,” She counters, eyes flickering back to where
the queen has been helped to her feet and is beckoning forward some honoured lesser soldier to train
with her. “Just… astounded.”

“By their talent?” Raven asks, following her gaze, and Clarke snorts, shaking her head.

“They may be talented, and I’ll admit it is unlike any fight I have seen before, but they are utterly foolish.”

“Foolish?” Octavia asks, her tone ticking defensively.

“Valyrian steel is the sharpest steel in the known world,” Clarke tells her, sharply, “They should be training with blunted objects.”

“Do you fight, my lady?” Raven eyes her curiously and Clarke gets the sense, as she always does around the blacksmith, that Raven is filing away everything she knows about her.

“Not with a sword.”

“Then with what?” Octavia asks.

Clarke’s eyes venture back to the training yard, and she thinks of the vial of poison hidden in a slit within her mattress. “Something much deadlier.”

A shout from beneath them cuts through Octavia’s questions, and Clarke’s eyes focus to find the queen on the ground, her hand clasped over her side. The buffoon soldier is staring down at her, his mouth an o of horror, and his sword swinging at his side, blood dripping from the blade to pool beside him on the ground. Everyone stares, silent and frozen, and for a moment Clarke thinks that she too will be stuck to the spot, but her feet are moving before she even realises it.

“Fetch a healer!” The voice is her own but she barely recognises it. Everything seems distant and far away, her feet skidding a little over the frozen ground as she races across the courtyard. It is only when she is on her knees beside the queen that she realises no one has moved, and she looks up desperately, her words a shout. “Fetch a healer!”

Finally, her shout seems to have the intended effect and she sees at least five people run in the direction of the castle. Satisfied, her eyes fall back to when Lexa lies. The queen’s blood is seeping from her wound and into the dirt around them, but her eyes are open and she is struggling to speak, braids splayed across the ground. Clarke rips her cloak from around her shoulders and bundles it up. Gently, her fingers snake beneath Lexa’s head and slide the cloak beneath it. The queen’s breath comes easier at that and Clarke is able to coax stiff fingers away from the wound. She gets only that far when hands fasten around her shoulders and pull her back so roughly that she is almost thrown to the ground.

When she gathers herself enough to look up, she finds Lady Anya bent over the queen, her eyes darting back to glare at her.

“Move,” She pushes at the Queensguard, but the woman does not yield.

“Stay away from her!” Anya snaps, shoving her away as if she were an errant street child.

“I can help her, I know about healing.” She thrusts all her weight into the woman and is gratified to see Anya stumble away a little. “But you have to let me at her.”

“You are not to be trusted!” Anya reels around, her eyes glowing with her fury, and Clarke can feel her own anger towering like a beast within her, when a voice cuts through them both.
“Anya, let her-” A hand pushes at Anya and Clarke finds the queen herself staring up at her as Anya reluctantly allows her space to see Lexa. Green eyes are dark as the Wolfswood, and clouded with pain, but the queen is clearly coherent enough to understand what is happening, because she nods to Clarke. “Continue, please.”

Clarke doesn’t waste time on words and instead snatches the dagger from the sheath at Anya’s hip to cut away at the leather and cloth covering Lexa’s wound. The slice isn’t too deep, though it appears ragged and blood is still pulsing steadily from it. Firmly, she presses her hand down on the wound. The queen cries out softly, but Clarke ignores her, turning to Anya and demanding.

“I need bandages or cloth or something to bind this with, quickly.”

Anya stares at her for a moment, stony faced, but before Clarke can shout again she shrugs off her own white cloak and takes her dagger to slice cleanly through the cloth.

“Anya-” Lexa tries to protest, reaching out, but Anya shakes her off impatiently.

“I can get another cloak,” She snaps, and hands Clarke the first of the long strips.

Clarke takes the first piece and folds it onto itself several times, until it creates a padding. Her fingers are slippery with blood and she can feel the queen’s chest heaving beneath her touch. Quickly, she exchanges the pressure of her hands for the padded strip, pressing it down firmly onto the wound. With the next strip in her hand, she turns to speak to the queen, who is pulling in long, low breaths.

“I’m going to have Lady Anya lift you a little so that I can bandage you, do you understand?”

At Lexa’s nods, she turns expectantly to the Queensguard. Anya does as she instructs, carefully raising the queen off the ground by just an inch, and ignoring her muffled grunt, so that Clarke can wrap the next several strips around her abdomen, giving enough pressure to the wound to keep Lexa from bleeding out.

Commotion in the crowd that has formed around them makes her lift her head, and she finds the familiar robes of the healer.

“I tried to stop the bleeding,” She explains, and it’s only then that she realises she is breathless and sweating, but chilled to the bone without her cloak. As the healer kneels on the queen’s other side, she continues, “It doesn’t seem to have gone deep enough to do that much damage, but she could go into shock.”

The healer nods, but it is the queen who speaks, her voice low and raspy as she is loaded onto the litter brought by the healer.

“Thank you.”

Clarke can only nod, her limbs shaking as she slowly stands. When she looks down, she can see that the bottom of her dress is stained with red where she knelt in the queen’s pooling blood, and she pulls in a deep breath at the sight.

A cloak appears around her shoulders, and she grasps it by the collar, glancing up to see Raven giving her a weak smile. Her head bows in thanks, but before she can speak Anya’s hand is wrapped around her arm, pulling her closer to speak in a low voice.

“If you have harmed our queen I swear I will see the end of your House.” She promises, softly, and Clarke wrenches her arm away.
Quietly, for the sake of the audience around them, she says. “I’ve probably saved her life.”

“We’ll see,” Anya tells her, and the dangerous look in her eyes is enough to make Clarke turn on her heel and stalk away, lest the woman see her trembling.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of your comments so far, they do so so much to keep me motivated and inspired! I love hearing what you think and replying to you all! What did you think of this chapter? We’re finally getting some clexa progress, though they don’t particularly like each other yet! Let me know down below or over on tumblr @onemilliongoldstars!
Lexa wakes to pain. The wound in her side is deep enough to throb to every heart beat and she lies for a moment, staring at the darkened canopy above her bed and breathing slowly in and out. This sort of pain is not unfamiliar to her; several years in the battlefield has given her plenty of scars to tell stories about, but it has been quite some time since she last received one. The sensation makes her feel powerless and utterly vulnerable, and her fingers inch under her pillow to find the cold touch of the dagger she keeps there. She is allowed only these few moments of quiet in her dark, painful world, before a hitching of her breath startles her handmaiden minder into wakefulness.

Cara hurries to her side, fussing over her anxiously, and Lexa tries to give her a weary smile, which she does not return. The girl fetches Nyko, Winterfell’s healer, who appears so quickly that Lexa fears he had been sleeping in the corridor, close at hand. The man is kindly and quiet, but firm. She had been administered milk of the poppy the day before, and despite sleeping until first light this morning she still feels tired. Nyko gives her another, smaller dose, and inspects her wound despite her protests. What he finds satisfies him.

“There is no sign of infection and the bleeding has nearly stopped.” He tells her, in his deep voice, and Lexa tries to get her swimming head to focus on his words. Nyko can see through her façade, and he laughs, touching at her shoulder in an attempt to keep her from rising. “Bed rest for at least three days.” He instructs her, firmly, and Lexa rolls her eyes, but nods her assent.

Confined to her bed, she is unable to escape the fury of both Titus and Anya, who enter her chamber as soon as Nyko deems her well enough. Anya paces and threatens and curses the soldier whose hand she put her sword in. She is still without her cloak and Lexa makes a mental note to have another one made for her. It is strange to see her without it. For once, Titus agrees with her, and together they are halfway to planning the man’s death before Lexa can stop them. She doesn’t dare to say that she was distracted by the sight of a certain golden haired visitor talking with her guard and a stranger Lexa didn’t recognise. It takes almost an hour of convincing to make them leave, and when she eventually pleads that her injury is paining her, Anya casts her suspicious glance as she walks out of the door.

Aden comes to sit with her throughout the day, and his company is much kinder to her spirit than her angry advisors. She sits up in bed and talks him through her correspondence, explaining their relationship to the Iron Bank and the yield needed on the early spring crops to make up for the long winter. He concentrates for some time, but when the sun has crested in the sky she can see that his eyes dart to the window and knows that she has kept him in her dark rooms for too long.

Alone for the afternoon, she sleeps for fleeting moments, and picks at the abundance of dishes sent up to her from the kitchen. Sweet milk and thinly sliced apples, porridge mixed with honey and dates and a soft, sweet sponge stack up along her bed, interspersed with the letters and parchments, but she
has little appetite for it. The direwolves lie about her floor. They are often to be found together when
she is injured, and they flop about the room, grooming one another and dozing. Liberty rests her
head on the bed where Lexa can stroke it and she offers bites of her food to Patience and Faith when
they whine. When the kitchen girl appears for the fifth time to deposit a light chicken broth, she tuts
quietly at the food leftover and Lexa is sure that she will report her to Leanna.

As the kitchen girl leaves, Cara appears at her bed chamber door, shifting unhappily from foot to foot
and Lexa gestures for her to speak.

“Lady Clarke is in your solar, my queen. She’s asking to see you.”

“Oh,” Lexa glances down at herself, sat in her great bed with food and dogs and books around her,
and flushes. “I suppose-”

“I did tell her you were not to be moved, your majesty.” Cara grumbles, “And that it wouldn’t do to
have you receive her in your chamber.”

“It’ll be fine, Cara,” Lexa soothes her handmaiden and gestures to the bed. “If you could just…”

“Of course,” Cara steps around the direwolves as if they were pups, well used to their presence, and
even dares to shoo Liberty off the bed. The sandy beast growls lowly, but scampers off the bed at
Cara’s firm expression. She collects all of the platters and dishes and puts them to one side as Lexa
piles together her parchments and books. After a moment of hesitation, Cara reaches behind her to
help readjust her pillows, until she can sit up straight and pull her long braid over one shoulder. She
is already wearing a heavy, fur lined robe to cover her decency, but Cara smooths the bed covers out
and adds a grey fur on top.

“Alright,” Lexa says at last, “See her in.”

Lady Clarke enters hesitantly at Cara’s side. Her golden hair falls in waves about her shoulders,
braided in a softer pattern than Lexa has seen it in before, and the blue velvet of her dress, with it’s
long sleeves and golden trim, make her eyes seem as deep as the sapphire pendant around her neck.
She pauses in the doorway, her eyes taking in every inch of the room, before landing on Lexa, sat
calm and serene in her large bed.

“Lady Clarke,” She says, with as much dignity as she can offer. “Welcome.”

“Thank you, your majesty,” Lady Clarke drops a small curtsey, her eyes flickering over the
direwolves nervously. “And thank you for allowing me an audience.”

“Of course,” Lexa bows her head courteously. “What can I do for you?”

Lady Clarke hesitates and then says, slowly, “I actually- just wanted to see how you are.”

“Oh,” Lexa tries desperately to school her expression into something other than shock, but based on
the look Cara has on her face she is unsuccessful. “I- I see. Well, please take a seat.” She gestures
around the room in general and Lady Clarke’s eyes flicker to one of the many comfortable arm chairs
in the corners of the room, before her eyes find the high backed chair at Lexa’s side, which Aden
had dragged closer earlier. A flicker of determination passes through the crease in her eyes and the
set in her lips, and Lexa tries not to be impressed when she lifts her skirts around her ankles and steps
carefully around the direwolves until she can settle into that chair.

Lexa’s eyes move to Cara’s waiting figure and she says, “You can leave us Cara, thank you.”

Cara’s eyes flicker between them, but she gives a curtsey and then Lexa is alone in a room with
Clarke of House Tyrell, as she has never been before.

A moment of awkward silence passes between them, before Lexa says, a little haltingly.

“You were good to come, Lady Clarke. I am quite well.”

“So your healer told me.” Clarke’s eyes pass over her body and Lexa feels exposed, despite the many layers covering her. She remembers clearly the feeling of Lady Clarke’s hands on her skin, her eyes so intense and fierce above her. “I wanted to see for myself. I’m rather invested in your recovery.”

“That’s understandable,” Lexa concedes. “I was hoping to have the opportunity to thank you more formally when I am able, but I’d like to thank you-”

“I didn’t come here for thanks,” Clarke cuts through her and a beat of silence, surprised and still, passes between them before Lexa says, softly.

“Regardless, I am thankful. Nyko says you could well have saved my life.”

Clarke snorts at that, “I doubt that, you’re wound isn’t that deep and I’m sure Lady Mormont would have figured out to add pressure.”

“Still, it was you who moved first.” Lexa’s eyes meet hers and in the low afternoon light streaming in from the window, Lady Clarke looks like one of the great stained windows in the septs, soft and glowing. “I remember that.”

“One of the downsides of being so awed is that people don’t know what to do in a crisis, I imagine,” Clarke fixes her with a smile and she laughs, brows creasing when she jars her wound.

“I suppose so. It is a good thing you are not so awed.”

“I knew it would be useful.”

Lexa’s eyes move over her, surveying the southern lady closely and she is serious when she speaks again. “Why did you do it?”

Lady Clarke’s eyes crease, lips parting softly in surprise, “What?”

“I was under the impression that you didn’t like me or my ways.” She keeps her voice steady and even, no accusation. “Why try so hard to help someone you despise?” It is a question afforded to them by their privacy, never would Lexa ask this in front of her court. But here in the quiet of her chambers, she is able to talk freely.

For a moment it seems as though Clarke will not answer, her eyes fixed to the bed coverings, and Lexa almost opens her mouth to excuse her, but then the southern lady speaks.

“Do you really think so little of me that I would let you die just because we disagreed?”

Lexa’s brows crease, her mouth dropping open, “No, of course not.”

“That is what you just asked me, though.” Clarke’s eyes meet hers and the hurt she sees in the twist of her face is almost painful. “I knew that northerners hated southerners but I didn’t think-”

“Lady Clarke,” Her hand reaches out before she even realises it, and her fingers brush across Clarke’s softly. Clarke jolts, surprised, and wide eyes meet hers. “Forgive me, that was not what I meant. I would never question your honour like that, I know that you are a brave and dignified
Lexa sees her swallow heavily before she speaks. “Thank you.” Her eyes flicker away and Lexa withdraws her hand, suddenly distinctly aware of the contact. “I may not agree with you, your majesty, but I have no wish to see you harmed. You are an honest, kind woman and a good queen to your people.” Her eyes dart back to Lexa and she says, her voice stilted with forced mirth. “Besides, for all I know you are the only person here between Lady Anya and I, and I fear she wants to rip my throat out.”

She laughs again, and hears the soft, husky sound of Clarke’s laughter join hers. “That may be true,” She concedes, “But now that you’ve saved my life, I think Lady Anya will be in your debt.”

“I hope not,” Clarke confesses, still smiling. “I would not know what to do with her gratitude.”

“It is rarely given,” Lexa admits, and smooths down the pelt across her legs. “But you are safe I think, from what I have heard this morning she has focused her attentions on the soldier I trained with.”

“It wasn’t his fault.” Lady Clarke rolls her eyes, and Lexa’s brows shoot up, her lips twitching at the sight of such impertinence.

“Oh really?”

Lady Clarke pushes a strand of hair behind her ear, answering surely. “He was a green recruit, he must have known no better and been desperate to prove himself to his queen. Besides,” She sets the queen with a look quite unlike any Lexa has ever seen, “You were training with Valyrian steel, you both deserved to lose a finger at least.”

Her eyebrows shoot up, “You recognise Valyrian steel?”

“My father’s blade is made of the stuff,” Clarke tells her, and her eyes soften. “I almost lost many fingers to it when I was a child, I know it’s dangerous.” There is a moment of silence between them, Clarke’s eyes hazy with thought. “Have you heard anything from him?” She asks, abruptly, and Lexa blinks, surprised.

“I’m afraid not,” The girl’s face falls at her words, and she attempts to joke. “But I have also heard less from your mother, for which I thank you.”

“Oh,” Clarke smiles again, though it is with exasperated good humour, “You’re welcome, though I now receive three letters from her for every one I return.”

“I’m sure she misses her daughter,” Lexa placates, and Clarke’s brows draw together, but she is saved from answering by Faith’s approaching figure.

Lady Clarke flinches away, just slightly, as the direwolf noses at her leg curiously, and Lexa can see how her body has become stiff and fearful.

“They will not hurt you,” She tells her, quietly, and Clarke startles at the sound.

“I just- they are such queer creatures. So foreign to me.”

“You must have heard stories,” Lexa pats at the bed invitingly, and Liberty resumes her place from earlier, curling up to place her large head on Lexa’s lap. Her tongue pokes from her mouth and her eyes close immediately as Lexa begins scratching between her ears. “But they are not the fearsome creatures you have heard of, not really. Like any animal, if you treat them with respect they will
return it.”

Clarke’s eyes flicker down to where Faith looks at her, hopefully and Lexa gestures at the platters on the table beside her bed, within reach.

“Try to feed her, maybe that’s what she wants.”

Clarke reaches out, and takes a piece of juicy venison from off the plate, holding it cautiously out for Faith. The direwolf immediately darts forward, eating it from her fingers and licking off the juice for good measure. It startles a surprised laugh from Clarke’s mouth and when she looks up at Lexa it is with amazement. Lexa can feel an answering smile pulling at her own lips and she nods to the dish. Slowly, Clarke feeds Faith until the plate is empty and the direwolf, seeming to sense it, rumbles a soft gratitude and puts her head into Clarke’s lap.

Clarke stares down at her, looking to Lexa for help and at her instruction, she runs a tentative hand down Faith’s white fur.

“I’m afraid you have no venison left,” She says, quietly and Lexa shakes her head.

“I have enough food left to feed the whole of Winter Town, I’m glad it went to someone who enjoyed it.”

Clarke hums her agreement, and is quiet again, running her hands over Faith’s ears. The direwolf’s tail is wagging softly on the floor, swishing with every movement and the sound is enough to send Lexa to sleep, until Clarke says.

“Thank you… for the lemon cakes.”

“Oh,” Lexa’s face heats at the mention of the treats and when her eyes meet Clarke’s it is with a terrible uncertainty that she has never felt before. What she finds is blue, clear and bright, and she drowns in it. “It was my pleasure.”

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The queen’s chambers are lit with soft candles and a fire flickering in the hearth when Anya steps in. There are tapestries on many of the walls, thick and woven with earthy tones, and rolled scrolls litter many of the surfaces. She finds the queen sat at her table, a long structure made from dark ironwood and groaning under the weight of the many books and parchments she has piled it with. Lexa is holding a letter, her eyes focused, and she twists a dagger absent mindedly between her fingers as she reads.

“You’ll bleed yourself dry if you’re not careful.” Anya’s voice makes her startle, the dagger falling to the table with a clatter. “Not that you haven’t already tried,” Anya adds, eyes sliding down her body critically. Lexa is still a little pale, but other than her stiff movement there is no sign of the wound she suffered.

“Anya,” Lexa sets down the letter she was reading, smiling at her in welcome. “I’m sure I should have the guards announce you, captain or not.”

“They’re more loyal to me than they are to you.” Anya tells her, with a shrug and when her cousin only smiles, she wanders to the counter where the wine decanter sits, pouring them each a glass before sitting in the chair across from the queen.

Lexus takes the glass, drinking gratefully. “Unfortunately I’m sure that’s true,” She sets her eyes on Anya from across the table and asks, her voice soft. “Should I be worried?”
Anya snorts, and stretches out her legs, crossing them at the ankle. The warmth from the fire soaks into her cold bones and the queen’s wine is especially fine. “You’re safe, I have no desire for the crown.”

“It is taxing at times,” Lexa admits and Anya knows that she would never say such a thing in front of anyone but her or Aden. Lexa taps the pile of letters before her, drawing Anya’s attention back, “Here, Lady Tyrell writes yet again to enquire as to the protection of her daughter.”

“Again?” Anya’s brows tick up in surprise, and she accepts the letter that Lexa holds out for her. Lady Tyrell’s handwriting is spiky and slanted, the ink dripping and smearing as if the letter had been written in some urgency, though Anya knows the woman has sent many similar letters. “You’ve already assigned the girl a constant guard, what more can the woman want?”

“For her daughter to be under lock and key, I expect,” Lexa responds, dryly, eyes flickering over another letter.

“I don’t think your southern rose would like that very much.” Anya rolls her eyes, placing the letter back on the table.

Lexa’s nose wrinkles at the nickname, but she doesn’t comment on it. “She would not. I’m sure the girl is safe enough here, she’s under my protection.”

“Does she really think so lowly of us that a northerner would attempt to murder her daughter? When we only just now have peace?”

“It seems so,” Lexa shakes her head, “No matter, I shall write to her again to tell her that her daughter is in safe hands.” Her lips quirk into a small smile, and she taps another letter with the blade of her dagger, smirking as she speaks. “This letter should amuse you more.”

“Really?” Anya’s voice is dripping with scepticism. “I am not so easily amused by royal musings as you, cousin.”

“Here,” Lexa slides the letter to her, but before Anya can begin to read she continues, “Lord Finn of House Swann writes to me to ask that I please release Lady Clarke from my clutches.”

“Your clutches?” Anya echoes, laughter bubbling in her chest as she reads. “Her ladyship is held so dear in my heart that I fear our separation may cause us both to wane away to nothingness,” She quotes, snorting. “He certainly has a way with words.”

“He seems to think I am the dragon keeping his maiden captive,” Lexa rolls her eyes, taking a sip of the heady, perfumed wine. “Despite the fact that Lady Clarke was sent up here of her own free will.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Anya mutters, and Lexa concedes.

“Her parents then. They could easily have refused the exchange.”

“It is hard to see the truth when blinded by love,” Anya offers, curtly, her lip curling with disdain. “He is a foolish young boy blinded by her beauty.”

“He is distantly in line for the throne,” Lexa admits, “He would not be an awful match for her. Perhaps they will unite when she returns home.”

“If the boy can wait that long,” Anya eyes her over the lip of her goblet and continues, cautiously. “The Tyrells are falling from favour, I hear.”
“You’re listening to palace gossip like Titus now?” Lexa’s voice is light, but there is an undertone of steel to her words.

“No, I don’t have Titus’s chain of whisperers,” Anya rolls her tongue around the words distastefully. “But Titus is anxious and when you won’t listen to him, he talks at me. Pike wields more power in the south, so they say.”

“The master of coin, more power than the Hand?” Lexa scoffs, but Anya continues.

“You and I both know that the titles given to lords are essentially meaningless once they’re on the small council. If Tyrell and the king are both weak men they could easily be swayed by the words of a stronger one, especially a Lannister with command of the most powerful armies on the continent.”

“Thelonious Jaha is not weak for pursuing peace,” Lexa snaps. “And Lord Tyrell is a quiet but strong man.” Her eyes flicker down to her desk, and her voice drops, as if she is speaking only to herself. “Look at his daughter, a weak man would not raise such a child.”

Anya’s eyes glance over the dark, bowed head before her and a flicker of worry forms in her gut, squirming away like a rabbit burrowing away for the summer.

“I keep my ear to the ground for news of Tris,” She tells her, quietly, and Lexa’s eyes dart up, softening.

“I understand.” Her words are cut through with pity, and Anya’s stomach turns at the sound of it. She stands abruptly, draining her wine even as Lexa continues to speak. “She is protected in the south, I promise.”

“I am only trying to keep her safe.” Her voice breaks, “And you.” Before Lexa can respond, she gives a stiff bow, suddenly desperate to be out of the dark, stuffy room. “With your leave, your majesty.” She doesn’t wait for Lexa’s answer, turning on her heel and striding from the solar before Lexa can stop her. Outside, the guards eye her strangely and she shoots them a glare so ferocious that she thinks she sees them quiver in their boots.

Her head swims with the queen’s words for the rest of the day, plaguing her. When she sees a shadowy figuring waiting for her at the entrance to the guard’s quarters later that evening, it is with a mixture of relief and exasperation that she takes her firmly by the arm, ignoring her protests, and leads her away with a stony expression. Only once they have stepped into the relative privacy of the tack room, empty and dark but for the moon shining in through the window, does she release the figure’s arm.

The woman grunts, pushing down her hood and eyeing Anya furiously as she rubs at her arm. When she opens her mouth to make her irritation known, Anya cuts through her.

“You know better than to wait for me there.”

“Nobody even looked at me twice until you grabbed me.” The woman argues, fiercely and Anya’s eyes darken.

“This is serious Reyes, no one else can know about this.”

“Why not?” Raven rolls her eyes, “I’m sure everyone from Measter Titus to the queen has secret eyes on Lady Clarke, why not you too?”

Anya takes a menacing step forwards, her voice dropping to a low murmur and she is gratified to see Raven edge a step back. “Our relationship with the south is precarious. If things go wrong, it is my
sister who will be beheaded in front of the watching southerners, is that what you want?"

"Of course not," Raven spits, burning hot with fury like the forge she slaves over.

"Good," Anya watches the blacksmith with dark eyes, "What do you know?"

"She isn’t dangerous not really." Raven swallows, eyes flickering to the side anxiously. "Surely you see that, she wouldn’t have saved the queen if she was. She isn’t dangerous, unless you consider arrogance a threat."

"Arrogance can be dangerous." Anya answers, "Has she said anything about the south?"

"Nothing of importance. Sometimes she speaks of home."

"And her correspondence? Does she speak of that?"

"Only that her mother writes too much and her father doesn’t write at all.” Raven grunts.

"Really?” Anya’s brows crease, “Lord Tyrell doesn’t write to her? I’d heard she was favoured by her father.”

“Well, fathers don’t usually make time for their daughters when it doesn’t suit them,” Raven mutters, low and Anya’s eyes flicker over her again with a little more interest.

“Speaking from experience, Reyes?”

Raven’s face draws closed like shutters keeping out a snowstorm, “Doesn’t matter.”

Sensing the girl has no more information forthcoming, Anya pulls a few coins from her purse, offering them out. Raven pauses for a moment, her eyes flickering between Anya and the outstretched coins, before finally snatching them into her hand, her nose wrinkling with disgust. Pushing past her, Raven slips from the tack room with the silence of a ghost and Anya is left in the slither of cold light shining down from the moon above.

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The queen’s injury means that Clarke is free to dine alone, away from the formal dining chamber in the queen’s quarters. She luxuriates in the opportunity to be away from the prying eyes of the northerners, though since the queen was wounded she finds that she is the interest of many of the small folk in Winter Town. Wherever she goes, she is followed by murmurs and curious looks, and it soon becomes tiresome enough that she requests that Raven be brought to her rooms to dine with her, rather than facing the curiosity of the crowds in the Smoking Log.

In Highgarden she would never dream of inviting a common person to dine with her, where she could be observed and whispered about by her ladies, but in Winterfell she finds she has little to lose. Raven accepts her offer graciously, and though she seems a little out of place at first, the blacksmith’s apprentice soon settles into her usual, raucous joviality. The solar the queen had offered for her use is not nearly so large and grand as her own, but it is close to Clarke’s chambers, a small, circular room with a fire to warm it and rich, light coloured draperies. Several over stuffed armchairs and a futon sit close to the fire, and a table with a top of light marble fills up the rest of the room, surrounded by chairs.

Clarke plucks a sweetbread from the platter in the table, and then pushes the tray to Octavia. The guard eyes it uncomfortably. She has been unsettled and out of place since Raven insist that she sit and dine with them. Calling upon another guard to take her place at the door, she had sunk into a
chair and picked at their rich food with reluctant appreciation.

Their meals are quickly eaten, with Raven’s excessive and amusing exclamations punctuating each new course, and when they are done Clarke slides the sweetbreads and dates to one side and calls for more wine, before reaching for her cyvasse board. The checked marble tiles and beautifully engraved pieces had been a gift from her father when she left, and she runs her fingers over the delicate carving of the dragon piece, before explaining the rules to an eager Raven.

The girl is disappointed to learn that the game does not involve monetary gain, but she listens hard and after a few questions and clarifications, she picks up on the rules and strategies of the game easily.

Octavia, on the other hand, has little love for the game. She groans, leaning back in her chair and sipping from her wine as Raven considers her next move.

“You play this all the time in Highgarden?” She asks, then adds, “When there are so many other things to do?”

“My father is a fan of the game,” Clarke explains, “He learnt it from the Dornish in the south, who learnt it from traders from the east. He taught me to play.”

“Willingly?” Octavia clarifies, “Or in the same way I was taught embroidery?”

The words break Raven from her reverie and her eyes light up with mischief. “You were taught embroidery?”

Octavia rolls her eyes, “I wasn’t always a soldier, you know. Septa Ordell taught me before I became a page.”

“You were raised in the castle?” Clarke’s eyes widen in surprise, and she turns to give the soldier her full attention. “Why?”

Octavia half shrugs, and her darkened eyes tell of a story she is not willing to relive. “I had no family,” She says, succinctly, and Clarke knows her guard well enough not to press her any further.

“Did your father also teach you healing, my lady?” Raven asks, casually, but Clarke is suddenly aware of the eyes in the room upon her. As carefully as she can, she shrugs her shoulders, staring down into her wine glass.

“I only know the basics.”

“You know enough to save the queen,” Octavia counters and Clarke swirls her wine around her cup thoughtfully, watching the red liquid leave a trail of dregs behind it.

“Do you know what the most potent weapon someone can wield is?” She asks, at last and her voice is deceptively soft and easy. At their silence, she continues. “Poison.”

The quiet that spreads between them is long and heavy, pooling like blood upon the stone beneath them and she waits, trying to keep her face as impassive as possible.

At last, Octavia speaks, and her voice is dark. “I thought poison was the weapon of cowards.”

“Poison is the weapon of someone who wants to survive,” Carefully, Clarke takes hold of her dragon, moving it a few places across the board so that it directly threatens Raven’s king. “Here, what would you do, Raven?”
Raven’s eyes flicker uncertainly between her and the board, and after a few moments she reaches forward and moves her knight to intercept the dragon.

“Very good,” Clarke praises, “But you have left yourself open to your flank. You weren’t watching my priestess, because she can only move one way, but by combatting the immediate threat you have left yourself vulnerable.” She picks up the carved priestess, with a thread of blood red running through her white marble, and takes Raven’s king. When she looks up, both women are watching her with clouded expressions and she continues, quietly. “Raised in the court of the south, you learn to expect enemies from every corner. Poison is quick and leaves you with no blood on your fingers.”

She takes the priestess piece into her hands, running the pad of her thumb across the engraving. “My grandmother taught me my poisons when I was no older than five summers.”

“That still doesn’t explain how you knew how to heal the queen,” Octavia’s voice is dangerously low and her fingers have edged to the sword in its hilt at her side.

“To understand how poison works, you must have some understanding of the human body.” Clarke shrugs, attempting to appear unaffected. She meets Octavia’s eyes, and continues. “I have no desire to hurt your queen, Octavia. If I did, I would have let her bleed out on the training ground.”

Octavia’s eyes stare into hers for a moment, as if reading her for any deceit, but she must find none because her hand leave the hilt of her sword, and she settled back into her chair.

“But just because I do not swing a sword,” Clarke sets the priestess back onto the board, in the place that Raven’s king had occupied only moments ago. “Does not mean I am helpless.”

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Her injury heals slowly, and at the insistence of all of her advisors she tries not to strain herself. The routine quickly wears on her, however, and Lexa quickly finds herself impatient and anxious to train again, though no one will dare to fight her in her current state. Her handmaidsen accompany her everywhere but her private chambers, in case she should need something, and Anya is often on hand to give her a few strong words to keep her in line. She feels more like a prisoner than a queen, especially when Titus takes the opportunity to have endless meetings of the small council over the most mundane matters.

One night, when she is so thoroughly bored that she feels as if her brain is porridge, she dismisses Titus from her chambers and slips out into the castle corridors before one of her handmaids can catch up with her. She knows this castle well enough that avoiding her advisors is an easy task, and the godswood provides a haven from the issues that seem to plague her every step.

Behind the tall gates, the world seems to fall away. The air is peaceful and quiet in the muffled way that seems to consume the world when the snow is heavy on the ground. Above her, the canopy of the trees that span for three acres form a skeletal roof, few leaves sprouting leaves in this wintery landscape, despite the arrival of spring. The snow crunches under foot, and she walks until she spots the heart tree, where the old gods of the north reside. The red eyes and mournful mouth of the heart tree stare down upon a figure, andLexa’s steps falter at the sight of Lady Clarke’s kneeling form. There are flowers, tiny and white and delicate, blooming through the snow and she is sat on the grass in nothing more than a nightgown and thin blanket, threading the flowers through each other.

She hesitates, playing uncertainly with the edge of the thick fur cape around her shoulders. The weight of the silver circlet around her head feels heavier than usual, the metal cold against her skin as she watches Lady Clarke bow forwards and collect a few more of the flowers, playing with them in her lap, delicate curls escaping from the rough braid running down her back to hang around her neck.
The burst of wind through the clearing makes her shiver, pulling her cloak closer and she sees Clarke’s shoulder curl forwards, drawing her body in tighter against the cold. Her feet carry her closer before she can stop herself and her boots are heavy against the frozen grass, drawing the girl’s head up to stare at her, blue eyes wide and startled. Clarke rushes to her feet, gathering her blanket closer around her shoulders and self consciously tucking the strands of hair behind her ears.

“Lady Clarke,” Lexa pauses a few steps away, observing the girl carefully. “You should really be more careful. It’s almost midnight, the cold is dangerous at times like this.”

“Your majesty,” Clarke tongue flickers out, licking at cold chapped lips. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“No?” Lexa’s brows furrow and she inches closer across the snow, “Is there anything I can do to make your stay more comfortable? Is it the cold?”

“Not at all,” Clarke hurries to correct her, eyes wandering to the surrounding trees, “I was simply restless… and I can see the godswood from my window.” She smiles sheepishly, “I managed to avoid my guard.”

“I can see that,” She hesitates for a beat, then adds, conspiratorially. “I have managed to avoid my advisors.”

Clarke’s eyes widen in surprise and then her lips lift into a wide smile and she lets out a soft, golden laugh at the words. “A difficult task, I can imagine.”

“Almost impossible,” Lexa bows her head to hide her smile.

“And yet here you are.”

“Here we are,” Lexa looks back to where Clarke was sitting, “were you praying my lady? I did not mean to disturb you.”

“No,” Clarke shakes her head and a curl escapes back in front of her face again. “No, I pray in the sept. I… would not know how to pray here, though it is beautiful and peaceful.” She gathers in a breath, lips pressing shut for a moment before she glances back at Lexa with another secret, shy smile. “I was actually making garlands.”

“Garlands?” Lexa echoes and her eyes wander down to where one of Clarke’s hands appears from beneath her make shift cape, offering out the simple chain of white blossoms for inspection.

Reaching out, her fingers- rough and calloused- brush against smooth, soft skin and delicately take the flowers from her hands, turning them over carefully to look at.

“Childish I know,” Clarke sounds embarrassed, anxious to explain herself, “But back home there are so many flowers and here… there is only snow.”

“We celebrate the first blossoms here, they show that spring is coming, but if you think that snow is not just as beautiful as flowers I would have to disagree with you,” Lexa hands back the blossoms, “Please, you are cold my lady. I must insist that you return inside with me before you catch a chill. I expect your mother would pronounce war on the north yet again if you were to fall ill under my protection.”

Clarke dares to roll her eyes just slightly, but when Lexa opens the silver clasp on her fur cloak and sweeps it around Clarke’s shoulders she does not protest and accepts the hand held out for her.
Together they walk back through the godswood, Lexa carefully guiding her guest away from the icy patches of snow and the roots reaching up to grab for their ankles. Her hand feels warm on Lexa’s arm, fingers slim and grip firm.

“I must protest your majesty,” Clarke breaks the moment of quiet between them, “How could the snow ever be so beautiful as a field of wild flowers?”

Lexa considers her words, “If you would be obliging, we could journey to the Wall together once the weather is clearer. It is a spectacular sight.”

“I would like that very much.” Clarke offers her a small smile and her hand tightens when her feet stumble and Lexa reaches out to catch her, an arm slipping around her waist to stop her. Clarke’s eyes are wide with surprise, body crushed to Lexa’s chest and her hand touches gently at Lexa’s shoulder, nudging her away.

“My apologies,” Lexa blinks, stepping away and clasping her hands behind her back carefully, lips pursed. Her heart is racing, though she does not know why.

“No, no. Thank you.” She still sounds slightly breathless. They walk again, falling into a silence that is now more painful and tense than it had been before and Lexa grasps clumsily for something to break it.

“I received an interesting letter a few days ago,” She says finally, and Lady Clarke’s eyes move to her curiously. Under her gaze, Lexa explains. “Lord Finn of House Swann says he wishes to have you returned to the south, so that he can marry you.”

“Oh,” To her surprise, Clarke does not seem joyous, only amused and maybe a little exasperated. “I’m sorry, I tried to stop him.”

“You did?” Lexa’s brows shoot up and they come to a halt at the gate to the godswood. They both hesitate, as if unwilling to leave the quiet and privacy it offers them.

“You’re surprised?” Clarke counters, eyebrows rising.

“He wrote with such fervour,” Lexa elaborates, unsettled by the lady’s quiet confidence beside her. “I assumed you were already… committed to one another in some way.”

“We exchanged a kiss in the orange orchard last summer,” Lady Clarke sighs and shakes her head, “But no promises have been made and neither will they be. He was wrong to write to you, I’m sorry.”

“Well, I am glad to know that your time here is not keeping you from your beloved,” Lexa says, at last and Clarke’s cheeks seem to pink a little, the first sign of bashfulness that Lexa has seen from her.

“I assure you, it is not.”

Lexa holds out her arm once again and if Lady Clarke tucks her body a little closer this time, she can only assume it is to shelter from the cold.

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let me know what you think of this chapter, I really like it so I hope you guys do too!
This chapter is a real turning point for clexa! Let me know below or over on tumblr @onemilliongoldstars what you think!
The white wolf- Faith, she remembers Lexa calling it- first appears outside her bedchamber three nights after her meeting in the godswood with the queen. Though she has always been raised on the teachings of the Seven, the gods that reign in the south, Clarke has to admit to finding the sept in Winterfell drab and uninspiring. It was easy to feel devout in the sept in Highgarden, where the stained glass windows reached as high as the treetops and choirs of children sang the praises of the gods into the vaulted ceilings. The faith of the Seven sits strangely in contrast to the politics of Highgarden, and though she had never been particularly pious her time in the sept had been enjoyable if only for a place to wear her grandest dresses in front of the nobility of the south and listen to pretty songs. Her parents had been devout enough, but as a young girl she hadn’t cared much for the gods, despite Prince Wells’s constant badgering and pious faith to the Seven. Now, in the decrepit sept in Winterfell, it is even harder to force herself to worship.

From her window, high in one of the castle towers, she can see the eerie godswood. It stretches for acres within the castle walls, a dark, snow covered forest. There is something silent and watchful about it, and sat beneath the heart tree at its centre, she had felt more in the presence of the gods than she ever did in the sept of Highgarden. Even thinking of it makes a chill rise to her skin.

The ghostly wolf lingers outside of her chambers, so still and quiet that she almost trips over it when she first steps out. Faith looks up at her with interest, stretching as she gapes. Behind her, a soft body collides into hers and she turns to find Reya, arms full of linens, staring down at the direwolf with terror in her eyes.

“Reya,” She touches at the handmaiden’s elbow, drawing her back to herself before the girl can be completely overcome. “It’s alright.”

“My- my lady, I-” Reya is trembling, the linens almost slipping from her arms, and Clarke soothes her as well as she can.

“She will not hurt you.” Octavia tells the handmaiden, her eyes running over her with something close to disdain, and Clarke feels herself bristle.

“You’re alright, Reya. Come,” Carefully, Clarke leads her back into the bedchamber with gentle hands.

She eases the girl to sit on the futon at the end of the bed, taking the linens from her hands to place in a pile beside them. The girl is still trembling, darting terrified glances to the door, and Clarke kneels before her, her dress crinkling and her bodice stiff. Her hands run over the girl’s knees, and she makes soft, soothing noises until Reya’s eyes flicker down to her.
“You must have seen the direwolves around the castle before, Reya?” Her voice stays low and even, as if she’s speaking to an uneasy mount.

“Yes, my lady, but-” Reya cuts herself off with a trembling sob. “Only from afar. They are… so big.”

“I thought you had northern blood? Where’s your dignity?” Octavia demands, from the doorway and Clarke’s glare is enough to make her falter.

Her voice is cold as ice when she speaks. “You’re not required in here Snow.”

Octavia’s jaw grinds, her eyes flickering between Clarke and Reya, but eventually she acquiesces, stepping out into the corridor to wait. She leaves the door hanging open, and Faith’s expectant face peers in. When she sees Clarke’s eyes on her, she takes a few steps closer into the room, a low, uncertain whine rumbling in her throat. Clarke wonders for a moment, her hands still rubbing gentle circles over her handmaiden’s trembling knees, and finally she gestures the wolf closer.

Faith seems to understand, because she trots into the room, her claws clicking against the wooden floor. Reya whimpers, and tears sparkle in her eyes, but Clarke doesn’t stop the wolf until she is a few paces away. From her place kneeling on the floor, Faith is so much larger than she has ever been before, and though Clarke sees the flash of her fangs she finds that most of her fear has gone. Hesitantly, she reaches out, and the wolf allows her to rub at the space between her ears, butting affectionately into her touch.

Reya hiccoughs over a sob beside her and Clarke says, quietly.

“You see? She doesn’t want to hurt us.”

Reya stares, open mouthed, as Faith accepts a few more moments of petting before flopping down onto the floor, her eyes sliding shut as Clarke continues to pet her. Her tail swishes against the floor as it moves back and forth, and she is so soft to the touch that Clarke almost forgets she is petting a wolf the size of a small horse.

Above her, Reya hiccoughs over a sob, and Clarke’s attention is drawn back to her. Clarke watches her go with a soft sigh and is left alone with the direwolf beside her. Faith’s eyes had slid open when Reya had moved, and now she watches her, her eyes like slits as Clarke continues to rub at the soft fur on her head. On her knees, Clarke is closer than she has ever been to the beast, and she takes the moment of peace to rake her eyes across Faith. The direwolf is long, sprawled out across the floor, and her tail is as long as a hand and a half sword. Her pelt is as white as the winter snows, and thick and warm. Around her paws her fur is matted with mud from where she has been running and hunting with her brothers and sisters, and her paws are almost as big as Clarke’s hands.
Though her eyes are now closed again, Clarke knows that they are as blue as the summer sky.

“Maybe one day you’ll allow me to draw you.” She tells the direwolf, quietly and Faith rumbles.

Reluctantly, Clarke draws her hands away from the soft fur, ignoring Faith’s whine of displeasure, and stands slowly back to her feet. Her hands brush over the brocade, embroidered bodice, shifting it back into place, and smooth out the long, heavy blue skirts. Faith clambers to her feet reluctantly, and follows a pace behind as Clarke straightens her shoulders and makes her way into the hallway where Octavia waits. The guard pushes away from her place leaning against the wall, and she must read the fury in Clarke’s eyes because she rolls her eyes and begins.

“The girl needs to toughen up, I was just-”

“You’re dismissed.” She is crisp and cool, her chin rising when Octavia’s mouth falls open in surprise.

“What?” The girl gapes at her, stuttering over her words. “You can’t do that! The queen-”

“When I decide I want you back on my service, I’ll request you from the queen.” Her voice is sharp. “Until then I want you out of my sight.”

“The girl was a fool, she deserved-”

“Out of my sight!” Her voice cuts through an octave, and it must be enough to convince Octavia that she’s being serious because the girl turns on her heel and marches away down the stairs.

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The air is close, in the way that suggests they should be expecting a heavy rainfall soon, and the clouds hang heavily over the castle in a rolling blanket of soft, dove grey. The air is warmer that it has been for an age, and Lexa can feel the season shifting into spring around her. Though it has been for a long time, the realisation that winter is finally over seems to hit her when she least expects it. The time for the long spring is coming and soon they will celebrate the first bloom and a new era of peace.

Lexa’s fingers flex against the bow string pulled taut. Her fingers brush against her cheek, her elbow perfectly positioned as years of training has taught her. The small archers yard is empty but for her and Valour and Liberty. The direwolves lie beside each other, Liberty almost asleep as Valour grooms her. The dirt underfoot is undisturbed and Lexa draws in a slow breath, steadying herself. Beneath her feet, she feels the bones of Winterfell, on the air she can smell the bread baking from the nearby kitchens and within her heavy furs she feels free to the playful winds from the west. Her breath escapes her slowly and she releases her grip on the bowstring, watching as the arrow soars towards its target. It thuds into place just to the left of the centre and she stretches her arms out, reaching for another bolt from the quiver at her hip when a presence disturbs her.

Turning, her fingers glance over her dagger until she finds her master at arms, Ser Indra, watching her. The woman bows her head respectfully when their eyes meet, and when Lexa gestures her closer, Indra makes her way across the courtyard as Lexa slots another arrow into her bow.

The woman who manages her guards and trained her when she was a child watches as she draws another arrow. Lexa waits for a moment, drawing in another slow breath, but when the bolt is released it hits the target in the same place, just left of the centre. She lets out a frustrated grunt.

“You’re distracted, your majesty.” Indra’s low, serious voice comes from beside her and Lexa nods her head, acquiescing.
“Running a kingdom is no small matter, it seems.”

“You’re out of practice too,” Indra remarks and when Lexa turns to fix her with a raised eyebrow, the master at arms does not flinch away.

“I wish I had more time,” She confesses, rotating her shoulder on her injured side to dispel any aches. “Nyko has barely cleared me for training.”

“As you say, you are busy running a kingdom.”

“I am,” Lexa leads them both to the table set up at the edge of the range and places down her bow, taking up the jug of water to pour herself a mug. “Fortunately I have you to supervise my soldiers, is all well?”

Indra purses her lips, an expression of distinct displeasure which Lexa had seen many times when she was a young squire. Just the sight of it makes her stomach clench anxiously. “I wish to speak to you about Lady Clarke, your majesty.”

“Lady Clarke?” Lexa’s voice ticks up, though she is less surprised than she should expect to be.

“You asked me to assign Octavia Snow to her guard when she first arrived.”

“I did,” Lexa places down the mug and her hands slide behind her back as she listens to Indra speak.

“Though Snow complained bitterly, I did as you asked. Several days ago, however, Snow told me that Lady Clarke wanted someone else for a while.”

“Someone else?” Lexa’s brows crease, her face drawing with irritation.

“I assigned other guards on a rotation, your majesty, expecting that the girl would have forgotten about it soon enough. But when I tried to send Snow back to her today, Snow returned and said Lady Clarke did not want her back yet.”

“Indra,” It is not often that Lexa finds fault with her master at arms. It is difficult to find fault with the woman who trained her from such a young age, and whose approval she craved so much, but now she straightens her shoulders, her voice sharp when she speaks. “I assigned Snow to Lady Clarke for a reason, she should not have been changed.”

“With all due respect, I was under the impression that you wanted Snow to be in your Queensguard someday, your majesty.” Indra is frustrated, and Lexa struggles against herself to continue.

“That is not a decision that is made yet.”

“But the girl is talented, and she is learning nothing following around some southern lady all day and night.” Indra argues and Lexa cuts her off sharply.

“Octavia Snow is a subject under my command, as are you Indra. You will do as I say without question.” Her tone is ice and her expression as hard as stone. Indra steps back immediately, bowing her head.

“Yes, your majesty. Forgive me, I spoke out of turn.”

The sign of deference is enough to extinguish any ire Lexa feels and she shakes her head, relaxing a little. Her voice is quieter when she continues.

“I know that Snow isn’t at her best protecting Lady Clarke. The girl’s mother is so convinced that
she will be harmed and I didn’t want to risk our alliance in any way. Octavia is the most loyal soldier I have, I trusted no other with Lady Clarke’s protection.” She hesitates for a moment, watching as Indra straightens and meets her eyes again. “But I will try to rotate her out for mornings or afternoons, so that she can resume her training.”

“Thank you, your majesty.” Indra nods, and Lexa leans against the table beside them, asking as casually as she can.

“Do you know why Lady Clarke sent Snow from her service?”

Indra’s lips tighten and Lexa sees exasperation pass across her face. “They had a disagreement of some sort. Snow wasn’t forthcoming with the details.”

“A disagreement,” Lexa echoes, and when a smile flickers across her lips she glances down, hoping to hide it from Indra. “I am not surprised, Lady Clarke can be very fervent when she wants to be.”

“So I hear,” Indra sounds flat and unamused, “The smallfolk have a hundred different stories about her, each more ridiculous than the last.”

“What stories?” Lexa tries to dampen her interest, but evidently she does not succeed, because Indra eyes her strangely.

“They have seen the wolf that follows her, they say that she is part wolf herself, that she has wolf blood.”

Lexa lets out an undignified snort before she can stop herself, and at Indra’s curious expression explains. “They say this just because Faith follows her? That’s ridiculous.”

“It is strange that the wolf is so attached to her, they say it is rarely from her side now.” Indra’s eyes dart to where Valour and Liberty lie. “Your majesty may I ask… did you… tell the wolf to do that?”

“Tell her?” Lexa’s eyebrows shoot up and she has to stop herself from laughing to save Indra the embarrassment. “No, I can no more command them than I can Lady Clarke.”

“Then it certainly is strange that the wolf follows her so.”

“Not strange at all,” Lexa rolls her eyes, collecting her bow into her hands again. “Lady Clarke made the fatal error of feeding her once.”

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Clarke wakes to sweat soaked sheets and the light of the moon slanting in through the windows of her bed chamber. The room is cold, the shutters rattling open at the window, a sound like the bones of the dead rising together in the crypts below Winterfell. Her eyes flicker around the room, struggling to focus in the silvery light, but she finds no one except the white wolf lying sentinel at the foot of her bed.

Her heart is racing, the hair on the back of her neck prickling and when she tries to think back to her nightmare, all she remembers is dark wings and the silent snow, untouched beneath a moonless sky. It leaves her feeling strange and unsettled, and she slides from the bed, still shivering. Her bare feet touch the stone and find it cold and harsh. The fire in the grate has been strangled by the wind coming in from the window. She pads across the room in only her nightdress to the open window. Outside, the moon is large and high in the sky, casting the godswood and the castle in cold, silent light, and she startles when a raven is sent fluttering from the rookery with a screaming cry.
Shaking herself, she steps back to struggle against the open shutters. The hinges creak in protest, and the ironwood is heavy and dark under her hands, refusing to shut. After a few moments of trying, she manages to shove the shutters closed with a rattling thump and lets out a soft breath at the sudden darkness. Moving to the bed, she takes a pelt and wraps it around her shoulders. Faith’s head rises as she pads to the door, and the direwolf watches her with eyes that look grey.

When she pulls open the door a flood of warm light is let in from the torch in one of the wall sconces. Her guard startles up from where he had been dozing against the wall, looking at her with alarm and she keeps one hand tight on the fur as she speaks.

“Fetch Reya, and ask her to bring a sleeping tea from the kitchens.” She tells him, with as much dignity as she can muster, and the guard nods, following her orders hurriedly.

Clarke turns back to the her bed chamber, fetching the candle from her bedside to light from the torch in the wall. It gives the room a strange eerie glow as she settles upon the bed again, gathering the furs around her. She feels as if she is sat in her own private cocoon of light, and somehow it makes the room beyond her feel even darker and further away. Faith clambers to her feet at the foot of the bed and moves closer, sniffing at Clarke’s bed things. She holds out her hand to rub against the direwolf’s ears and though Faith accepts the affection for a few moments, she wriggles away to pace back across the room. Her ears are flat, her fur bristling and Clarke’s brows furrow as she watches the direwolf.

“What is it?” Her limbs feel tingly with unease, her feet restless and she steels herself, sitting up within the bed.

The room is so dark it feels as if someone has cast them into eternal night and when she hears a wolf howl from somewhere in the castle, the sound sends shivers up her spine. Her mind wanders despite herself, and her fingers tighten on the furs when she thinks of the stories told to her by her Septa when she was young, of the monsters that lived beyond the Wall in the coldest part of the north. Giants who could crush a man with one step, ice spiders as big as hounds, and men raised from the dead with ice in their hearts. She swallows and it sounds loud in the silent room.

“I am not afraid,” She whispers, into the dark air. “I am Clarke of House Tyrell and I am not afraid.”

The shutters on the window burst open again, slamming against the wall and she jumps in her bed, staring at them. For a moment all she can hear is the rush of her blood and the pounding of her heart, and she feels paralysed with terror, but as it subsides anger creeps up in her chest.

“I am not afraid.” She repeats, and slides from the bed to wrestle with the shutters again.

Everything seems to happen at once. Faith lets out a snarl so loud that Clark feels it rumble in her bones, and a startled shout and the crash of something falling to the ground and smashing pulls her around as if she’s a marionette being controlled by strings. The door to the corridor is open, and it illuminates the scene behind her in a slant of light, like a grisly tableau. A tray falls from Reya’s hands, where the handmaiden is stood in the doorway, and as the pots hit they ground they shatter, sending shards of pottery across the stone floor, and soaking it in hot, herbal tea. The smell of the tea floats through the room so strongly that Clarke feels as if she is dizzied by it. In front of Reya, dressed in dark robes, stands a man she has never seen before.

What she notices most about him is his eyes, a slim ring of green almost swallowed by the blackness of his pupil. The hood pulled about his head casts the rest of his face in shadow, but she sees the slant of a jaw, and a tall nose. His robes are nondescript, woollen and heavy, and in his hands is a long dagger, with a hilt of gold and a blade that catches the light from the moon outside.
The man turns at the sound of Reya’s shout and his widened eyes tell Clarke that this was not the scene he was expecting. He twists, and breaches the space between himself and Reya in moments, throwing her to the ground as if she is nothing more than a ragdoll. She shouts and Clarke’s bones finally seem to thaw. She rushes across the bed chamber, shouting out, and grabs the man by the shoulders to drag him away. He knocks her back with a strike to her stomach, throwing the air out of her and leaving her staggering backwards as she coughs and gasps.

He advances upon her, a towering shadow in the darkness and she scrambles back as the dagger in his hands glints. He swings, but she throws herself out of his way, avoiding his blade by only seconds. Her head slams back into the table pushed up against the wall and her fingers grope at the table top. They flex around the something cold and hard and she brings it down upon his head, sending him reeling. When she looks down, she sees that her hands are wrapped around the stem of a candle stick.

He lashes back, his hand colliding with her face. The impact leaves her dizzy and breathless, the candlestick falling from her fingers as she gasps. A hand wraps around the material of her nightgown, wrenching her up and she is so close that she sees the green eyes sharply, and smells the rancid breath whispering from between his teeth, before hands grab at his shoulders and pull him backwards. He spins away, releasing him grip on her and Clarke sees Reya’s face, something between terror and fury. The assassin spins out of her grip with the elegance of a trained killer, and Clarke’s breath catches in her throat when he slashes his dagger into the handmaiden’s stomach.

“No!” The voice does not sound like her own.

She launches herself towards him, trying to haul him away from the girl, but the assassin turns, his attention only on her now, and grabs her by the waist. She twists, snarling and her sweating hands struggle to grip the hand that holds the dagger in an effort to keep it away from her neck. Behind her, the man grunts and struggles and Clarke’s hands slip, digging in to grip the dagger blade itself. A cry falls from her lips as blood wells between her fingers, but as her hold loosens the man shouts out and falls away from her. She staggers forwards and twists to see Faith’s teeth digging into the man’s thigh, a growl rumbling from between her jaw.

Clarke turns, searching, and her fingers find the discarded candlestick just as a strangled yelp comes from the direwolf. The assassin kicks at her side, and the wolf’s jaws open, releasing him enough to allow him to kick her again, throwing her across the room so that her body lands with a sickening thump.

A roar comes from somewhere within the room and it takes a moment for Clarke to realise it is coming from her. The assassin turns back to her again, and she strikes him hard about the head with the candlestick. He wavers, stumbling under the force of the blow, and she rams herself into him, sending him crashing to the ground. Beneath her, her feet stumble and she lands atop him, struggling against him to pry the dagger from his fingers. He shouts out, and wrenches away his hand to slash the dagger aimlessly, landing a blow to her hip that makes her scream.

Fire bites through her skin, and he takes her sudden weakness as a chance to grapple them over, so that he is holding her down to the cold stone floor. She screams again, writhing beneath him, and she manages to slam her fist into his wrist. The dagger is sent spiralling away, landing with a clatter somewhere across the room, and the assassin lets out an enraged snarl. His fist strikes her cheek again, slamming her head back into the floor and before she can catch her breath his hands are at her throat.
Her fingers scrabble at his, still slippery from the blood dripping from the cuts on her palms. Above her, the assassin’s skin is shining with sweat and he is bleeding from her blow to his head. Her eyes roll, vision swimming as her lungs begin to burn. Everything feels faint and far away, the room illuminated only by the flickering torch in the corridor and the moon. The lights send her bed chamber into leering shadows, tall and strange, and she lets out a whimper when her rolling eyes begin to flicker, her vision darkening. The assassin’s lips play with the edge of a smile, and her eyes roll back in her head.

The weight is lifted from her so suddenly that it almost feels as if it isn’t real. There is a snarling growl, and the snap of bone hitting the floor. She drags air into her burning lungs, her body curling instinctively over onto itself as she claws at the floor and blinks her vision back into clarity.

The assassin lies flat on his back and on his chest stands Faith. The direwolf is growling, a low, steady rumble, but beneath her the man is lifeless, bleeding sluggishly from the gaping wound where his throat once was. Faith turns to look at her. The fur around her mouth and her long fangs are dripping with blood, shreds of the man’s skin caught in her fur and Clarke heaves, clamping her mouth shut over her vomit at the sight.

The room is eerily quiet, only Faith’s growling and the sound of her own erratic breathing tearing through it and her eyes swim, reeling about the room for any further dangers until she finds Reya. The girl lies in a pool of her blood, one hand over her stomach, eyes glassy and unseeing and Clarke’s breath catches in her throat. On painful limbs, she hauls herself across the floor, a trail of blood following in her wake.

Her hand shakes when it touches Reya’s cheek, pale but still full and hearty in her youth. The handmaiden’s braids fall in a tangle from their usual neat crown, and Clarke touches at them uselessly, as if fixing them will do anything to help. A strangled, broken noise escapes her and she presses at Reya’s cheek more insistently, staring down at her. The hand propping her up shakes in her exhaustion and she falls forwards, landing upon Reya’s body. Her fingers tackle in the handmaiden’s dress, clutching at it as shaking, awful breaths escape her.

At her side, her own wound is oozing blood, and her head is ringing with pain. She knows, somewhere in the clear, clinical side of her mind that she has to stop the bleeding and find a physician, but her body feels limb and heavy, like iron. A warm tongue licks at her fingers, and she twists to see Faith looking down at her.

Clarke lifts a hand, and fists it in the direwolf’s fur, desperate to touch something warm and alive. Above her, Faith whines uncertainly, and she lets out a staggered breath. When she moves her hand, she can see the marks her blood soaked hands have left over the white of the direwolf’s fur. Faith’s tongue licks at her cheek, anxious and insistent and when Clarke speaks, her voice crackles painfully.

“Find help.”

It is madness to think that the direwolf understands her, but after another tentative lick to her cheek Faith turns and races from the room. Distantly, Clarke can hear her barking, but the world seems to fade away when she is gone. Her head rests against Reya’s unmoving chest and she feels as if she is walking through swathes of golden roses. Somewhere ahead of her, she knows she will find Highgarden, but no matter which way she walks the roses continue like the sea, stretching to every horizon. Their smell is so strong it fills her nose and she is dizzy and floating upon this sea of rosebuds. Her weariness weighs upon her like a yoke and she sits slowly upon the sun baked earth. It is warm and suddenly she is lying down, a rose petal blanket upon her, and she thinks that if she closes her eyes for just a moment, it couldn’t possibly hurt.
Chapter End Notes

ooooo, let me know what you think, what your theories are about this attack! who do you think ordered it? thank you so much for reading, be sure to let me know what you think below or over on tumblr (@onemilliongoldstars)!
Lexa sleeps lightly, a habit rooted in years of sleeping on the cold ground, in the midst of a battlefield. She is used to waking at the slightest noise, used to hours of staring at the dark canopy above her bed as she waits for the dawn light to flicker through the cracks in the shutters on her windows. When she was a squire to her Uncle Gustus, under Indra’s tutelage, she would be woken with a hand shaking her shoulder, or a sharply barked command. As queen of her people, she learnt to wake with the dawn and sleep long after the bell tolled the midnight hour.

Now, she somehow awakens moments before the knock comes to her door. In those few seconds she lies still and stares up at the canopy, where the silver threads catch the light of the guttering fire in her grate. The wind whistles against the shutters, and something itches beneath her skin, like a spark running through her veins.

At the knock, she swings her legs from the bed, calling for entry. She can tell by the fire in the grate that it is not morning yet, and a fine prickle of fear runs down the back of her neck.

One of her Queensguard guide in the waiting guard, who gives a deep bow at her attention. The torch her Queensguard carries casts flickering light throughout the room, illuminating their faces in ghoulish shadows. Her shoulders square at the sight of the guardsman, and she watches impassively as he straightens and begins, hesitantly.

“Your majesty, sorry to disturb you but something has happened.”

“What?” Lexa stands from the bed, reaching for her hose and pulling them up her legs. Both of the men look away, colouring at the sight of their queen dressing so brazenly before them, but she ignores them. “What is it? Speak!” She demands.

“Lady Clarke, your majesty, there’s been an attempt on her life.”

Her fingers still, eyes widening and she has to take a moment to gather herself before she can speak again without her voice shaking. “An attempt on her life?”

“Yes, my queen.” The man is trembling now, obviously fearful of her wrath, but she only pulls on the rest of her hose and shrugs into the housecoat tossed at the end of her bed. Striding past him, she pushes her feet into boots and beckons him to follow her.

“Where is Lady Clarke?”

“In her chambers, your majesty.” The man is hurrying to keep up with her, but she dares not slow down. Instead, she turns back to her Queensguard and says.

“Fetch Lady Anya and the rest of the Queensguard, tell them to meet us in the south tower.”
Her Queensguard nods and strides away, and the guard beside her has enough sense to grab a torch from a sconce they pass to light their way. As they pass open windows, Lexa can see that the sky outside is dark but for the moon shining down, the wind slipping through the open windows to send a chill down her spine. The castle is almost deserted, but the few passing maids and pages press themselves against the wall, almost falling to their knees in their desperation to show deference. Lexa knows that her face must be a thundercloud of fury, but it is all she can do to keep from bursting into a run and screaming at everyone that passes her.

There are guards gathered around the doorway to Lady Clarke’s room and for a moment Lexa feels her heart sink. She hadn’t asked the guard whether Lady Clarke was alive, but there is something about the pale set to the watcher’s faces that makes dread curdle in her stomach.

They move aside for her like waves and she finds her path to the door unobstructed. In the doorway, her step falters and she draws in a breath as she takes in the room. The shutters on the window are wide open, letting in a blast of cold air from the frosty night outside. It seems as if every surface is covered in blood, red and dark, congealing into sticky puddles on the floor and the bed sheets and the table. Someone has lit the candles around the room, giving it a warm glow, but the fire in the hearth is cold and silvery light shines in from the moon outside. There are two bodies in the room. One has been left mangled and bleeding out against the stone floor, dressed in dark robes with most of the innards of his neck showing. The other has been laid more carefully on a cloth and covered in a white sheet. For one, heart stopping moment, Lexa thinks that is Lady Clarke, but then her eyes fall on Nyko who leans over the bed, tending to a figure upon it.

He looks up at her approach, bowing his head quickly, but his hands are hurriedly back to work as he cleans out a gash on Lady Clarke’s hip. Her nightdress, stained dark with blood and ripped, has been pulled up, a fur covering her modesty. Hesitantly, Lexa inches closer, pausing an only barely respectable distance away to look down at the unconscious girl. Her skin is wan and pale, and dark bruises are already beginning to appear at her neck and face, a cut to her forehead matting her golden hair with blood. Both her hands are bandaged, and she lies incredibly still and quiet. On the bed beside her sits Faith, blood staining her white coat around her mouth and across her back. Her eyes are dark and dangerous when she looks up at the intruder, hackles rising before she realises that it is Lexa.

“Nyko, how is she?” Her voice is strained with the effort of keeping it even and the healer makes a soft, concerned noise in the back of his throat as he dips her cloth in the bowl of hot water at his side. The water is already dark with blood, Lexa realises with a sickening drop of her heart.

“Badly injured, but she should live.” Nyko tells her honestly, reaching for another set of bandages to press to the wound. With his free hand, he touches gently to her forehead. “She will suffer from this head wound, I think. And her hands will take time to recover. It does not seem as though the blade cut too deeply into her hip, she was protected by the bone.”

“Good,” Lexa releases a shuddering breath. “She must have fought him.”

“Yes, and hard,” Nyko adds softly.

A throat clearing behind her makes her turn, and she finds Anya, in leather armour and a white cloak, stood in the doorway watching her with a dark expression.

“Anya, there was an attack on Lady Clarke’s life.” Lexa welcomes her into the room, and Anya makes her way to the body covered with a cloth. Lexa watches as she kneels and pulls back the sheet to show the face of a young girl, utterly still and lifeless.

“A handmaiden?” Anya asks softly, and slowly Lexa nods.
“I assume so, we must see to it that her family is notified.”

“She should be given a hero’s burial.” Anya’s eyes are still fixed to the girl, and Lexa watches as she stares down at her for a long moment, before carefully covering the girl back up and standing, striding across the room to stand over the attacker’s still form. Lexa moves reluctantly away from the bed, her eyes lingering on Clarke, to join her.

“It seems he came into contact with one of your direwolves.” Anya remarks, dryly, and Lexa’s gaze flickers to where Faith rests her head on the bed beside Clarke.

“It seems so.”

Anya kneels down beside the body, as Lincoln steps into the room, offering a bow in her direction.

“Your majesty, was anyone else harmed?”

Lexa shakes her head, distracted, “No, only the handmaiden and Lady Clarke.”

Anya touches at the assassin’s face, turning it this way and that as she inspects his face. “I don’t recognise him.”

Lexa gazes down at the man, her lips pursed. He has shaggy, dark hair that hangs about his eyes, which stare up at them, a pale blue like ice and unseeing. His skin is sallow, his cheeks thin, but he doesn’t look unkempt or unfed. The dark robes he wears are utterly nondescript and as Anya pulls away the robes, there is no sign of any personal effects.

“Here, your majesty,” Lincoln speaks from across the room, and Lexa looks up to see him holding up a dagger with a gleaming silver hilt. He crosses the room to place it in her hands and she turns it over, staring down at it thoughtfully.

The hilt is finely decorated in old silver metalwork, running around the handle. She turns it over, letting it catch the light and shine.

“A fine blade.” She says, thoughtfully, but her reverie is broken by loud voices from the corridor, and the ring of swords being drawn. In moments, Anya and Lincoln have their hands on their blades, and Lexa brandishes her dagger. On the bed, Faith’s ears prick up and she growls, hunched low over Clarke’s still form, when a figure stumbles into the room, shaking off the hands that try to grab her.

Octavia Snow is dressed only in linen rags, her sword clutched in her hand and her hair hanging about her face in messy tendrils. Her eyes are fierce with fire, and she does not back away at the sight that greets her, though her eyes are drawn insistently to the girl on the bed. Indra follows her, grabbing at her arm to yank her a step back, but upon seeing Lexa her grip falters just slightly.

“Apologies, your majesty. Snow was just leaving.”

“No I’m not,” Octavia pulls her arm out of Indra’s grip, barely flinching under Anya’s glowering expression and takes a step closer to the bed before Indra can pull her to a stop again.

“It’s alright Indra,” Lexa holds up a hand, and slowly, Indra lets Snow go so that she can stagger the few steps towards the end of the bed.

“Is she alright?” Octavia demands of Nyko, “Was she hurt?”

“She was hurt,” Nyko glares at her, pulling the furs over Lady Clarke. “And the last thing she needs is this noise and commotion. I’ll have to ask you all.” His eyes flicker to Lexa, “-respectfully, to
“Of course, Nyko.” Lexa glances again at Lady Clarke’s face, her parted lips and the flutter of her eyelashes against her cheek and Anya and Lincoln usher Octavia out of the room. “Keep me informed, please.”

Nyko bows, and Lexa follows her Queensguard out into the crowded corridor. The guards lingering at the doorway have the good sense to move back, giving them all a little space, and Lexa pulls in a breath, looking down at the dagger in her hands again.

“I apologise, your majesty,” Indra has a firm hand on Octavia’s shoulder and the girl seems to have shrunk with the knowledge that the southern lady behind the door is alive, her relief palpable. “I tried to stop Snow, but she was most insistent.”

“I can understand that,” Lexa’s eyes rake over Octavia’s bedraggled form. “You were not on duty tonight, Snow?”

Octavia shakes her head miserably, “No, your majesty, I was not.”

“More’s the pity,” Lexa tries to soften her voice, “You probably would have given that assassin a harder time.”

To her dismay, the words only make Octavia’s desolation carve deeper into her expression. “I should have been here, he wouldn’t have-”

“Hush,” Indra’s hand tightens on her shoulder, but it seems more caring now that it did before. “No use shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted.”

“You’re on duty for the remainder of the night, Snow.” Lexa tells her, decisively. “Get dressed and report back here, quickly.”

Octavia nods, bowing. “Yes, your majesty.” She disappears down the stairs and Lexa watches her go, her mind beginning to whirr.

“Someone else was on duty to cover Snow?” She turns back to Indra, who almost looks affronted at the question.

“Yes, of course.”

“Good, find out who he was, I expect he’s already gone. With the assassin dead, he’s our only lead. Report back to my chambers when you know.”

Indra nods, following after Snow down the stairs, and Lexa gestures one of the waiting guards forwards. “Have the warning bell rung, no one enters or leaves this castle except for us.”

Anya eyes her. “What are you planning, your majesty?”

Lexus the dagger over in her hand and when she speaks, it is with grim determination. “A hunt.”

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The direwolves scent the bedclothes in the guard’s bunk and it takes them only seconds to begin following his trail. Lexa takes her dagger and rips off a strip of the bed clothes to push into her belt. Her sword hangs on her hip, her fur lined cloak over her shoulders as she swings herself onto her horse. Behind her, several of the Queensguard accompany her, their white cloaks replaced with
black to blend into the darkness of the night, and thirty soldiers are gathered to follow them on foot. Torches burn across the courtyard, but the moon is so bright they are barely needed and Lexa clicks her tongue, squeezing her heels to jolt her mount into movement.

They leave the castle at a gallop, the direwolves quick on the scent of the fleeing man. Honour leads the pack, his dark fur making him almost invisible in the night, and Valour and Patience follow quickly at his back. Liberty lingers close to Lexa’s horse, her eyes dark. Their noses are sharper than any hound Lexa has ever encountered, and they track the man down the Kingsroad for a league, before darting into the surrounding fields.

The snow is left only in patches as the season changes, but Lexa can see a few errant footsteps, clumsily left in what little snow remains. The direwolves track him easily through the grass and when Lexa lifts her eyes to peer through the dark landscape, she sees that they are headed towards the Wolfswood. Her cheeks are tingling with cold from the wind that whips past them, but her blood feels hot with fury.

Honour leads them into the forest, and the horses have to slow, picking their way through the dense vegetation. The light of the moon is almost completely blocked here by the pine trees overhead, and though the wolves barely seem to notice, the hunting party is left blind for a few moments, until the runners light their torches. They are an easy target now for the beasts that roam these woods, wolves and bears alike, but with six direwolves they are unlikely to be bothered by such animals. The ground is thick with ferns and brambles under foot, and though the horses are unshaded, the men struggle to keep up. Without the aid of a torch, it would be difficult to traverse and Lexa can only imagine that the guard, startled by the warning bell coming from the castle, had darted into the Wolfswood out of panic.

The direwolves do not lose his scent, leading them swiftly through the crowded trees. Lexa urges her mount on, and though her beast is fast enough to keep up with the wolves, many of her companions fall behind, with only Lincoln and Anya close. The wolves begin to snarl, their pace increases and Lexa knows that they are close. She swings her bow from around her back and notches an arrow, her jaw tight and her eyes narrow in concentration.

Suddenly, Honour darts forwards, his snarl becoming a growl and the rest of the wolves follow. Lexa hears a cry through the darkness, the strangled shout of a man, and she sees Sage’s sandy coat glowing in the torchlight from behind her as the wolf fights over his prize with his brothers and sisters.

She whistles sharply and the wolves turn to look at her. The man’s eyes are wide, staring out at her like two white pebbles on the shore, and she is relieved to find he is still alive as the wolves clamber reluctantly away, still growling and snarling. The man scrambles up at their inattention, but he is barely standing before Lexa’s arrow strikes him in the leg. The man shouts out, stumbling and Lexa draws her horse to a stop a few paces away from him.

She lands on the forest floor with a thump, not even bothering to draw her sword as she approaches the terrified man. He still wears his guard’s uniform, and the sight of the Stark crest upon him is enough to make her wretch. She is reaching out before she knows it, hitting him hard across the face. He has barely hit the ground before her fist catches the front of his leather jerkin and she hauls him up, spitting in his face.

“You thought you could run from your queen?”

Despite the fear in his eyes, she respects him for not cowering. Instead, his lips roll back, showing a furious snarl.
Lexa slams him back into the tree behind him, so hard that his head cracks, and hisses. “You plotted against someone protected by the queen. You’ll die for this treason.”

“It’s nah treason,” He retorts, through gasping breaths, “She’s was a southern whore.”

Her vision turns red and her fingers grasp her dagger, yanking it from the sheath to press so close to his throat that it draws blood. He quails at that, letting out a startled whimper, but torchlight from behind her saves him.

“Your majesty!” Anya’s voice does not cut through the haze of her fury at first, but the hand her mentor places on her arm is enough to draw her back to herself. “Lexa!”

Her eyes flicker to Anya, close to her side and she abruptly remembers herself, stepping back to let the man fall to her feet, gasping and clutching at his neck like a dramatic fishwife. She aims a ferocious kick at his ribs, leaving him doubled over and gasping and steps away. Her mouth is set in a grim line, her eyes stony and Anya takes a faltering step back when she meets her eyes.

“Have him tied to the back of my horse.” Her disgusted gaze falls on their captive again. “Let the whole of Winter Town see what becomes of traitors to the crown.”

The low, pale light of dawn is just beginning to creep over the north when they arrive back in Winter Town. Small folk hauling pales to the well, and throwing feed for their animals stop and stare at the sight of the wolf queen emerging from the darkness of the forest with her prey struggling and bound, behind her. Mounted on her dark stallion, her wolves pacing at her side and her expression set like steel, she looks every bit the woman from the stories, the woman whelped by wolves and raised by the children of the forest. Behind her, the dawn breaks like an icy crown of light, and the people drop to their knees, awed and afraid.

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Clarke emerges into consciousness slowly. She feels as if she is lying on the sandy beaches of the Sunset Sea, staring at the sky as the waves lap about her body. They rise up her legs, the cold so fierce it’s painful, soaking through her light dress. She wonders how she came to be here, and who accompanied her. When she was her child her father would sometimes take her to the beaches of the Sunset Sea when he visited Brightwater Keep or Oldtown. Her mother insisted that it wasn’t the done thing to have a lady of a great house sat about on the sands when she should be practicing her courtesies or embroideries, but her father would hear no protest. She remembers the feeling of her hand in his, so much larger, warm and rough from years on the training grounds. Together they collected shells, and when he held out the prettiest, light pink ones for her inspection she would gather them into her hands and hold them in her lap in the carriage, presenting them to her mother with a beam.

Distantly, she wonders whether her father is here somewhere. She wants to turn her head to look, but her body will not move and as the sea rises further up her legs, lapping at her waist and fingers, she feels a tendril of panic. She cannot remember how she came to be here, but she knows that something was wrong. The knowledge sits like the stone of a plum in her stomach, hard and heavy, and she feels her breath come more quickly as she tries to remember. Seawater creeps over her breasts and the pain and panic are enough to make her cry out. She pleads for her father to the empty, sunlit sky, but no one comes, and as the water reaches her neck, she imagines fingers there, forcing the life from her. The water fills her mouth as she screams for her father and her eyes open.

For a moment she is sure she has drowned. Gods, her whole body aches and she feels cold enough to shiver, though the movement hurts. The room is dark but for the light spilling in from the shutters against the windows, and as her eyes struggle to adjust she remembers suddenly the evening past so
clearly that it feels like a strike to her chest. A whimper escapes her as the memories resurface, and it must be enough to draw the attention of the figure by the fire, because her eyes find Octavia rushing towards her.

“Lady Clarke, you’re awake!” Octavia hesitates a few steps away, her eyes flickering over Clarke as if she isn’t quite sure what to do, and then the girl darts to the door, sticking her head out to bark something.

Clarke feels another soft noise escape her, but the sound makes her flinch. Her throat feels as if it has been scraped raw by thorns, and she reaches for the water beside her bed, but finds her hand stiff and uncooperative, heavy with bandages. Bleary eyes peer about the room, and she finds Octavia approaching her again. She tries to speak, but her voice is hoarse and crackling. Octavia seems to understand her though, because the guard reaches for the mug of water.

“Here,” With gentle clumsiness, Octavia holds the mug to her dry lips and lets her drink her fill. When the water slips from between her lips and down her chin, the guard wordlessly reaches for a spare cloth to dry her tenderly with. There is only silence between them as Clarke settles back into the pillows, her eyes moving around the room. “I’ve sent for a handmaiden to help, and Nyko.” Octavia tells her, after a few moments of quiet and Clarke nods, her eyes falling shut when pain lances through her head.

“Reya?” The word comes out croaking and struggling, and she though she knows it is a faint hope, she still feels awash with sadness when Octavia’s eyes dart away and she shakes her head.

Her eyes press shut again, her lips tight and she heaves in a few struggling breaths as tears bite at the corners of her vision. The girl had been maybe the closest thing to a friend that she’d had here, a reminder of home and she had stayed in the north for Clarke and her House. Now, because of Clarke, she is dead. The weight settles about her shoulders like a yoke and Clarke knows, somehow, that it will never come off again.

The bed dips, and she blinks through her tears to find Faith clambering onto the bed beside her. The direwolf’s fur is still stiff with dried blood, and she tries not to cringe as Faith licks at her cheeks and chin. Still, she owes her life to the direwolf and when she looks into the beast’s eyes she knows that something has changed there as well. They are bound together in a way that she can’t quite explain, and when Faith rests her head heavily on Clarke’s covered legs, she feels safe and grounded beneath her warmth.

“She hasn’t left your side.” Octavia tells her, quietly, and upon seeing Clarke’s curious glance, she continues. “They tried to wash her, but she almost took off their fingers.”

Wordlessly, Clarke gestures for the mug and cloth that Octavia has placed beside the table, and dips the cloth into the water to begin wiping at the bloody handprints she’d left upon the direwolf’s back. Faith’s head rises, and she swings around to look curiously, but upon seeing what she’s doing, the wolf places her head peacefully back onto her legs. Her hands bite with pain at the movement, but she keeps going. It feels easier to work at the problem before her, something easy to fix, than linger on her thoughts of the night before. It takes some time to work through the blood dried into dark patches on the wolf’s fur. The fur has been left matted and spiky to the touch, but Clarke has eyes for nothing but the animal under her care and Faith almost seems to fall asleep against her, so steady and slow is her breathing.

The wolf’s mouth is still covered in blood when a knock comes to the door. Octavia unsheathes her sword and the sound of ringing metal makes Faith’s ears prick, tearing herself out of Clarke’s grip to look at the door, a growl already growing at the back of her throat.
The guard steps through the door, announcing a handmaiden and Nyko, and Clarke nods to allow them in, soothing her stiff, painful hands over Faith’s fur as the healer enters. To her surprise, he offers her a small bow, a courtesy she is rarely shown in the north, before approaching her bedside. His features are gentle and kindly, his white robes brushing against the stone floor and woven rugs and a leather bag is swinging from his hands. The handmaiden behind him bustles to her other side, matronly in her movements and begins straightening her blankets as best she can under Faith’s heavy body.

“Lady Clarke,” Nyko moves a small stool close to her bedside, and Clarke appreciates the gesture. It is nice not to look up at the man. “I’m glad to see you’ve awoken.”

Clarke only nods, but the handmaiden is at her side moments later, easing her up with gentle hands and propping up the cushions behind her so that she can sit up with ease. Faith growls a little beside her, but the handmaiden only clucks her tongue at her, and the direwolf settles.

“I don’t know if you remember me, my lady.” Nyko says and she nods.

“I remember-” Her voice cracks and breaks and she struggles to continue, as he pours out another mug of water for her. “I remember you.”

“Good,” He offers her the clean mug to drink from and helps when she struggles with her bandaged hands. “And do you remember other things? Where you are, for example? Your House, your name?”

Clarke eyes him from above the mug, and when she answers, “I’m not daft, I remember.” He laughs. “I’m sure you’re not, my lady. You sustained a rather nasty head injury, which can sometimes lead to forgetfulness.” He looks down at the leather bag in his lap, and Clarke thinks he is hiding a smile. “But I can see that your mind is still in fine shape.”

He takes away her empty mug, and continues. “You also cut your hands rather deeply, as you can tell, and you’ve sustained a light wound on your hip. Your neck is bruised, too,” He eyes her curiously, “I assume the assassin tried to strangle you.”

The memory makes her breath stop momentarily, and she averts her gaze down to wolf in her lap as she nods.

“I’ll have to look at your hands again, my lady, and rebandage them.” Nyko doesn’t touch her, which she appreciates. “Is that acceptable?”

After a moment of hesitation, she nods, and as he takes her hand gently in his own to begin unwrapping the bandage, she turns to find Octavia lingering near the bed, somehow torn between staying and going.

“The assassin?” She asks, quietly and watches Octavia’s expression darken.

“Dead,” The soldier’s eyes flicker to the door of Clarke’s bedchamber, “But the queen is interrogating the accomplice personally.”

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Sweat drips slowly down Lexa’s back, trailing from her hairline, and down her neck until it soaks into the linen of her undershirt. The cold of the dungeons does not seem to touch her. Inside, she burns, a furious fire, coals burning low and angry in her soul and sending the heat in prickling lines over her skin, cracking it apart like scorched earth. It lingers at the edge of her vision but her mind
feels surprisingly sharp and clear, as if everything has come into sudden relief. She dips her hands into the bronze bowl of warm water and watches the blood caked on her fingers ease away with strange, cold detachment.

Behind her, she can feel Anya’s eyes from where the Queensguard waits by the door. Her cousin is smart enough not to say anything, and Lexa slowly scrubs away the last of the blood on her hands, letting them sit in the water until her fingers start to prune and shrivel. Eventually, she lifts them away, dripping, and dries them methodically with the cloth provided. Anya seems to take the movement as her cue, because she steps away from her post at the door and asks, her voice low.

“Any news?”

“He still refuses to speak,“ Her voice is even and detached, and she barely recognises it as her own when she continues, “But that will change, soon enough.”

Anya gives a grim nod of her head and approaches the table that Lexa stands at to look down at the offending dagger. Its blade is still stained with blood and when Lexa thinks of it biting into Lady Clarke’s skin, she feels a shiver of fury.

“Titus has inspected the assassin’s body, but he finds nothing of use.” She reports, at last.

Lexa’s eyes dart up to her, surprise creasing her brows, “Nothing?”

Anya shakes her head, her lips tight. “He is of average height and weight, his skin tone tells us nothing and he has no tattoos or distinctive features. He is simply a man.”

“Strange,” Lexa reaches out to pick up the dagger, turning it carefully over in her hands. “He was careless in this regard, at least, and to leave the guard as a loose end.”

“Not if the guard knows nothing.”

“I will see to it that everything he knows is spilled, if I have to cut it out of him myself.” She doesn’t raise her eyes, but something about her voice must be enough to convince Anya she is telling the truth, because the woman is silent. “The dagger is too fine to be owned by a common man. Why buy such a dagger for this purpose, before you are even paid?”

“You think it was ordered by a noble?” At Lexa’s nod, Anya hums. “But of north or south?”

“South?” At this, Lexa turns to look at the captain of her Queensguard curiously and Anya gestures for the dagger, taking it from Lexa’s hand to turn it over carefully.

“You see here?” Anya gestures to the shape of the dagger, it’s wide blade and dark metal. “This dagger is clearly northern, the style is Mormont.”

“Mormont?” Lexa’s eyes flicker up to her, her stomach dropping, and Anya nods grimly.

“Almost too much so.” She turns to dagger over in her hands. “I haven’t seen a dagger like this since my grandfather wore one on his belt, this sort of style hasn’t been used for years.”

“So why would this assassin have it?” Lexa ponders, staring down at the weapon. “You think he may have been from Bear Island?”

“Perhaps,” Anya concedes, “I haven’t seen many of these daggers outside of Mormont lands, it’s true, but I wonder if perhaps the Mormont claim is… overstated.”
Lexa's mind clicks together the pieces Anya is showing her and her eyes slide slowly up to her captain. “You think House Mormont is being framed.”

“I believe so.” Anya bows her head, and Lexa thinks over the words for a moment, rolling them around her mind.

“An assassin from House Mormont would allow a threat on Tris from the south,” Her expression darkens, “Which would only further the rift between north and south, perhaps even lead to another war.”

Anya only nods again, and Lexa takes the dagger from her hands, placing it carefully next to the bowl of water on the table again. She takes the moment to pull in a long breath, ignoring the quiver of uncertainty that lingers at the pit of her stomach.

“I will send Gustus back to Bear Island to investigate this, with Luna to ensure that it is carried out fairly.” A flash of indignation sparks across Anya’s expression at her words, before her cousin has schooled herself back into stony neutrality. “For now, there is someone who can shed some more light on this.”

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She goes to Lady Clarke much later in the day, when the evening has come. Something hangs about the castle, an icy silence that grips them all, and Lexa knows that the screams of the man in the dungeon could be heard throughout the castle and into the courtyard. Her hands are scrubbed clean of his blood now, a bath soaking away the feeling of his screams trapped beneath her skin, and she feels bare and open to the world as she treks her way up the steps of the tower to Lady Clarke’s room. Two guards are posted outside, and they straighten upon her arrival. They have enough tact to keep their eyes on the wall ahead as she hesitates, her hand raised to knock.

Strangely, she feels as if she shouldn’t be here. Her guilt has slipped through the cracks in her ribs and taken root deep within her heart. If Clarke wanted to scream at her, throw her from her room and never see her again for the rest of her living days, Lexa would not wonder at her choices. The image of her pale body lying within the bed, marred by blood and bruises and so utterly still will plague Lexa for the rest of her days. Carving pieces out of the man in the dungeons only gives her so much relief and here, waiting uncertainly at Clarke’s door, she feels like a trespasser in her own castle.

Regardless, she knows she ought to face the lady’s ire, as honour demands, and knocks softly against the door three times. Cowardly as it is, she hopes that Clarke is asleep, or too weak to see her, but when Octavia opens the door the room is lit with a gentle, warm light, candles glowing on every surface and a warm fire in the grate. The soldier bows to her, but keeps her hand against the door, her arm blocking her queen’s path as she turns to where the bed sits, unseen, and says.

“It’s the queen, my lady. Do you want me to allow her in?”

Lexa feels a moment of indignation, though she knows Clarke is entirely within her rights to want nothing to do with her, but the lady must nod the affirmative, because Octavia steps back to hold open the door for her.

Stepping inside, Lexa is momentarily reminded of the scene that greeted her in the early hours of this morning. The room holds little trace of the earlier carnage; the floors are scrubbed clean, the rugs on the floor replaced, and soft light illuminates every corner. Even the shutters on the windows have been fixed, and are shut tightly against the evening air. The room feels warm and safe, despite the ghosts that linger.
Her eyes are drawn unerringly to the bed, and she finds Lady Clarke sat up, propped against a mountain of pillows and cushions. Golden curls fall around her shoulders, and though her skin is pale, her lips are full and dark. Bathed in the soft light of the candles, she looks like a winter spirit who could disappear into the clouds at any moment. She wears a thick, periwinkle robe, with white fur at the cuffs and neck, and Faith is laid half atop her, having her head scratched. The wolf eyes Lexa with a warning rumble, but doesn’t move from her spot sprawled across the bed. Compared to the wolf and the wide expanse of the bed, Clarke looks small, but there is nothing retiring about the smile that she gives Lexa.

“We must stop meeting like this.” Her voice is hoarse, and Lexa’s eyes find the bandages on her hands, the bruises on her neck and blossoming across her cheek like lilacs.

“Like this?” Lexa’s words escape her, and she is left fumbling and foolish until Clarke comes to her aid.

“In our sick beds,” She explains, her eyes flickering down to the wolf over her lap. The respite from the blue of her eyes gives Lexa time to gather herself, offering a bow to the lady.

“I agree, my lady.” Straightening, she hesitates when she sees that Clarke’s gaze is upon her again. “I’m glad to see you well,” The words feel ludicrous and she begins correcting herself on the same breath, “Not well, I mean to say- of course you are not well, I only meant-” Under Clarke’s amused gaze, she falters and finally finishes, limply. “Better.”

“I am better, your majesty,” Clarke gestures to the stool beside her bed. “I’m sorry I can’t get up to receive you, but if you’d care to sit.”

“Thank you,” She can feel the heat creeping up her cheeks, burrowing there to display her humiliation for all to see, and she is glad of the moment of distraction. Sinking onto the stool, she finds herself looking up at Lady Clarke and is once again reminded of a benevolent spirit. “I’m sorry to disturb you, only I-” Her eyes flicker back to Octavia’s stoic figure, stood near the door, and she hesitates. “I wanted to see how you were.”

“That’s kind,” Clarke’s gaze follows hers, and she scratches the top of Faith’s head. “Octavia?” The soldier’s attention is immediately upon her lady. “Could you step out?”

“Yes, my lady.” Octavia bows her head, slipping from the room, and then they are alone once again. Silence stretches out for a moment, as Clarke runs her fingers over Faith’s ears and Lexa searches desperately for the right thing to say. Unsurprisingly, it is Clarke who speaks again.

“I think she feels guilty.” When Lexa’s curious gaze meets hers, she elaborates. “Octavia, she feels guilty for not being here. Ridiculous really,” Clarke gives a wry laugh, “It was me who sent her away.”

“There is no way of knowing whether it would have made a difference,” Lexa tells her, softly and Clarke nods, swallowing once.

“I know, perhaps I saved her life. Perhaps the assassin would have killed her.” A beat of quiet, and then she continues, her voice trembling. “Or perhaps Reya would be here now if Octavia had been standing guard.”

“Clarke, you cannot do this to yourself,” Lexa pleads, quietly, “You have too much time to think and you are plagueing yourself with questions that cannot be answered. The past is written in ink that has already dried, there is no way to change it.”
“You’re right,” Clarke’s eyes dart down to the comforter, and Lexa sees tears lingering on the edges of her eyelashes, sparkling in the candlelight. Something seems to catch in her throat, some confession that she cannot speak, and Lexa watches her swallow heavily and her eyes flicker away. “I’m sorry, your majesty, I shouldn’t burden you with this.”

“It is no burden,” She speaks ardently, reaching out before she can stop herself to touch at Clarke’s hand. Her skin is incredibly soft and warm, and she hears the breath stutter in Clarke’s throat, sees her eyes dart up, wide with surprise. “Please,” Her voice is coloured with fervour, soft and urgent, “You are no burden, my lady.”

Clarke’s wide eyes stare at her, and Lexa pulls away seconds later, as her head catches up with her heart. Her cheeks heat, and she reaches for the mug of water on the table beside the bed, holding it out for Clarke to soothe her sore throat. Their fingers brush again when Clarke takes the mug with clumsy hands, and Lexa has to look away for fear of another impulsive action.

“Thank you,” Clarke says at last, passing the mug back. “Not only for the water… I believe you caught the guard? Hunted him down this morning?”

“I did,” Lexa bows her head in acknowledgement.

“Then I am in your debt,” Clarke sighs softly. “Thank you, your majesty.”

“There is no debt,” Lexa protests, fiercely. “It is my duty to protect you,” Here, she hesitates and swallows against the agony in her chest. “And for that I must beg your forgiveness, my lady, for I failed you.”

“But you caught the guard,” Clarke’s eyes widen in surprise as Lexa sinks to one knee beside the bed, “Lexa, what-”

“You should never have been attacked in the first place, my lady. I can only pray that you will forgive me and accept my promise once again to keep you safe.”

Clarke seems stunned into silence for a moment, and nothing breaks the peace of the room apart from Faith’s low panting from atop the bed. Then, a touch comes to her bent head, and she raises her face to the light to see Clarke’s tender hand withdrawing, her eyes wide as if she can’t believe herself.

“There is nothing to forgive, your majesty.” Carefully, she unfurls her hand and holds it out in offering. “Please.”

Slowly, as if touching a fine silk or the petal of a flower, Lexa slides her hand along Clarke’s. Their fingers wrap together and the touch is warm and soft and so innately right that Lexa feels her heart squeeze as Clarke guides her back to her feet. Their eyes do not leave one another.

“Thank you,” Clarke says, quietly, and Lexa bows her head again to hide her pang of woe when their hands part.

“It is my honour.” The words pull a delicate, rosy flush to Clarke’s pale cheeks and Lexa fumbles for a moment, before remembering her purpose. “Actually, I did want to ask you something.”

“Of course.”

She pulls the dagger from her belt, extending it out to Clarke. The girl flinches at the sight, her brows pulling together, and she looks at Lexa curiously.

“The dagger?”
“Do you recognise it, my lady?” At the shake of her head, Lexa sighs, replacing the dagger in her belt. “We are trying to trace its roots, but there has been little to go on so far.”

“I’m sorry I can’t be more use,” Clarke’s eyes dart down to Faith, and she is quiet for a moment, before meeting Lexa’s gaze with a quiet fury. “Can I ask you for something?”

“Anything,” Lexa promises, and is frightened to find that a part of her means it.

Clarke’s eyes flash, dark like a stormy sea, as she speaks. “Leave the guard alive. I want to watch him die.”

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Chapter End Notes

so many of you guys wanted to see lexa retaliate after the assassination attempt- I hope this satisfied you! what do you think of Lexa’s true queen in the north moment? and what do you think of her vow to protect Clarke? Let me know down below or come and chat to me on tumblr @onemilliongoldstars!
Nyko tells her firmly that she isn’t to leave her bed unless absolutely necessary and Clarke soon bores of reading and petting Faith. The healer returns every so often to give her more milk of the poppy and check her bandages, but otherwise she is alone but for Octavia’s still figure beside the door. Clarke had hoped that Octavia may be some company in her confinement, but the guard is more severe and serious than ever. She has been standing at the door for the past two days, only sitting in one of the overstuffed chairs by the fire when Clarke threatened to get up and push her into one if she did not obey. There, in front of the warm fire, Clarke spots her head loll, her chin coming to rest against her chest as she sleeps, and Clarke gives a satisfied smile at the sight, turning the page in her book as quietly as she can.

Unfortunately Octavia doesn’t get long until there is another knock on the door, and Clarke sighs when her head startles up. The soldier blinks blearily, peering around the room and rushing to her feet.

“You let me sleep,” She accuses Clarke, her voice rough with fatigue and Clarke purses her lips.

“You need to sleep.”

“I am well enough,” Octavia argues, but the knock comes again at the door, cutting through them before they can begin their quarrel in earnest.

Octavia pulls it open, her eyes widening in surprise, and steps back to let Raven into the room. The girl has soot smudged over her cheeks, hair falling from her bun, and her face is pale and anxious. She hurries in with none of her usual pep and crosses the room to where the bed sits in only a few hurried paces.

“Clarke,” Her hands reach out, as if she wants to touch her but doesn’t dare, and Clarke feels her eyes travel over the bruises on her cheek and around her neck. “My lady, I’m sorry to burst in I just—would have come sooner but I only just heard.”

“Raven,” Clarke is glad for the company, “You’re good to come.”

“How could I not?” Raven sinks onto the stool at her bedside as Octavia shuts the door. “I’m so glad to see you… alive.”

“As am I,” Clarke reaches out to touch at her friend’s hand where it rests on the bed, “You look a state, have something to drink.”

“Thank you,” The girl rises, crossing the room to pour out two goblets of sweetened wine. She brings one to Clarke, and drinks the second herself. “I’ve been working since yesterday morn. I heard that the queen had brought back a prisoner, but I had no idea what you had to do with it.”

“The queen fetched the guard herself?” Clarke’s eyes widen in surprise, and she glances at Octavia to see her guard nod.

“Brought him back to the castle at dawn,” Raven adds, “Hunted him down like a fattened pig, by all
accounts.”

“That’s—” She hesitates, catching her words before she can say anything out of turn, and eventually settles with. “I am indebted to her.”

“She’s fairly furious about it, from what I hear.” Raven takes a drink from her goblet, and Clarke notices the colour slowly beginning to return to her cheeks. “I only found out because she was at the forge.”

“At the forge?” Octavia asks, and Raven turns to look at her.

“She wanted to know if we could help her identify the dagger. Sinclair is looking it over now, but it’s nothing that we’ve ever made.”

“The queen brought you the dagger personally?” Clarke swirls her untouched wine around in her goblet, watching the dregs catch against the metal. “It’s kind of her to pursue this so personally.”

“You’re a guest in her care, my lady.” Raven gives her a soft smile, “I would expect nothing less.”

Clarke can feel the heat rising to her cheeks in the silence that follows, and she clears her throat, brushing down her bed covers until Faith makes an irritated noise from beside her.

“Would you like to play cyvasse, Raven? I’m dreadfully bored, Octavia is no fun at all.” The gentle teasing barely elicits a smile from her guard.

Raven shakes her head, her expression colouring with regret. “I’m afraid I cannot, my lady. I need to return to the forge and help Sinclair examine the dagger.” She stands and reaches out again, brushing a touch to the top of Clarke’s hand where it rests on the bed covers. “But I’ll return this evening, if you’d like, and play cyvasse then.”


Raven’s smile gentles and she nods, squeezing Clarke’s hand, before she moves to the door. She pauses by Octavia, looking her up and down and says, a little harshly.

“You look like shit Snow, when did you last sleep?”

Octavia glowers at her resentfully, her spine stiffening in response. “I’m fine.”

“Can you please tell her to get some sleep?” Clarke demands, from the bed, “Or better yet walk her to the soldiers’ quarters yourself.”

“I’m fine,” Octavia repeats, twisting out of Raven’s grip when the blacksmith tries to grab her. She sets her feet, as still as a statue. “I’m staying.”

“You’ve been here for two days,” Clarke argues, struggling to sit up a little more. “You have to rest.”

“I’m not leaving you in the hands of those baffoons!” Octavia snaps, her voice spiralling up to a shout, and the silence that follows it is so heavy that Clarke feels she can scarcely breathe. She stares at Octavia’s furious form, her heaving chest and snarled expression, and finally everything clicks into place.

“You’re scared of leaving me on my own.”

Octavia’s mouth shuts with an audible click, and Raven’s eyes fix upon her. Octavia grinds her jaw,
her gaze stuck to Clarke in the bed, and for a few moments they all just watch one another, waiting for someone to crack. Eventually, Octavia’s eyes slide away to the side, and she lets out a sigh so quiet that Clarke barely hears it.

“If I had been here nothing would have happened.”

“Octavia,” Clarke’s voice breaks a little over the word, and she leans forward, wishing she could ease the pained expression on her guard’s face. “That’s not true.”

“It is, I should have protected you.” Octavia’s words crack and for one terrifying moment, Clarke things that the guard will start crying. Instead, she sees the grief and terror written across Octavia’s expression, as clearly as if she was reading a scroll. Octavia’s jaw is tight, as if she is biting back her fury, and Clarke can’t stand it for one more second, so she swings her legs out of bed and levers herself up, ignoring the dull throbbing in her body.

“Clarke-” Raven reaches out as if to stop her, but Clarke bats away her hands, crossing the room to stand in front of Octavia.

The soldier continues to refuse to look at her, eyes dark and hands clenched into fists at her sides. Clarke touches at one of her balled fists gently, urging her attention back up, and when Octavia finally meets her gaze Clarke sees regret as deep as the ocean in her eyes. As gently as she can, she says.

“There was nothing you could have done. You’re very talented, but the assassin would have killed you, Faith is the only reason that I’m still alive myself.” She sees Octavia swallow harshly. “Only one died here, when it could have been all of us.”

Octavia’s gaze clouds over again, dark with regret. “Reya… I was so awful to her…”

“Reya was a kind soul, I’m sure she had already forgiven.” Clarke feels a knot of despair in her stomach at the sound of her handmaiden’s name. “She was a hero, she died to protect me… just as I believe you would have.”

“It’s my duty,” Octavia replies, solemnly, and Clarke has to catch a sob in her throat, pulling in a ragged breath before she says.

“I’m glad you’re still alive Octavia,” She squeezes the girl’s fingers again, where they have loosened by her side and when Octavia meets her gaze again, it’s with a faint smile.

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Anya has been trained from the moment she could walk to expect attack. Women of Bear Island have long learned to wield a sword, to protect their homes from raiding Greyjoys while their men were away catching fish. Though the island is protected under the Queen in the North, women still swing an axe as well as men on Bear Island, which is why Anya was given a sword rather than needlework when she was young. When she had told her father she was leaving to join the Queensguard and protect her younger cousin in her bid to be queen, he had pressed her sword into her hand and bid her to ride safely. Her younger sister, now down in the south, would inherit the Mormont title in her stead and Anya knows her father sometimes grieves the loss of his first daughter, but she is glad to be of service in Winterfell. Here, she can feel useful working for a cause she believes in, and shamefully she gets more pleasure in it than she knows she would get from answering her smallfolk’s inane concerns. Tris is far better suited to the role, more likely to reach for a quill than a sword, much like Lexa.
It's why even as she drinks from a flagon in the Smoking Log and contemplates putting a few coins on the dice game, she reacts so quickly to the hand on her shoulder. Her assailant is hauled forwards across her body and Anya's dagger presses at the skin of their wrist. Her eyes dart up and she slackens her grip when she finds Raven Reyes looking back at her with sharp, furious eyes. Though it is dark in the tavern, Anya pushes her chair back as she releases the girl and cocks her head to make the girl follow. Raven tails her out of the tavern, following until they are in the dark back streets of Winter Town. Anya ducks past the lines of washing strung across the alleyway, and finally pauses in a deserted doorway, leaning back against the wall to look at Raven curiously.

“What are you doing here? I didn't leave a signal.”

Raven’s expression crumples with disdain. “You're not the only one who knows how to find somebody.”

“And why did you want to find me so badly?” Anya retorts.

Raven glances over her shoulder, through the lonely alleyway, and then says, her voice low. “I need to know if you tried to kill Lady Clarke.”

Anya’s jaw tightens, her lips pressing into a firm line and fury creeps up through her ribs to make its home in her heart. “If you truly think that I could do that, you’re a fool.”

“I'm not a fool!” Raven counters angrily, her voice rising a little. “I know steel, I’ve worked with it my whole life! That is a Mormont dagger.”

“A Mormont dagger from years past!” Anya retorts, “We haven’t used daggers like that since the Targaryen rule.”

“You hate Clarke, you wanted me to spy on her!”

“Half of this castle is spying on her.” She advances a few steps, though Raven doesn’t back down in the face of her anger. “And killing the girl would ruin our relationship in the south- who need I remind you have my sister.”

Raven falters, swallowing and though her expression is still creased with suspicion she allows, “Killing Lady Clarke would probably lead to your sister's ransom.”

“At best,” Anya mutters, darkly, “They would probably execute her.”

Raven heaves in a shuddering breath and is quiet for a moment, before she admits. “You did not order the assassination.”

“Of course not,” Anya scoffs, grinding her jaw, “As much as I would like to see the girl gone.”

“You don’t know her,” Raven argues, fiercely, “She’s not what you think, though she has you all fooled.”

“Oh I’m not fooled,” Anya shakes her head, glowering into the darkness, “I know about Tyrell women, beautiful and deadly.”

“So you think the dagger was planted to frame House Mormont?” Raven’s shoulders finally start to relax a little, and Anya nods. “You have to find out who did it.”

“The guard isn’t being very helpful, I suspect he doesn’t know himself.”
“It was clever to choose to frame you,” Raven admits, slowly, as if thinking out loud. “War with the south and disunity within the north all at once.”

“The queen knows my family would never do such a thing.” She straightens, looking over the blacksmith, “If you’re done accusing me, I have to go back to the castle.”

Raven nods, a little reluctantly, but then says, quietly. “I’m not doing it any more.”

Anyà’s nose wrinkles, but she nods, “I suspected you might say that, clearly she has you under her thumb.”

“I’m under no one’s thumb,” Raven snaps. “She’s a good person.”

“As you say, Reyes.”

They walk together back to the mouth of the alleyway, pushing past the linens that hang like ghosts on the lines criss-crossing the street. Raven’s gait is awkward and ungraceful, leaving her struggling to keep up and Anya slows her pace just a little to save the blacksmith any further humiliation. There is a pinched, pained look on her face, and at the mouth of the alleyway Anya pauses and says, a little awkwardly.

“I thought you needed the money for a better brace.”

Raven’s expression shutters immediately, and Anya knows on instinct that any offer of money now would only get her a punch in the mouth.

“I’m fine.” Raven tells her, bluntly, and when she turns to make her way back into Winter Town Anya lets her go.

Instead of lingering and thinking on what the girl said, she starts back to the castle. The streets are dark and slippery, but she is well used to them by now and the white of her Queensguard cloak means that no pickpockets dare to target her as she walks. Her strides are long and swift, her mind reeling with anxieties over the source of the dagger and possible attempts to put distance between her and Lexa. The queen is like a younger sister to her, had squired under her for a short time before the war. She had watched her grow from a child with limbs too long into a lithe, graceful queen. Sometimes she feels a pang of guilt, that she avoiding her obligations by becoming a Queensguard while her cousin took on a mantel that she had never been prepared for. Lexa has taken to reigning like a duck to water, however. Perhaps because, unlike Mormont’s relatively small house and lands, Lexa had been raised to be Warden of the North under the southern kings that would come after Thelonius Baratheon. She remembers that child well, ink stained fingers and mud stained knees, dwarfed by her father’s chair as she listened with endless patience to the complaints of petty lesser lords and smallfolk. She had always been such an ordinary child, the thought of her one day being surrounded by mysterious creatures from folklore is almost baffling.

As Anya passes through the courtyard, she spares a glance at the Winterfell forge, which still glows with candlelight. She wonders what report Sinclair will make to Lexa, and the thought of someone trying to push a rift between them leads her feet further into the castle, to where Lexa’s quarters are guarded by Lincoln.

Lincoln nods to her on her approach, but sensing her darkened mind says nothing but, “Captain.”

“Is she asleep?” Anya demands, and Lincoln shakes his head.

“She has only just retired.”
Anya nods, giving a cursory knock to the door but stepping inside before she hears Lexa’s call for her. The queen is leaning over her desk, the room dark but for the flickering of a few candles, the fire burning low in the grate. Her hair hangs from about her face in tendrils that Anya is sure are unbecoming of a queen, and her eyes are clouded and tired when she looks up. Her fingers, Anya notices, are crusted with dried blood that Anya is sure is not her own.

“Will you ever learn to wait until you are called?” Lexa snaps, and Anya jolts at the words, her eyes widening.

A moment of silence passes between them before she says, calmly. “I apologise, your majesty.”

The words make Lexa sag like a cut marionette, falling in her chair with a long sigh. The queen tilts her back and pushes away the hair around her face with her bloody fingers, her eyes squeezing shut as if in pain.

“I’m sorry Anya,” When she speaks again her voice is lower, but Anya still lingers near the doorway, unsure if she’s truly welcome. Lexa’s eyes open and she gestures her closer with a soft sigh. “I shouldn’t have said that, you know you’re always welcome.”

Anya nods, biding time as she thinks of how to approach her. It is as if a wide glacier has opened between them, stretching out in a yawn to push them away from each other and she feels a persistent wriggle of worry in her gut at the thought.

“I wanted to know how the identification of the dagger was progressing.” She says, at last, and Lexa frowns, her eyes narrowing as she groans.

“The guard knows nothing, not really.” Her expression darkens, “Trust me, he is thoroughly broken.”

“I do trust you.” Anya’s eyes flicker over her warily and Lexa must read her unease in her gaze because she heaves herself up and walks around her desk to hold out her hand.

“I trust you Anya, I know that you and your house would never do anything to betray me, or the north.” The sincerity of her words loosens the iron band tightening around Anya’s chest, and she pulls in a deep breath, clasping her cousin’s elbow as Lexa mirrors the gesture.

“Come, sit.” Lexa gestures to the fireplace and as Anya sinks down into one of the comfortable chairs there, Lexa coaxes the fire back into life and fetches them two goblets of wine to drink.

“So, you found nothing out from the guard?” Anya asks, when Lexa is sitting comfortably, one of her wolves laying its head upon her lap. Lexa strokes the sandy head as she thinks and Anya sees the great beast’s eyes drift close blissfully.

“He said that the assassin came to him two nights past, offered him a great reward for stepping away while he was on guard. The guard already had anti southern sympathies, that’s clear from the way he talks about Cl- Lady Clarke.” Lexa’s gaze is dark.

“He couldn’t say anything about the assassin?” Anya probes, taking a slug from her wine goblet.

Lexa shakes her head, barely touching her own wine. “Nothing of substance, he was an average man, dark of hair and green of eye.” Something about the statement plucks at the workings of Anya’s mind, but she cannot place it and instead dismisses the thought and focuses on Lexa again. “He had no accent or markings, did not give a name or a place of origin.”

“Why would he?” Anya snorts, “He probably thought he would get away with it and leave the guard
to be caught. The guard was a fool.”

“A radicalised fool,” Lexa’s eyes are dark again, staring into the firelight. “I knew there was some discontent with Lady Clarke’s presence, but I never expected anything of this level.”

“I would advise checking the guards assigned to her from now on.”

“Indra has already implemented it, though I fear she will struggle to pry Octavia Snow away from her,” Lexa laughs quietly, and Anya’s eyes crease.

“Snow, really?”

“She’s insisting on guarding Lady Clarke from now on.” Lexa shakes her head, and takes a sip from her goblet, “I get the impression that Lady Clarke has charmed her way into many people’s acquaintances.”

“Yes,” Anya’s eyes stay fixed to her queen, watching the high, light flush on her cheeks and her slight smile. “She is rather charming, I hear.”

“She is indeed.” Something about Lexa’s smile leaves Anya’s gut churning.

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They burn Reya the next day. Clarke wakes to a bright, white morning, where the clouds hang in the air in that heavy, blanketing sort of way that she has come to know means snow, and she takes a moment to stare out of her window at the still sky as her new handmaiden bustles around the room. It feels good to be out of bed, to stretch her legs and the milk of the poppy Nyko gives her to drink in the morning makes her feel far away and listless. Her handmaiden has to call her name three times before she turns around.

The handmaiden is a kindly older woman, who bustles around her with the quiet warmth of a nursemaid. Clarke feels as pliant as a helpless child when she is guided into her chemise and stockings, stays affixed very loosely around her waist and a thick, heavy dress guided over her shoulders, in dove grey and slight golden embroidery. The sleeves are long, and she is glad to cover her hands, which are still wrapped in bandages.

The handmaiden guides her to a chair before the warm fire and with soothing words urges her to eat some of the soft egg and apple slices before her. Clarke picks at the food like a baby bird, but eats very little. Her stomach feels warped and churning, and she is almost lightheaded with guilt and grief. Nyko’s milk of the poppy had sent her deeply to sleep the night before, but her dreams had been plagued with Reya- her eyes, her scream, her blood covering Clarke’s hands- and now she feels her exhaustion sitting like weights upon her shoulders. Behind her, the handmaiden begins to brush out her hair with a soft brush, until it falls in long, golden waves down her back, and then braids it back into a simple, soft northern style. It occurs to Clarke that the only person in the north who knew her complex, southern braids will be burned today, and the food turns to dust in her mouth.

The handmaiden tuts softly to see she hasn’t eaten much, but whisks the tray away and begins to help Clarke into an assortment of jewels, until she pushes them away. Instead, she chooses a small white dove on a golden chain and wears only that around her neck. The handmaiden drapes her duck egg blue cape around her shoulders and the white fur trim cradles her like a mother would. In this moment, she misses her parents so intensely that she could cry. Instead, the handmaiden opens the door for her and she somehow glides outside, where Octavia is waiting for her.

The soldier is dressed in her finest uniform, her silver chest plate shining, a dark cloak over her
shoulders and her hair pulled back into a thick, neat braid down her back, but her face is pale and her eyes dark as if she too has had a restless night. Clarke feels a spark of camaraderie at the sight of her and nods her head in greeting, accepting the hand held out for her. She thanks her handmaiden in soft words, and allows Octavia to help her down the spiral stairs of her tower room. At the bottom, to her surprise, she finds the queen waiting.

Lexa stands with her hands behind her back, like the soldier she truly is, and her face is darkened by thought and worry. She brightens a little when she sees them, giving a respectful nod as Clarke bobs her curtsey. Her dark cloak is trimmed with grey fur and a dark blue, luxurious dress sits beneath it. She wears no sword today, and her only decoration is a direwolf pin on her cloak and a delicate silver circlet running around her forehead. Anya lingers behind her at some distance with several other guards, and she gives Clarke a nod.

“Lady Clarke,” Lexa steps up to meet them, her face a mask of sympathy. “I thought it would be good for us to enter together.”

“Yes,” Her voice is faint, and though she blames the milk of the poppy, her grief clogs her throat. “Politically aligned, even after the attack.”

Lexa’s expression stutters and she nods, seemingly a little taken aback, before continuing more gently, almost uncertainly. “I also thought you may like the company.”

“Oh,” Her eyes widen, and for a moment she stares into Lexa’s kind eyes and forgets what is to come. “Yes, thank you.” The queen holds out an arm for her and she accepts, her fingers curling around her elbow. Lexa offers her a small, sad smile and Clarke feels slightly less alone than she had.

The ceremony is carried out in the godswood. Lexa stands beside the Heart Tree, while Clarke, Octavia, Lady Anya and Prince Aden stand with Reya’s northern family and few friends. Her family look like Reya, Clarke notices with a pang that shoots through her haze of grief, only a little hardier. They are joined by a smattering of maids who hold each other’s clasped hands and brush away their tears with trembling hands, and Measter Titus lingers close to Lexa, ready to read her final rites. To the left of them all, where they are avoiding looking, Reya’s body is laid out upon a funeral pyre. She is dressed in white and draped in snowdrops, and Clarke knows that if she sees her closely she will not survive the grief. Lexa looks out across their shivering forms, her expression grave and sorrowful, and pulls in a long breath before she begins to speak.

“I cannot claim to know Reya as you did.” She admits, her voice low but carrying through the quiet. “I was not her friend, or her family, or her lady.” She nods to Clarke, who shivers. “But I know a few things, from what I have been told. I know from talking with you,” Here her eyes linger on Reya’s family, “That Reya was a kind soul, with a smile for everyone. I know that she was an expert needleworker, a skill I could never master myself.” The words bring a slight smile to the faces of those gathered and Clarke can feel the tears clawing up her throat. “I know from her lady that Reya was a conscientious worker, that she gave up her life in the south out of loyalty to her house. I also know that she was brave, in saving Lady Clarke’s life.” Clarke feels stiff with the agony of it, her eyes flickering closed to flash with images of blood and fear and tears. “That is why we are here, because Reya was a hero and she deserves a hero’s burial.” Lexa’s words draw her eyes open again, and she finds the queen looking seriously at them all. “I cannot give you back the person that you loved, but I can give you peace in knowing that she is with the gods now and she will never be forgotten.”

She turns to look at Measter Titus and the man nods shallowly, speaking the funeral rites as a guard passes Lexa the torch. The queen moves to the funeral pyre with grace, pausing for a moment to scan her eyes over them all, before dipping the torch to catch at the tinder. It takes a moment for the
licking flames to catch, and then they stretch out through the pyre like stretching fingers, until Clarke is left watching the girl who saved her life burn.

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Lexa watches Clarke speak with Reya’s family for some time before Maester Titus interrupts her thoughts. Her eyes follow the girl as she speaks, nodding along with the nervous smallfolk and saying something that makes Reya’s aunt sob. Clarke lays a comforting hand on her shoulder and the woman draws her into a hug just as Titus arrives at her side. Lexa startles away to look at her Maester, whose brow is set in its usual furrow.

“Maester Titus.”

“Your majesty,” Titus gives a slight bow, “A lovely eulogy.” He tells her, stiffly and Lexa nods, though she knows he hadn’t understood her desire for a hero’s funeral for a handmaiden. “We have many things to run over today, I’m afraid. The Night’s Watch is requesting more men at The Wall, and there are the preparations for the First Bloom to get underway, and-”

“Don’t fear Maester, I’ll be sure to look over all of these issues today.” She interrupts him, her eyes still flickering back to where Clarke waits.

“Excellent,” Titus deflates a little in relief, and Lexa nods, though she knows he hadn’t understood her desire for a hero’s funeral for a handmaiden. “We have many things to run over today, I’m afraid. The Night’s Watch is requesting more men at The Wall, and there are the preparations for the First Bloom to get underway, and-”

“Titus.” She shoots him a look that reads of impatience and annoyance and he nods hurriedly, turning to rush away.

Aden approaches her as he leaves, watching their Maester’s retreating form and saying, off handedly, “Will he be dead by the time I am king, do you suppose?”

“That depends on how long you plan to wait to usurp me,” Lexa replies, dryly, and Aden cracks a smile, stepping in to stand beside her. His hands go behind his back, his spine straightening and Lexa notes the change with approval.

Their eyes both follow Clarke’s movement as the girl continues to speak with Reya’s family, and Aden finally says, “She is sad.”

“I think she carries some guilt with her,” Lexa admits, softly. “She feels responsible for the girl’s death.” Her expression twists, troubled. “I only wish I had time to truly speak with her about it… Titus is demanding my attention.”

“I’ll look after her.” Aden says, without prompting and Lexa’s eyes flicker over to him. He returns her gaze steadily, and eventually she nods.

“Thank you, Aden. We should pay our respects to the family.”

They approach together, and the family fall silent at the sight of them, offering bows and tearful curtseys, though Lexa urges them all onto their feet as gently as she can. The wife is a seamstress in Winter Town, Lexa knows of some of her work, and the husband is a logger in the warmer seasons. Their children stand with them, one holding a squirming babe on her hip, and their dark cloaks make them look like crows gathered in the snow.
“I’m very sorry for your loss.” Lexa tells the eldest girl, who stands closest to her and the girl flushes, adjusting the babe in her arms when he wriggles.

“Your majesty is very kind for giving Reya a hero’s funeral.” The husband rushes to say, “Thank you for all you’ve done for us.”

“It’s the least I could do,” Lexa tells him earnestly, “Reya was a hero by all accounts.”

“She deserves nothing less,” Clarke murmurs, and the wife grips her hand more tightly, offering her watery smile.

“You’ve always been very kind to her m’lady,” The eldest daughter wavers over her words, as if fighting away her tears. “She always said so.”

Lexa watches Clarke swallow, her eyes dark with grief. “I was lucky to have her with me. I… I’m sorry that I brought her to the north… that she was caught in all of this.”

“She would always want you to be safe and happy, m’lady.” The seamstress pats her hand in a motherly sort of way, and Clarke swallows again.

“If there’s anything you need… anything at all… please come to me.” She begs the seamstress, who shakes her head.

“You’ve already been too kind, m’lady.”

“Still,” Lexa steps in, “Reya died in service of not only Lady Clarke, but the crown as well. Anything you need, please come to the castle.”

“Thank you,” The husband wipes at his wet cheeks, swallowing back a sob. “Truly.”

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“My lady?”

The voice startles her from her reverie, and Clarke blinks the tears from her eyes, swiping a hand over her cheek when she turns. Prince Aden stands a respectful step away, her expression drawn with soft sympathy. His eyes are grave, his clothes dark, and he speaks quietly.

“Your highness,” Clarke dips her head, her voice rough with tears, and the prince closes the gap between them until he is stood by her side.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” His eyes flicker back to the pyre, “You were close?”

“She was a sweet girl,” Clarke’s hands curl up where they are clasped together before her, until her fingers press painfully against the healing cuts on her palms. “She did not deserve to die for me.”

Aden hums quietly, his eyes moving over her thoughtfully. “Death is a difficult thing to assign meaning to. May I show you something?” At her curious gaze, he adds, “I think it could help.”

Part of her wishes that she could stay where she is, forcing herself to watch the pyre until there is nothing left to burn. She feels as if she owes Reya at least that, owes her her pain and heartache, but the prince’s expression is hopeful and sweet, so she nods and allows him to take her arm and lead her from the godswood. Octavia falls into step behind them, keeping a few paces away, and Aden is quiet as they walk through the main courtyard and into a smaller, lighter courtyard, in which a warm hot spring bubbles. From there, he leads her to heavy iron oak door, embellished with iron and silver
and a guard standing sentry outside of it. She’s never noticed it before, and the cool darkness sends a shiver down her spine.

Aden leads her down a set of narrow, spiralling stairs, their way lit only by torches in the wall. Clarke has to run her hands over the cold stone to keep her balance, and she feels a slice of dread when she realises that Octavia is no longer behind them. They step out into a long hallway, with tall, vaulted ceilings. The smell of damp earth lingers in the air, telling of their place beneath the surface, and the few torches that light the hallway send long, flickering shadows climbing across the walls from the statues that line either side of the hall. They are taller than a real man, carved out of stone, with severe expressions. In their hands they hold longswords and curled at their feet are direwolves with snarling faces.

The prince takes a torch from the wall to light their way and Clarke is forced to follow as he leads her further into the hall.

“These are the crypts of Winterfell.” Though his voice is low it echoes through the hall. “The children of House Stark are buried here, and the Lords and Kings have their statues placed beside their tombs.” He holds up the torch, casting light over the severe faces of the statues. “The swords are to ward off any vengeful spirits.”

Clarke is quiet, her eyes moving through the dark, dank tomb. She feels as if these children of the north have their eyes upon her, every one seeing her for who she truly is. It’s enough to leave her mute.

Aden leads her on, to the last statue waiting for them and holds it up, first gesturing to a woman. Though the stone is aged, Clarke can see that she had fair features and high cheekbones, her hair braided softly back and partly covered by a headdress.

“This is Lady Alaina Stark, Lexa’s mother,” His voice breaks just a little over the word, but when Clarke’s eyes dart to him she sees nothing amiss. “Our father adored her. They say she was the only woman he ever truly loved, he never married again after her death. He had her likeness carved after she died giving birth to Lexa.” His eyes cast down and Clarke follows his gaze to see flowers at her feet. “She loved the summertime, so sometimes Lexa brings her flowers.”

“She looks kind.” The words escape her before she realises it and Aden gives a slight smile.

“She was, by all accounts.” He moves further into the crypt, gesturing to the towering statue beside Lady Alaina. The tomb is bigger that the lady’s, decorated with direwolves and a broken chain at the base of the man’s feet. Aden holds up the torch and Clarke sees the serious eyes she recognises in both of the siblings, and the strong jaw.

“Our father,” Aden explains, unnecessarily, “Lord Brandon Stark, the First King, Liberator of the North. Lexa had the tomb carved for him when she returned from war; she insisted he wear a crown, said he was the first true King of the North.”

“Do you miss him?” She asks, softly.

Aden shrugs, his face twisting with thought. “You know the story, I assume?” When she shakes her head his eyes widen, and he almost laughs he’s so surprised. “You must be the only person in the north who doesn’t. I was left on the castle doorstep as a babe, with this.” He fishes inside his tunic and brings out a silver pendant on a long black string. “It’s all I have of my mother.” He runs his finger over it, “Supposedly Lord Brandon took one look at it and had me taken in.”

The silver glints in the torchlight, and Clarke catches sight of a direwolf sitting in stark relief on the
pendant, teeth bared. She thinks of Aden, so tiny he’s dragged down by the pendant, waiting in the snow and cold to meet his true father, and feels a stab of sharp pain through the ache that has taken up residence in her stomach.

Aden must see some of her thoughts in her face, because he shakes his head, sliding the pendant away. “Lord Stark was good to me, he took me in and raised me as his own. Most other lords don’t see fit to bestow such kindness, and Lexa.” He cuts himself off, closing his lips over his words as if he doesn’t quite trust himself. “Lexa is as good a sister to me as if we had the same mother.”

Clarke nods, and as the silence stretches between them her mind wanders to her own father, the feeling of her small hand clasped around his own. She knows she was blessed by an easy childhood, beloved despite being a girl, and she can’t imagine growing up without her father beside her, his quick laughter and bright smile, the lines made by laughter around his eyes. Her time in Winterfell is the first time she’s ever felt as if she doesn’t belong, as if she is unwanted, and to think of being raised feeling like an outsider makes her stomach churn and her heart clench with pain.

“Will you miss Reya?”

The words feel like a punch to the gut and her eyes stay fixed for a moment, her breath catching. It feels as if everything has been pulled from her insides, scraping out through her throat and blocking her airways as the words rattle around her skull like it’s an empty chest.

“I-” Her words catch, and her eyes flicker to Aden only to find the prince looking at her with soft, sympathetic eyes. “I- I was only her mistress, I shouldn’t… her family…” Something about the curve of his face and the dark quiet of the crypts seems to pierce something deep within her and a hiccoughing sob works its way up her throat and bursts out. In the dark, the light of the torch fragments into contorted starbursts as tears cling to her lashes and her first instinct is to twist away from the prince and push her bandaged hands against her cheeks.

A hand on her shoulder, gentle pressure eases her around and she finds herself looking at Aden through the darkness. He is solemn, and quiet and there, and when his hand moves to her arm and squeezes, she feels herself crumble.

“It’s my fault.”

His eyes widen, his mouth dropping open in surprise, and he begins to shake his head even as she continues talking.

“She died for me, I was- I was the target and I asked for her-” Her knees tremble beneath her and when she falls, her chest heaving, Aden falls with her. The torch clatters to the floor, rolling away across the stone to send lurching shadows across the walls and the ceilings. Aden lets it go, his arms curling around her shoulders as Clarke’s tears blind her. Her chest heaves, despite her constant struggles to control herself, and she can feel her limbs trembling. It is as someone is twisting at her stomach and gut, as if she can see the girl before her like a spectre.

“Clarke,” Aden’s arms are careful around her shoulders, holding her close and her cheek presses against his shoulder, her tears staining his tunic. “It isn’t your fault, listen to me!” At the sound of his raised voice, she stutters over her sobs, eyes heavy with tears staring up at him, and he releases a long breath. “The assassin would have killed everyone he came across. This is his fault, not yours, you understand me? You were clearly a good mistress to Reya, or she wouldn’t have spoken so highly of you to her family. You were kind to them, as well. You’ve done the right thing Clarke, and it’s awful and terrible, but it’s not your fault.”

The words are like a balm to her tender heart and she pulls in a few long breaths, feeling Aden’s
steadying arms around her and the ground cool beneath her splayed hands.  

“I’m sorry,” Her voice croaks and cracks, struggling. “I shouldn’t have… this was-”  

“Don’t think of it,” Aden cuts her off, shaking his head with a kind smile. “Truly,” He pushes himself to his feet and holds out a hand to help her up again. “It was my honour to show you the crypts, my lady.” He squeezes her hand and she smiles, tightening her fingers around his.  

“Thank you, your highness.”  

“Here,” He digs in his pockets and eventually retrieves a crumpled, old handkerchief. She has a fresh one, but the gesture is so kind that she can’t ignore it and takes it with a smile to dab at her eyes, whilst Aden retrieves their forgotten torch.  

When he holds out an arm, she takes it gratefully.  

“I think being somewhere warm and bright would help you, my lady. Perhaps with a plate of lemon cakes.”  

He gives her a hopeful smile, and she can’t help but smile again, nodding. “I think you’re right.”  

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The guard dies two days later, when the day dawns grey and dark. Thunder cracks above them as he is half led, half carried to the execution block. He is a shell of the man he once was, Lexa made sure of that when she wrung every last tearful, bloody confession from him, and his hollowed eyes stare out at the waiting crowds who watch him cross the bailey with dark eyes and shouted words. Lexa waits, as still as a statue and hard as stone, her hands behind her back and her shoulders squared, face impassive and sombre. She is flanked by attendants, Anya and Aden on one side, Titus on the other. The approaching prisoner and smallfolk calling for his blood do not touch her in her place upon the raised platform, with the ironwood execution block before her, stained with the blood of those who had come before. Her sword rests at her hip, heavy with the direwolf pommel shining, and the fate of the man before her hangs from her fingers like chains she must bear. Her wolves roam about the edge of the bailey, snarling at the man in chains, and Honour sits at her side as he always does, her shadow in everything. She does not often give much thought to the rumours of the smallfolk, to the whispers of mysticism and fate and the old gods, but standing here with a man’s life in her hands, she feels as close to the gods as ever she has.  

It is only when she catches sight of the woman emerging onto the raised balcony that surrounds the courtyard, that she falters. Lady Clarke is like a ghost, her golden hair almost white in the light, with Faith walking at her heels. She seems wan and pale, but the sight of her eyes, as blue as sapphires and dangerous as a stormy sea, lingers with Lexa even as she utters her words, brings her sword down, and ends a man’s life.  

She finds it hard to believe that those eyes are the same which look at her across the table in Lady Clarke’s solar later that day. The dark clouds that had crowded the sky earlier in the day have given way to soft evening sunlight, shining in through the arched windows of the solar, and bathed as she is in the warm glow, Clarke looks so far from the ghost of a girl that had watched the execution earlier that day. They sup together, in peaceful quiet, and as she finishes her last bite of tender, roasted duck, Clarke clears her throat and says.  

“I’d like to thank you again for all you’ve done for me.”  

L Lexa tries her hardest to keep a modicum of decorum and not roll her eyes, but something about the
twist of her expression must give away her true feelings, because Lady Clarke cracks a smile.

“I know you’ve said and said that it isn’t necessary but still, after today I felt it only right.”

“My lady, you are under my protection in Winterfell.” Lexa insists, resisting the urge to reach for the woman’s hand in her earnestness. “I am only sorry that this much harm befell you,” She hesitates, before continuing, a little uncertainly. “Nyko tells me you are doing well?”

“You were asking after me?” The light, lilting tease that runs through Lady Clarke’s voice brings heat to Lexa’s cheeks, and she glances away bashfully.

“I- yes, I was.” She admits with a sheepish smile, “I am concerned your mother will ride north and decapitate me herself if she thinks you are getting any worse.”

Clarke actually laughs at that, golden laughter that settles in Lexa’s heart and nestles there, warming her entire body. “Don’t fear, I’ve assured her that I am well and being served dutifully by my hostess.”

“We will continue to search for the root of the assassin,” Lexa promises her, “I promise no further harm will come to you here.”

“You shall have to manage Lady Anya to promise that,” Clarke continues, lightly, and Lexa allows herself a soft breath of laughter.

“I can only swear to try, my lady.”

“I wish you luck, your majesty,” Clarke raises her goblet and Lexa meets it with her own, enjoying the heady spiced wine and warmth from the fire burning in the grate. Seeing Lady Clarke so well and healthy again is a weight away from her heart, though she feels almost drunk on their time together.

“Aden took you to see the Winterfell crypts, I understand?” She asks, after a second of silence, and Clarke nods.

“He showed me your father’s tomb,” She pauses for a moment, her face drawn with thought, fingers still cradling her goblet, “He is a kind soul, your brother, and a gentle heart. I hope he does not change.”

“As do I,” Lexa tells her, readily. “He is loyal and strong, and young in a way that I never was, I think.”

Clarke eyes her with curiosity, “You speak very well of him, better than I would expect one to speak of an illegitimate sibling.”

Lexa brows crease and she sits a little straighter in her chair. “His parentage has never bothered me, we were children together, we grew up together. I only ever knew him as my little brother.” She hesitates for a moment, caught on a memory, “I remember when he was only five he asked me why everyone called me a lady.” She laughs, quietly, “Even then he was never one for decorum.”

“And you were?” Clarke tilts her head, her eyes fixed to Lexa’s form and the queen tries not to squirm under her gaze.

“Decorum here is different to the south, I think. I was taught to be respectful and honourable, to value duty above all else. It is good, I suppose, that my father never thought to teach me only embroidery and dancing,” She stumbles on her words, fearing she has offended, “Not that they are
not meaningful pursuits— that is to say—”

“You cannot win a war with embroidery and dancing,” Clarke supplies, and then continues, to Lexa’s great relief, “You have not offended me, your majesty, please don’t fret.”

Lexa bows her head, hoping that the gesture will hide her colouring cheeks from the lady’s shrewd gaze. “Were you taught such pursuits, my lady?”

“Yes,” The sigh Clarke gives draws her eyes upwards again and she finds the girl looking distractedly into the fire, her hands playing with the wine goblet on the table. “And to curtsey and smile, I sometimes wish I had been taught to fight and run, as you were. But I was never left idle, tutors taught me numbers and letters, my grandmother taught me something of healing, and my father of history.” Her smile becomes fond and soft, “And he taught me to play cyvasse, which kept my mind sharp.”

“Cyvasse?” Lexa’s brows crease, and she watches as Clarke rises from her seat.

“You have not heard of it?” She asks, as she moves to the chest at the end of her bed, “I suppose it isn’t popular much north of Highgarden.”

“What is it?” Lexa watches on with interest as she extracts a box, upon which sits a checked pattern of dark and light inlaid wood. Carefully, Lady Clarke sets the box on the table between them and flips the clasp keeping it closed to reveal a set of beautifully carved marble pieces. She decants them onto the table and turns the box, flattening it out until it forms a board between them, as wide and long as Lexa’s forearm.

She speaks as she sets the pieces upon each end of the checked board, “They each represent a different part of the kingdom, here we have a knight,” She holds up a carved horse’s head, “And a priestess,” Here, she displays a woman with clasped hands and a robe around her face. “Each piece can only move a certain way around the board, you have to think a few steps ahead of your opponent to protect your most important piece.”

“And what is that?” Lexa asks, as she examines a carved dragon, snarling, with a column of flames escaping its mouth.

“Why, your queen of course,” Clarke gives her a wry smile, and places the crowned figure into her hands.

An answering smile lights up Lexa’s face, and she looks at the golden girl carefully setting pieces upon a board between them. “Will you teach me how to play?”

Clarke’s eyes meet hers, and her surprised expression quickly melts into one of shocked, quiet joy. “Of course, your majesty.”
thank you so so much for the comments on the last chapter, they were so great! let me know what you think of this chapter, what did you think of Aden and Clarke's interaction? what did you think of the funeral? hit me up below or over on tumblr @onemilliongoldstars!
after the drama and angst of the last few chapters, everyone breathe out and relax, this one is a little softer. enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Book One: Chapter 10

Spring finally seems to creep its way into the castle and with it comes the celebrations of the first blossom. The skies are lighter, the days slowly longer, and the sun burns away through the clouds enough to make Clarke feel refreshed and clean in the thawing landscape. Though spring is upon them, some snows still linger to the north, leaving the mountains and forests white like an old crone’s hair. After a week with no snow, and a raven from the Citadel pronouncing that spring is finally coming, Measter Titus announces the festival of the First Blossom, and Clarke hears the people cheering from within her solar.

Stepping to the window, she peers out and from her place in her tower she sees the smallfolk hurrying from the castle and into the streets of Winter Town to begin their preparations. When they sup together that evening, she asks Lexa about the commotion and the queen gives her a smile so wide and pure she thinks she is seeing the stars when they were first born.

“We celebrate the coming of spring here with a festival,” She explains, waving away the cupbearer to fill Clarke’s goblet herself. “The First Blossom, where the town celebrates for two days and two nights.”

“We end up with a feast here,” Aden tells her, through a mouthful of food, and grins guiltily when Lexa cuts him a stern glance. He swallows and then continues, just as eagerly, “Most of the lords of the north will come.”

“Really?” Her eyes widen, swinging to Lexa in surprise and the queen nods.

“Yes, traditionally we welcome the lords of the north to eat at our hearth to celebrate the beginning of the spring. There will be musicians and dancing, I expect.”

“Of course there will be,” Aden rolls his eyes at his sister, and Clarke covers her grin at Lexa’s irritated expression with a sip of wine. “You must dance with me Clarke.”

“Lady Clarke can dance with whomever she pleases,” Lexa tells him, firmly and Clarke gives the boy a dazzling smile.

“Of course I’ll dance with you Aden.”

“There are markets in Winter Town,” Lexa supplies, ignoring her brother’s triumphant look, “Vendors travel for miles, it is usually fairly spectacular.” She hesitates for a moment, busying herself by pouring some more wine, before she offers, “I would be glad to show you around, if you’d like.”

“Oh,” Her eyes widen, a smile slipping unbidden onto her lips even as she says. “That would be lovely but- I mean, do you not have to entertain the northern lords?”
“They are quite able to entertain themselves,” She waves her hand, and Clarke doesn’t miss the surprise that flits across Aden’s face. “You are our guest too, and you’ve never seen the festival before.”

“Then yes,” Clarke meets the soft green eyes gazing out at her and nods, “I’d like that very much, thank you.”

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Winter Town is transformed when Clarke awakes the morning of the festival. The town she had first thought of as dull and bleak appears bustling and joyous from her window, where she can see flags have been hung between the buildings in bright colours, and tapers burn against the walls. Even from her tower window she can hear the sounds of fiddles and drums, and the shouts and songs of the townsfolk, and she can barely stay still long enough for her new handmaiden to dress her and force breakfast down her throat. Octavia has a spring to her step when she escorts her down the stairs, and when Clarke asks about it, Octavia eyes the beam on her face and says.

“The spring festival is always my favourite, ever since I was a girl.”

She is escorted down to the courtyard, where the queen waits with a retinue of her own guards. Anya is surprisingly absent, though Clarke notices the Queensguard Lincoln at her side, and the queen nods along to something her harried Measter is saying to her. Clarke tries to ignore the squeeze of her heart when Lexa’s face lights up into a smile upon seeing her. Faith trots at her feet, and Clarke spots a few of the other direwolves, the dark one sat at Lexa’s side while two of the lighter ones nip and playfight.

Faith darts away to join her siblings in their play, as Clarke stops in front of the small group and dips a curtsey.

“Lady Clarke,” Lexa greets her warmly, “I hope you’re well.”

“I am, thank you your majesty,” Clarke glances up at the blue sky and luxuriates in the feeling of the sun on her skin for a moment. “The day is so fair, it’s good to feel the sun.”

“Perfect for the festival,” Lexa agrees, and at her side Measter Titus clears his throat, eyeing Clarke with distaste.

“Your majesty, the Karhold lords will be expecting—”

Lexa brushes him away impatiently, her expression pinching. “The Karstarks have seen the festival plenty of times, I will be pleased to receive them this evening.”

Measter Titus opens his mouth to protest, but seems to think better of it. Instead, he gives a bow, “Your majesty,” His expression sours, “Lady Clarke.” And turns to stalk away across the courtyard again.

Clarke’s eyes follow him, crinkling with curiosity, and she turns to see the queen pressing down her annoyance to give her a soft smile. “I think your Measter doesn’t like me.”

“He doesn’t like many people,” Lexa tells her, her smile widening with mirth hidden at its creases.

“I’m not keeping you from anything important, am I?” Clarke’s gaze flickers back to the retreating figure of the Maester.

“No, there’s nowhere else I need to be but here,” Lexa assures her, and offers her arm. After a
second of hesitation, Clarke winds her hand through it and the queen’s beaming smile is more than enough reward for her bravery.

Together, they make their way out of the courtyard, and Clarke’s spirits brighten at the sight of Winter Town awaiting them behind the raised portcullis. As she had suspected when leaning out of her window, the town has transformed from the usual dreariness and practicality that came from the stern northern ways, into a riot of colour and music. Flags of every colour stretch between the houses, the sigil of the Stark direwolf stitched upon them in silver thread which catches the light, intertwined with lengths of ribbon which bluster in the breeze. In the centre of the market place has been erected a maypole, flowers woven into its top and strips of brightly coloured cloth wrapped around its centre. Around the maypole are crowded more stalls than Clarke has ever seen in Winter Town, rickety, hastily constructed stands jostling for space with the stalls that look as if they have grown roots, so long have they been standing there. Brightly coloured blankets are scattered across the ground, with wares displayed upon them, and girls skip between the revellers with baskets of flowers for a bronze coin.

Though it is nothing compared to the grand scale of celebrations in Highgarden, there is something overwhelmingly warm and jovial about the festival. Guards laugh to each other, tanners and weavers share mead, farmers and woodsmen share food, and children and dogs dart about between it all, squealing and laughing and stealing food from the hands of adults. Clarke laughs as a little one spirals past her, catching himself in her skirts as he chases after his friends. He staggers back, disorientated for a moment and his eyes reel from her to the queen, before they widen at the sight of the silver circlet upon her head.

“The queen!” He shouts after his friends, and though they ignore him in favour of their game, others hear his shout and turn to look.

People shout out, hail her name with cries of “Queen in the North” and “Daughter of Wolves” and though Lexa raises a hand to wave to them, she doesn’t linger to luxuriate in their praise.

They move together through the festival, though eyes are now upon them and children scamper at their sides. Some dart close to touch at the tails and backs of the direwolves, before running away to their awed companions, others trot at Lexa’s side, until she touches their shoulder, or ruffles their hair long enough to satisfy them.

“The festival is celebrated when the first bloom appears upon the flowers in the Winterfell gardens,” Lexa explains, stretching out a hand to indicate the revelries around them, “It is hoped that the festival will encourage the gods to bring us a fair and long summer.”

“It’s wonderful,” Clarke tells her, honestly, “To see the town so colourful and happy…” Her eyes wander to the flowers pinned to the top of the maypole, “I will admit that I missed seeing flowers.”

“I’m sure this place is very different to Highgarden,” Lexa’s gaze is soft and curious, and Clarke feels strangely bare beneath it even as she nods.

“Very much so, at first I hated it here,” The words come too easily and for a moment her heart constricts, fearing that she has caused offence, but when she meets the queen’s gaze again it is still open and kind, curious.

“And now?”

“I am beginning to understand that the north has its own beauty, just as you said,” Her gaze lingers on the green eyes that stare down at that, and she thinks she sees a flush light Lexa’s cheeks, even as the queen smiles.
“I am glad. Here,” She gestures to the shop they are passing, easing them to a stop to look up at it. “They do the best pastries in the north here, better even than my own kitchens—though,” Panic flickers across her face, “please don’t tell Leanne that I said that.”

Clarke laughs at the sight of her fear, thinking of the rounded kitchen mistress. Though she’s only met her a few times, the woman seems proud and no nonsense, happy to wield a heavy wooden rolling pin at those who crossed her. The shop before them is beaming with light, candles flickering within and bright sunshine spilling through the open door, out of which a stream of both waiting customers and heavenly smells emerges. A swinging sign above the door is painted with a loaf, and adorned with flowers and flags for the celebration.

“We should go in,” Clarke announces, and Lexa follows her two steps, seemingly automatically, before balking.

“Are you sure?’’

“Of course,” Clarke looks over her shoulder at the royal and gives a smile that seems to only make the queen smile wider, “If it was your favourite I’m sure it’s wonderful. I’d like to sample it.”

“If it is what my lady wishes,” Lexa gives in with little fight, stepping in to join the queue of people waiting. Clarke is not surprised however, that at the sight of her crown and the Queensguard accompanying them, the smallfolk immediately usher her to the front of their line, her protests falling on deaf ears. Clarke is bustled in behind her, her grip on the queen’s arm falling away in the small space, and she tries not to mourn the loss of the warm contact.

Behind the wide counter, a man stands with flour dusted down his front and across his cheeks, so that he looks like some strange, jolly spectre. The shop is small but glowing with warmth and light, with servants and assistants bustling around behind the baker to slide trays in and out of the burning stoves. At the sight of them, the baker’s eyes widen and he gives a bow, straightening up only when Lexa says, looking strangely embarrassed.

“Come, Aemon, there’s no need for that.”

“I assure you there is, your majesty,” Despite his words, Aemon straightens up. “It’s been some time since we’ve seen you, I should have known that the first bloom would tempt you from the castle walls.”

“I only wish I could persuade you to come and cook for the castle,” Lexa’s mouth twists with regret and the baker laughs, eyeing her even as he continues to shape the small pastry before him, pulling and twisting the dough.

“And replace Leanne? I would never dare.”

Lexa hums her agreement, but seems to remember her courtesies, gesturing to Aemon, “Lady Clarke, this is Master Aemon.”

“Lady Clarke of House Tyrell, I assume?” The man eyes her, his gaze travelling up and down her fineries and Clarke’s chin tilts up just a little, until he bows his head respectfully. “A pleasure to meet you, is the queen showing you the festival?”

“She is,” Clarke gives a graceful smile, eyes flickering back to Lexa, “She says yours are the finest treats in the north.”

Lexa rolls her eyes, flushing a little under the gentle teasing, but Master Aemon lets out a bark of laughter.
“She would say that, the amount she used to steal in here when she was a girl.”

“Aemon,” Lexa begins to protest, but Clarke’s gaze darts between the two.

“Is that so?”

“Aye, m’lady.” Master Aemon shakes his head, placing the pastry on a tray with its twins to be baked. “I guess you’ll be wanting your favourite, your majesty?”

Lexa looks a little shamefaced, but after a moment she nods eagerly. The baker gestures and a serving girl brings a tray to his side, from which he plucks two biscuits and holds them out for the two women across the counter. They are gingerbread, Clarke realises with a start, but instead of being shaped into little men they instead take the shape of a direwolf, snarling teeth and all.

“Careful,” Aemon warns, as Lexa takes one from his hand, “They’re hot.”

“You make them as direwolves?” Lexa looks up curiously from where she was examining her treat, though Clarke catches her breaking a piece off to squirrel into her mouth, seemingly unable to control herself.

“Upon popular demand,” He gives her a meaningful glance and her eyes widen. It is constantly amazing to Clarke that this woman who seemed to conquer the world and become a legend in only a few years, is so unaware of her own myth and lore.

“Would you like one, m’lady?” Clarke is startled from her reverie by Aemon’s words, but before she can answer Lexa says.

“Lady Clarke actually prefers lemon cakes.”

There is a moment of silence, as Clarke’s eyes dart to Lexa in surprise. The queen seems to be equally shocked by her words, blinking back at her, her mouth falling open immediately to apologise, but Clarke nods.

“That’s right,” She turns back to Master Aemon, “I love lemon cakes, if you have them.”

“Of course,” He turns to bark something to his apprentice, and Clarke takes the moment to brush her fingers along Lexa’s elbow, pulling the queen’s flustered gaze back to her.

“You can have my gingerbread,” She offers, quietly, “If you’d like.”

Lexa continues to stare at her, her soul laid bare in her open, astonished gaze and the flush on her cheeks, but after a second her hand darts out and she collects up the spare treat so quickly that Clarke has to press her lips together to stifle a laugh.

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“Did you come to Winter Town often as a child?” Clarke’s arm brushes against hers as they walk, and the slight contact makes Lexa almost forget how to speak. The sun is warm above them, cutting through the cold breeze, and she feels flushed in her heavy furs and thick dress. That, she is sure, is the reason for her tied tongue and sudden struggle for words.

“When I could get away from my lessons,” She confesses, at last, and casts a smile in the girl’s direction. “It grew more difficult the older I became.”

“I can imagine,” Clarke lets out a laugh so soft that it sounds like silver bells. “It’s not easy having
Lexa’s lips curve up into a tender smile at the memories, and her eyes wander the streets, remembering them as they were when she was a child. There has been little change, though the town has grown considerably, and she remembers these streets as if she were only small again. “When I was young I would beg treats from Aemon, and run about the streets with the other children. Sometimes I would chase cats, though,” Here she smiles ruefully, “I was never fast enough.”

Clarke laughs again, mirth sparkling in her eyes, “I can imagine not- and when you were older?”

“It was harder when I was more easily recognised, and the friction between the north and the south had grown by then, so my absence was more sorely missed.” She frowns, her memories souring at the thoughts of days spent indoors, pouring over lessons and maps and strategies. “But I managed sometimes, and mostly I would just ride out of Winter Town and into the forests. I could spend hours in there, alone with my thoughts.”

“That sounds lonely.” Clarke muses quietly and Lexa gives a small shrug.

“I was used to being surrounded by people, the peace was nice.” Her gaze settles on the lady and turns curious, watching as she picks at the last of her lemon cake. “And you, my lady? How did you occupy yourself as a child in Highgarden?”

Clarke’s expression fades into a fond smile and she shakes her head, “Highgarden is isolated, your majesty, so there was no way to escape to another town. But I would spend hours in the orange orchards, drawing and playing with my ladies.” Her lips tweak up at one corner, mischievous, and Lexa feels a flutter in her stomach at her next words. “I’m afraid to say that I was a terrible influence.”

“Really, my lady? I have only ever found you to follow rules very well.” The jest falls from her lips before she can stop them and Clarke laughs so loudly that several people turn to look at them as they pass, while a flock of crows takes flight from a nearby rooftop.

As they approach the Smoking Log, the noise of chattering and music becomes louder, as does the strong scent of mead and beer, with baking bread and cooking meat. They turn the corner, feet careful against the slippery road underfoot, to find that the Smoking Log has spilled over into the street. The doors hang open and the place is evidently crowded because people sit outside on upturned beer barrels, with fires burning around them to keep away the wind. Lexa’s eyes glance over them, frowning when she recognises the dark haired girl who works as an apprentice at the Winterfell forge. The girl spots her at the same moment and her eyes widen, knocking the man beside her, who almost falls off his barrel at the sight of them. Word travels quickly and Lexa hesitates when the tavern goers fall into bows at the sight of her.

The blacksmith’s girl approaches them uncertainly, eyes darting between the two of them, but it is Clarke who breaks the awkwardness by stepping forward and beaming at the girl.

Lexa’s eyebrows almost rise into her hairline when Clarke greets the girl. “Raven!”

“My lady,” Raven nods her head, her eyes still flickering to Lexa, “It’s good to see you. And you, your majesty.” She adds, hastily.

“Raven,” Lexa gives a small smile; the girl is obviously familiar with Clarke, but she isn’t sure how they could know each other. “How are you enjoying the festival?”

“Oh, very well, thank you your majesty.” Raven’s eyes dart back to the tavern and a smirk crosses
her lips, “I hope Niylah has got enough mead in for us all.”

Lexa’s smile widens at that, turning genuine. “As do I, it will be a long few days if she hasn’t.”

“Raven is the person I was telling you about, your majesty.” Clarke tells her, almost eager. “I taught her to play cyvasse and she’s picked it up almost immediately.”

“I see,” Lexa’s eyes widen, and she thinks of the warm evenings she has spent with Clarke, half feigning her poor performance in the game in hopes of prolonging her time in the girl’s solar. “Then you are more skilled than I.”

“Oh, I’m not that good,” Raven shakes her head, embarrassed and modest, but adds. “But I did teach Lady Clarke some dice games that I still have her beat in.”

“I see,” Lexa repeats, her gaze moving to Clarke to take in the girl’s pretty flush. “Dice Lady Clarke?”

“It was only to pass the time.” Clarke argues, rolling her eyes when they both smile at her.

“I shouldn’t worry about you betting on our cyvasse games, then?” Lexa probes, and Clarke laughs loudly, shaking her head.

“I wouldn’t dare your majesty,” Shrewd eyes meet hers, “For all I know, you could be bluffing.”

Lexa laughs, and is surprised when Raven laughs too. “I can assure you I am quite as bad as I seem.”

“Would you like to join us for a drink?” Raven’s offer seems to surprise even her and she glances uncertainly back at the tavern, where the patrons outside are still half looking at them, exchanging glances. Her eyes wander to Clarke, half expecting the southern lady to turn her nose up at such common activities, but Clarke has a soft, golden smile upon her face and Lexa feels herself surrender at the sight of it.

“I suppose, it could be fitting for me to join you in such a celebratory time…” Clarke’s soft smile widens, as d Raven’s eyes, though to her credit the blacksmith takes her acceptance in her stride. However, Lexa manages only one step towards the tavern before a breathless voice calls out for her.

She turns, and is surprised to see a castle messenger boy skidding to a stop beside Lincoln.

“Your majesty,” He pants through his words, offering a deep bow, “Measter Titus is in urgent need of your attendance.”

Lexa resists the urge to throw her arms into the air and instead sucks in a breath between her teeth, her expression setting into low fury. “Really? Urgent need?”

The boy cowers in the face of her obvious anger and Lexa works to relax her face a little, though irritating this summons comes from far above the boy. “Y-Yes your majesty, that’s what he said.”

“I see,” She glances back to where Clarke’s expression is drawn into surprisingly earnest disappointment and offers her apologetic nod of her head. “I’m very sorry to leave you, Lady Clarke.”

“I’ll be sorry to lose you, your majesty,” The words make a flush rise to her cheeks, especially under the watchful eyes of the tavern patrons and she sees an answering pinkness shine across Clarke’s cheeks as the southern lady continues, hastily. “But of course, the work of a queen doesn’t stop for a festival.”
“It seems not,” Lexa sighs softly, “I will return in time for the jousting later, I hope you’ll do me the pleasure of sitting close by.”

“It would be my honour,” Lady Clarke dips into an elegant curtsey, and Lexa forces herself to take a step back before she stays rooted to the spot forever.

“Then I shall see you later, my lady.”

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Titus’s urgent business is nothing more than some unsettled lords and a letter from the Iron Bank. Lexa taps her fingers against the table in her solar and attempts not to appear too desperate to leave, lest Titus question her further, but when their meeting inevitably ends in her hosting the Karstark lords to mead and wine, she gives up on seeing Lady Clarke again before the joust. The lords are dour and quietly resentful, and though her smile stays pleasant and wan, her mind wanders back to the red wax Aden had told her of so many months ago. Further investigations had found nothing untoward and Titus made no reports of anything to fear from the west, but still she watches Lord Karstark over the rim of her goblet.

She could kiss Aden when he arrives at her door, and entreats them all to come in time for the jousting. Lexa rises and exchanges pleasantries with Lord Karhold, but is quick to fall into step next to Aden as they make their way down into Winter Town.

“Thank you,” She tells him quietly, and Aden’s eyes flicker back to the men who follow them, his hands folding behind his back that tell of his training at Anya’s side.

Mirth glitters in his eyes and he half shrugs, “We cannot have the crown dying of boredom.”

“I never thought I would be so glad of the joust,” Lexa confesses, smiling at the few people left in Winter Town who are not waiting on the field to see the jousting begin. The lords and their heirs who have gathered for the festival, spilling from their guest houses like an overstuffed cushion bursting at the seams, pull at the bit to prove themselves in the queen’s joust. It is more entertainment than Winter Town sees through all of the cold months, and so the people yearn for the excitement and bloodshed that will follow.

They arrive to find the tourney ready to begin. The mead is flowing freely, and the musicians play fiddles among the standing crowds of smallfolk who roar at the sight of their queen. Lexa can’t help the joy she feels at the sound, a swell of warmth within her chest when she hears their shouts, but it is nothing compared to the warmth she feels when she takes her place of honour in the stands, and sees Lady Clarke sat a little to her right and below her. The girl speaks with Octavia, who sits beside her with a hand on her sword, and Lincoln, and there is a breathless smile upon her face and flowers of pink and white woven into the braids and twists in her golden hair. As if she feels her gaze, Clarke turns and offers her a smile that shines like the sun, nodding her head in greeting.

“Lexa,” Aden’s voice is the only thing that calls her attention back to where it ought to be, and she feels her cheeks heat as he sinks into the chair next to hers.

“Young majesty, we await your approval to begin the tourney.” Titus tells her, in a low voice, and Lexa nods, waving him away.

Slowly, she stands, her skirts heavy about her and her crown shining on her head, and raises her hand in a wave when the smallfolk cheer and shout. Lexa can feel Clarke’s eyes upon her again, a prickle rising up her spine and the back of neck. Her mouth goes dry and for a moment she fears she will not be able to speak, but with the eyes of the lords of the north and her people upon her, her
training kicks in.

“We celebrate the coming of spring!” Her voice echoes out through the tourney grounds and there is a ripple of murmurs at her words. “We hope for a warm, long summer and a good harvest. Let the tourney begin!”

The crowd cheer their agreement, so loud that they drown out the shrill fiddlers completely and Lexa settles back into her seat as the first two jousters take the field. The two riders appear on horseback, their steeds mighty and gleaming in the sunlight, their armour shining and their shields brightly painted. She recognises the crocodile on a green field of House Reed, and the shock of dark hair beneath the helmet tells her that the rider is one of Luna’s sisters. The second rider’s silver fist on red displayed across his shield tells of his heritage to House Glover, a house situated deep in the Wolf’s Wood, and Lexa settles back in her seat as the pair settle their horses and drop their lances to ride at one another. The first strike doesn’t hit, though Reed comes close to cutting down Glover, and the crowd gasp and shout in response. As the riders turn their horses, Lexa’s eyes cut back to Clarke and find her rivetted on the show before her, and she tries to ignore the flutter in her stomach that wishes Clarke’s eyes would turn back to her again.

Reed charges again, Glover quickly following suit as they ride fast and hard towards each other again Lexa sees Reed’s mount stumble at the last moment and she scrambles for her place in the saddle. The momentary lapse is enough to give Glover at opening, and the lance strikes Reed’s shoulder with such ferocity that Lexa hears the crack and watches as Reed is thrown from her horse, only just rolling in time to avoid being trampled on. The crowd cry out at the violence, but the joust is won fairly and Lexa watches as Glover turns his horse at the end of the field and trots closer. Pages rush out onto the field to help up Lady Reed, and Lexa’s eyes find Luna, standing from her place in the stands to watch as her sister staggers off the field. Lord Glover swings from his horse as the smallfolk cheer and gives a bow to his queen, and Lexa smiles her approval.

“Lady Reed was unlucky,” Aden says, lowly and Anya hums her agreement from her place standing just a step behind Lexa.

“Next time she will be more careful and choose a better mount.”

Lexa’s skin prickles and she turns just in time to see a flower flutter from Clarke’s braid as she turns away. The sight distracts her so much that she barely realises a new joust has begun until the sound of hoofbeats draws her from her reverie. She finds a lordling from House Whitehill approaching on his mount, a strong white gelding. His helmet is still off, showing red hair and a shining smile that he flashes readily from his place on his horse. Lexa is instantly sure that the boy saw no blood in the battle of north and south and she watches, attempting to hide her disdain as he gives her a flourishing bow from his horse.

“What fool is this?” Anya mutters, and Lexa can picture her rolling her eyes, “This isn’t the south, get on and fight boy.”

Instead, Whitehall turns his horse until he is close to the stands where Lady Clarke sits and extends his hand, a handkerchief offered to the golden haired lady, who stares at him in surprise.

“My lady,” His voice is as silken as the kerchief, and loud enough to carry, “I pray that you accept this favour, and hold it close so that I may collect it upon my victory.”

Clarke’s expression clears with realisation and then her cheeks colour prettily, a coy smile curling at her lips. Lexa’s throat tightens at the sight of her fingers plucking the kerchief from him and folding it between her hands.
“Thank you, Ser. I shall.”

He bows again, just as flourishing, before spurring his horse to gallop to the end of the field. His opponent, a Mormont boy that Gustus had brought back with him, rolls his eyes and clicks his visor down, and Lexa considers, as they joust, that she can be forgiven for hoping the Whitehall boy falls when the Mormonts are essentially her family. The Mormont boy falls first, to her dismay, taking a strike to his chest that leaves him sagging over his horse and she hears Anya grunt with annoyance behind her. Lexa’s eyes are focused on the Whitehall boy as he approaches again, pulling his helmet away to reveal a beaming face, damp with sweat. He slides from his horse and bows again, seemingly unaware of Lexa’s pressed lips and tight nod, before he strides down the stands to Lady Clarke again.

Clarke stands and leans over to hand him back the kerchief, with a laugh and a soft congratulations. Lexa hears the lordling say: “Could I beg a dance from you, my lady? Tomorrow night? To celebrate my win?”

When Clarke laughs again at his audacity and nods, Lexa gestures forward the boy waiting with the wine goblets and drains one in moments.

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“Not much further,” The queen promises her, turning to speak to her from her place a few steps ahead, and there is something so wild and joyful in her eyes that Clarke is like to believe her. Lexa has been leading her away from Winter Town for some time, her sturdy black mount taking the lead as naturally as Clarke’s patched mare fell into line. She has a cloak around her shoulders now, to keep away the chill of the dusk which is settling quickly about them, but the flowers the children had begged the braid into her hair remain, their soft scents lingering around her all day. Behind them a procession of guards keep pace easily, but they are discreet enough that at moments it sometimes feels as though they are alone and Clarke’s heart beats faster at the thought.

She is light with laughter and mead and good food, and high on the thought that this will only continue tomorrow when the feast takes up most of the day.

“Here,” The word is clearly for her benefit because the moment she holds up a hand, the Queensguard come to an instant stop. Lexa turns her mount, easing him around and sliding from his back. A page runs forward to take her reins, and Clarke follows her lead, moving closer to follow Lexa’s gaze.

They are a league or so from Winter Town, and as the sun sets the town becomes dark and dimly lit. The festivities are such that even from here they can still hear the music drifting towards them on the breeze, but otherwise everything is dark and quiet and Clarke breathes it in like a soothing goblet of cold water.

“This may seem strange but I promise,” Lexa gives her an earnest look, obviously excited. “This is the best view in the north.”

“I believe you, your majesty,” Clarke assures her, and when Lexa’s expression does not shift, she dares to reach out in the darkness and touch her arm.

Lexa melts under her touch and Clarke doesn’t draw her hand away. They breathe, soft and quiet, as the sun sets on the north and the colours bleed from the sky, leaving only dark indigo scattered with silver stars like diamonds. Winter Town is dark for a moment, before Clarke sees a spot of golden
light coming from a window, quickly followed by another, and then another, until before her eyes every window in Winter Town has been filled with a soft, yellow light and the town lights up like it has been scattered with fairy dust. Her eyes widen and she is caught breathless at the sight. A starlit sky, but in gold and inlaid in the land, a deeply moving and beautiful sight and then, behind them, someone begins singing.

She jolts, turning to look over her shoulder as the rest of the Queensguard join in, a soft chorus of voices raising in song. Her bewildered eyes find Lexa’s, and the queen steps closer in the darkness to explain, quietly.

“It is a prayer, for a long summer. They will be singing it in Winter Town too.”

Before her eyes, the queen begins to sing. She is no great songstress, far outstripped by the musicians of Highgarden, but Clarke finds her breath catching and her eyes swelling at the sound of the small choir of northerners she had thought dour and crude, their voice raised in hopeful prayer.

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A knock comes to her door as her handmaiden places the crown onto her head, settling it within the carefully pinned curls. The afternoon is drawing to a close and it’s nearly time for her to make her way to the Great Hall and announce the start of the spring. From her chambers she has been listening to the courtyard flutter with activity for some time, as she has been bathed and primped and dressed. The crown sits heavily upon her head, made of strong silver, winding together in an intricate pattern, and she knows that by the end of the night it will have given her a headache under its weight. Her dress is the emerald of new grass, and a jewelled chain sits around her waist and hangs down the skirt to end in a silver diamond. Around the fur lined neck, direwolves are embroidered with silver thread, only a few strands of hair hanging down from the braided nest upon her head.

A guard announces her uncle, and she rises despite the quiet protests of her handmaiden. The girl flits about her, straightening the train of her skirt and brushing away imaginary wrinkles as she greets Lord Mormont.

“Uncle,” She holds out her hands to clasp his, glad that his bow is short and small. “I am so glad to have you back. We have missed your reason in the small council.”

“I’m sure you have, your majesty.” Gustus smiles at her from behind his thick beard, a heavy cloak around his shoulders, soft bear pelts at his neck. “You look beautiful,” His eyes soften for a moment, and he adds, almost quietly. “The image of your lady mother.”

The words send a pang to her heart and Lexa has to gather herself for a moment, so thick is her throat. Many say that she has the look of her father, but Gustus has always insisted that she looks like his sister and it warms her soul to hear it.

“Thank you, uncle.” She runs a hand down her skirt and folds her hands in front of her as she becomes more serious, “I’m glad we could find the time to speak in private. You have just returned from Bear Island.”

“I have,” He confirms, though it was not a question. “And I am deeply sorry to say that I uncovered nothing useful, despite my efforts. My blacksmiths could not determine the origins of the dagger, though they say it is a Mormont design, the metals are not from our land.”

“They are not?” Lexa’s brows rise, “So it was almost definitely a ruse designed to point the blame at House Mormont.”
“That is what I believe, your majesty.” Gustus remains thoughtful. “I’m glad that this hasn’t shaken your faith in us.”

“Gustus, you are my family,” She answers him earnestly, as Patience trots up beside her and butts her head against Lexa’s hand until the queen gives in and scratches at her head. “Luna tells me that you did everything in your power to find out the origins of the dagger and I believe her, but I also believe you. I have no cause not to.”

“We have always been your loyal servants, your majesty.” Gustus bows his head and she smiles.

“I know it, uncle, and I thank you for your efforts on this.”

“There is something more, your majesty.” His eyes flicker to the handmaiden, and the girl is well schooled enough in this art to know that she is being dismissed. They are quiet until she slips from the room, and then Gustus continues, his face clouding with sombre worry. “During my journey back I happened upon some news, which I understand is not yet common knowledge.”

“What?” Lexa’s lips pull into a serious line and she feels her stomach curdle in preparation. There is a feeling of dread hanging about her shoulders at his words, and somehow what he says next does not surprise her.

“Prince Wells took the maester’s chains only yesterday. He has given up his claim to the throne.”

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The Great Hall is filled with the nobility of the north, loud and jovial as the mead and wine flow. Men and women in shades of green and blue and brown, dressed in the furs and jewels of their houses, sit at the various tables, talking and laughing over the sound of music. Long tables are pressed up against the walls, leaving a space in the middle of the room for dancing once people are done with their meals. The feast continues even into Winter Town, Lexa wishes dearly that there were enough space to house the entire north in her Great Hall, but alas a line must be drawn somewhere and so while she feasts with the lords of the north and their heirs and families, the people of Winter Town celebrate around a huge bonfire outside the castle walls.

From her place at the high table, Lexa is able to survey the whole room. Pages and lowly lordlings get drunk on the wine too quickly and are left laughing too loudly or staggering out to relieve their stomachs in the courtyard. Servers flit between the tables, keeping the plates and goblets filled, and dogs follow them, hoping for scraps. Her own direwolves roam the room, though Honour sits at her side and Liberty and Sage stay lounging at her feet. Faith sits at Lady Clarke’s side, much to the alarm of her fellow guests, and the sight makes Lexa smile secretly into her wine goblet.

It is not her aim to catch the lady’s gaze all night, but Lady Clarke is hard to keep her eyes away from tonight. Something about the soft light seems to settle upon her like a morning mist, leaving her to sparkle. Her hair is a gentle golden sheet down her back, mostly loose of the formal southern braids she used to wear and instead dressed with a crown of flowers of all hues. Around her shoulders sits a dress made of fabric so gauzy and fine that Lexa feels as if one wrong pull of the materials could send it sprawling to her feet. It billows like a cloud, floating when she moves and Lexa knows she is not the only one who is captivated by the sight.

It’s enough to keep her spirits up, even when Titus appears at her side requesting an urgent aside. She stands, waving her hand when the rest of the hall rush to follow her lead, and steps to the back of the hall with him, still carrying her goblet. There is an anxious blur to Titus’s eyes as he tells her what she already knows, and she cuts through him.
“I know Titus, Gustus told me before we entered the hall.”

“Your majesty, this is urgent!” Titus insists, his jaw tightening with fury. “Thelonius is a fool to allow this, and it could easily endanger us!”

“From whom did you hear this, Titus?” She takes a sip of her wine and attempts to keep a wan smile on her face, for the sake of those watching.

Her advisor doesn’t do nearly as good a job, his expression crumpling into distress. “The Grand Measters of Oldtown, they tell me that Wells Baratheon is with them now, and that the south is in uproar! They are without an heir!”

“It is admittedly a problem I hadn’t foreseen,” Lexa sighs softly, “But what can we do? Their politics is not our own.”

“Those who did not support the peace between us may attempt to influence the king.” Titus mutters his dire warnings. “We should mobilise our troops tonight, while the wine is flowing and most of the north is here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Titus,” Lexa’s lips tighten, “That will look like an act of war and if anything will reignite the sparks of our conflict it will be that.”

“But the south is without an heir!” Titus insists, furiously, “And by the boy’s own choosing, the people will question the Baratheon right to the throne at all.”

“Thelonius is a good king, with the people on his side. Besides, he is young enough to sire another heir yet. Peace, teacher, there is nothing we can do here but sit and wait. I will write to Tris and her guards to ensure that she is being well protected in the south.”

Titus is clearly left unhappy by their conversation, but he is left with little choice but to let well alone when Lexa turns to make her way back to the High Table without him. In her absence the music has begun in earnest, and she watches, amused, as the younger lords and ladies take to the floor, twirling and spinning. The flowing wine has clearly had enough of an effect, because there is raucous laughter and staggering. From the corner of her eye, she sees Aden step away from where he had been conversing with some of his friends and make his way to Clarke. He offers his hand with a flourish and Lexa smiles at the sight of Clarke’s happy flush.

Her eyes follow them as they dance, watching the way Clarke laughs at something Aden has said and the pleased smile that her brother can’t suppress at having the beautiful lady on his arm. Someone clears their throat from behind her, and she turns to find Lord Bolton looking down at her. He gives a low bow, but she notices that his hand comes to rest on the back of the chair beside her, which Aden abandoned some time ago.

Her lip curls, just a little, but she gives him a pleasant smile when his eyes find her face again. “Lord Bolton.” She says in greeting.

“Your majesty, you look as beautiful and youthful as ever.” His honeyed words do not mitigate the undercurrent of surliness that spreads through his tone, curling like a vine suffocating its host.

“Thank you, Lord Bolton.” She tries to maintain her civility as she speaks, steering the topic away from herself. “It’s a shame Lady Bolton could not be here, how goes her confinement?”

“Well when I left,” A smile spreads across his face, thin lips stretching up and satisfaction sparkling in his eyes. “I should have another healthy heir when I return.”
“Excellent,” Her eyes fall back on where Lady Clarke and Aden are spinning around. The girl’s skirts fly about around her ankles, her cheeks flushed with enjoyment and laughter falling from her lips as Aden leads her in the traditional northern dance. As the song comes to an end, she watches the lordling from the joust the day before approach them and offer his hand. Demurely, Clarke accepts, though she watches Aden go with a pang of wistfulness in her eyes.

“That is Lady Clarke, I understand.” Lord Bolton comments, and his expression is dark when Lexa glances over at him.

“Indeed, have you been introduced?” Lexa sips her wine, steeling herself against the disapproval she can feel dripping from the lord’s words.

“I have not yet had the pleasure,” He sounds as if he would expect it to be anything but. “But I can understand why much chatter has reached us of her.”

“Much chatter?” Lexa echoes the words curiously and he grunts, explaining.

“She is the object of much speculation and rumour.” Together, they watch the Whitehall lordling lead the southern lady as they dance. “I can see why she is so… polarising.”

“Polarising?” Lexa feels like one of the birds from the south, trained to repeat everything their owner says. “I’ll admit, I didn’t know that much word of Lady Clarke had reached the Dreadfort.”

“Of course, your majesty, everything that happens in the capital is of interest,” Lord Bolton arches an eyebrow, and Lexa straightens her spine, trying not to feel the years he has on her. “Especially a beautiful woman from despised lands, who has caught the eye of many and the favour of the queen.”

“My favour?” Lexa’s eyes widen a notch, her throat tightening with surprise, “Any guest who stays in my castle has my favour.”

“Yet I hear that you pay special interest to the Tyrell girl.” Lord Bolton’s face stays in a friendly mask, but his words send a shiver down her spine. “You showed her the festival personally yesterday, I believe?”

“Lady Clarke has never seen our festivals before.” She hates that he has backed her into a corner in this way, that she feels as if she is scrambling for excuses.

“Oh I meant no offence, your majesty,” Bolton’s voice rises in pseudo surprise, “Lady Clarke is beautiful, there’s no debating that. I’m sure that the pressures of regency must be taxing and the Tyrell woman have long been known for having a certain… skill in relaxing those they choose to.”

“Lord Bolton, I think Lord Mormont would like to speak with you.” It is all Lexa can do to keep from striking the man, so hot and heady is her fury, and though the clear dismissal is rude the lord stands and offers her a bow, a smug smile lingering at the corners of his lips. Before her, the musicians finish their song and she joins the other lords and ladies applauding them, though she feels distant with anger, her cheeks heating despite herself.

It is the sight of a figure before her, stood on the other side of the high table, which breaks her from her reverie and she finds a cloud of pink and gold looking back at her. A flush lights Clarke’s cheeks, from exertion and alcohol Lexa is sure, and a soft smile plays about her features. Despite herself, Lexa returns it, watching as the girl sinks into a low curtsey. In the background the fiddlers begin another song as Clarke rises.

“Your majesty.”
“Lady Clarke,” She greets her, trying to dispel the tenderness from her voice. “You look wonderful, are you enjoying your evening?”

“Yes, thank you your majesty.” Clarke’s smile grows, like a rose unfurling its petals for the sun. “I was hoping I could tempt you to dance with me, if it pleases your majesty.” She holds out a hand, graceful and slender, and Lexa’s heart jumps in her chest, yearning with desperation. The thought of holding Lady Clarke in her arms as they spin, feeling her hands upon her skin, is intoxicating.

In that moment, however, she feels the eyes of every northern lord upon her and Lord Bolton’s words thunder through her head like a stampede of wild horses. Her breath catches and she struggles for the right words, even as Clarke holds her hand out, expectant and smiling.

“I’m afraid I do not dance, Lady Clarke.”

Clarke’s expression falters just slightly, but her playful smile remains as she teases. “I could lead, your majesty.”

“I don’t think so, my lady.” At her words, Clarke’s face falls, disappointment and surprise warring through her eyes. Hurriedly, Lexa adds, “But I’m sure my brother would be happy to accept another dance from you.” The dismissal is so clear that hurt flies across Clarke’s face, and Lexa feels her heart squeeze as the lady nods haltingly, and offers a slightly curtsey, before turning her back on the high table.

Lexa gestures for more wine as Lady Clarke’s figure retreats.

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thank you so much for your comments, they inspire me so much! what did you think of this chapter? let me know either below or on tumblr @onemilliongoldstars!
Book One: Chapter 11

The sky is clear and blue above her, as Clarke makes her way through the mazes of small courtyards in the Winterfell grounds. The castle is surrounded by a labyrinth of enclosed spaces, in which warm springs sometimes bubble and the warm air is caught by the walls to keep the courtyards temperate, as if they are not open to the elements. In her many times wandering the castle, Clarke has found that the courtyards make for a pleasant place to read or draw, the warmth of the springs reminding her of the forgiving climate back in Highgarden. It is in search of one of these courtyards that she finds herself stumbling upon a small, private space, with straw and sawdust scattered across the stone paving and few windows looking down upon it. In this courtyard, the queen practices her swordplay alone.

Clarke has thought before that the queen’s sparring often looks far more elegant than she would expect, and once again her eyes are drawn to the lean curves of the woman’s body, barely hidden by her soft jerkin and hose. Her movement tells of strength and speed, her eyes steely with determination and Clarke imagines that on the battlefield she would be a force to behold.

So wrapped up in her training is the queen, that she doesn’t notice Clarke’s presence until the lady announces herself.

“Your majesty.”

Lena startles, reeling around in surprise as her sword drops to her side. She almost stumbles upon her own feet, so surprised is she at the sight of visitors, and Clarke privately retracts her thoughts of elegance.

“Lady Clarke,” Lena is so taken aback that Clarke is given the rare pleasure of seeing her utterly unmasked. Her eyes are wide, and Clarke hesitates over her words, momentarily stunned. Never before has she noticed just how green the woman’s eyes are, like the forests of the Wolfswood, and it steals the breath from her chest.

“I- you said you couldn’t dance.” Clarke manages, at last, and Lena arches at eyebrow, looking her over with interest.

“No,” She corrects at last, “I said I didn’t dance.”

“Is there a difference?” Clarke challenges her, tearing her eyes away from the queen’s face to resume normal thought.
“Of course,” Lexa gives her a slight smile, clearly intrigued, “I find it better not to dance at those sorts of gatherings, but I could if the need arose. I was not utterly uneducated as a child.”

“I thought you said that you were taught swordplay rather than dancing?” Clarke takes a curious step closer, her eyes drawn to the shining blade in the woman’s hand.

“They are remarkably similar,” Lexa explains, with a wan smile. “Though far more deadly.”

“Clearly, you have not had the displeasure of dancing with the lords of Riverrun,” Clarke raises an eyebrow in her direction, and Lexa laughs freely, her eyes filled with mirth. “They are the least graceful creatures I have ever met.”

“Thank goodness you inherited the grace of the Tyrells, my lady,” Lexa’s words draw a smile to her lips and a flush to her cheeks.

“And who did you inherit your grace from, your majesty?”

“My grace with a sword was drilled into me by hours in the courtyard with Ser Indra and Lord Mormont,” Lexa admits, twisting the sword within her grasp so that the steel catches the light. “Not as enjoyable as your dance lessons, I suspect.”

Clarke bristles, just slightly, and tells her coolly. “I’m not so sure, my dance instructor was from Pentos and he had very little patience. I expect he could have broken the spirit of stronger women than you, your majesty.”

Lexa’s eyes widen in surprise at her words, and for a moment Clarke thinks she will take offence, but then the queen offers out her sword, “You think that swordplay is no real challenge, my lady?”

“I think it can be taught just as easily as dancing.” She answers, gingerly taking the sword into her hands. It is heavier than she expects, the silver wolf pommel cold beneath her touch, and her arm begins to ache only moments after accepting it into her grip, though she does not admit it to the expectant woman watching her. “Your blade is quite impressive.”

“Thank you,” Lexa is watching her with a keen interest in her eyes, “You said your father had a similar weapon? Did you ever hold it?”

She is surprised that the queen remembers, her stomach curling a little at the mention of her father, but she nods, a mischievous smile playing across her features as she remembers. “Only when I was not supposed to.”

Lexa laughs again, shaking her head so that her braids fall across her shoulders. “Did you have any training with weapons at all?”

Clarke’s lips press together, as she thinks of the poison still hidden in the slit in her mattress, but she shakes her head innocently. “A few archery lessons, but I showed no real aptitude and quickly lost interest.”

“That’s a shame, I think you would be rather lethal with some training.” Their eyes meet and something unspoken and hot flashes between them, catching Clarke’s breath in her throat and leaving her cheeks to heat as Lexa tears her gaze away and continues, her voice a notch hoarser. “Besides, everyone should know the basics of swordplay to defend themselves should the need arise.”

“I fear my lack of experience would scare off any potential tutor,” Clarke shakes her head, handling the weapon with ungainly hands.
“I would be happy to teach you a few things,” The offer seems to surprise them both, because when Clarke looks up, her eyes wide, she finds Lexa looking back at her with equal shock. “Though,” The queen stumbles over her words, “Of course- you need not.”

“No,” Clarke dares to interrupt her, though Lexa seems grateful for it, “Since the attack I… I have been worried. It might put my mind at ease to learn how to swing a sword.”

“Then… I would be happy to help.” Her smile is so kind that for a moment Clarke feels as if she is looking at someone utterly different. “Though you should perhaps start with a lighter blade.”

“Yes, I think you may be right,” Clarke admits, happy to hand the heavy longsword back to the queen when she holds out her hand. The queen crosses the courtyard to exchange it at the rack of weapons pressed against the wall, and Clarke takes the moment to look over her shoulder. To her relief, Octavia has taken her post outside the courtyard archway and has her back to them.

“Here,” Lexa’s voice startles her, bringing her attention back to the queen, who looks at her with eager interest. In her hands, she offers out a shorter, wooden training sword, the like of which Clarke has seen young pages practicing with, and Clarke smiles wryly. When she takes it from her, their hands brush softly.

“I suppose this is safer for everyone involved.”

“Not that I don’t trust you, but it’s easy to be injured training, as you’ve seen before.” Lexa grins, and holds up her own wooden sword. “There are several basic principles to swordplay,” She switches so seamlessly into the role of teacher that Clarke wonders whether she has taught her brother before, or some of the younger pages. “Timing and balance to name a few.”

“Doesn’t sound so different to dancing, so far.” Clarke teases, and Lexa actually rolls her eyes good naturedly.

“Maybe not so far, but there are several things you have to learn before you can even cross blades with someone. For example, stretch out your sword please?” When Clarke does as instructed, she tuts, her eyes narrowing as she examines her form. “I… I’m sorry but your grip really isn’t very good.”

“I think I know how to hold something,” Clarke remarks, and Lexa’s eyes flash up to her in surprise, before the queen steps forward and with one deft stroke knocks the practice sword straight from her hands. It lands in the dirt at their feet with a clatter and Clarke splutters her outrage, looking to the queen for an explanation.

Lexa’s expression is not forgiving; instead, the queen arches an eyebrow, and asks. “Did you expect this to be easy, my lady?”

“No,” Clarke huffs, bending to collect her weapon. “I suppose you ought to show me how to hold it.”

“Curl your fingers further… that’s right, a little higher,” Lexa watches as she adjusts her grip, “No, your thumb needs to be stretched out.” She edges closer, and only catches her reaching hands at the last moment. Green eyes flicker up to meet hers, and Clarke barely realises how close Lexa is when she asks, “May I?”

Clarke can only nod mutely, and watch as warm, calloused fingers gently adjust her own. This close to her, she can see the smooth cut of Lexa’s jawline and curve of her neck, the arch of her nose and brush of her eyelashes against her cheek as she focuses on Clarke’s hands. The sight is enchanting,
haunting, and for a moment she is no longer the queen who brought the south to its knees, but a beautiful girl, under the sunlight. Clarke wonders what would happen if they had met in a different world, if Lexa had been a visiting noble to Highgarden and she had shown her through the orange groves, and stolen away with her into the sunlit groves where wandering hands and lips could not be seen.

“There, that’s perfect.” Lexa’s words draw her so sharply from her reverie that she pulls in a sharp breath, her cheeks colouring when Lexa’s eyes find hers, gentle with concern. “Are you well?”

“Yes,” Clarke is ashamed of how breathless her voice is in Lexa’s company. “Yes, quite well your majesty.”

“I think… in these circumstances… you should call me Lexa.” The queen looks at her with eyes so open and soft that Clarke feels her heart constrict.

“Then you should call me Clarke.”

Lexa’s lips pull up into a smile so bright it could rival the evening stars, “Thank you, Clarke.”

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As Spring settles across the north, the snow melts away and the roads clear enough to allow travel. In Highgarden Clarke rarely stayed in the same place for longer than a few weeks. It was easy to sail down to Oldtown, or ride to Kingslanding to see Wells and take in the excitement of the city, so her confinement in Winterfell grates upon her the longer she is kept within the cold grey walls of the castle. When the queen tells her that the Kingsroad to the Wall is passable now, she jumps at the chance to accompany her on her visit. It takes some preparation, though they expect to only be there for a day or so. It buoys her spirits, which have been low since the spring festival came to an end and the lords who had been filling it returned to their own lands.

A messenger scrambles into the courtyard the morning they are due to leave. He clammers past the waiting pages and soldiers, the horses and carts that accompany a trip with the queen, and rushes to the kitchens as if he’s being chased by the old gods themselves. After some berating, he is able to hand over his charge to a serving boy, and collapse in front of the fire to beg scraps from the cook, as the boy delivers his message to Lady Clarke.

The southern lady turns, startled by the knock on the door. Her handmaiden tuts where she is gathering the last of her things, and Faith’s ears perk up from her place curled in front of the fire, but the door swings open at her call to show Octavia and a serving boy clutching a letter.

“A letter from the south, m’lady.” The boy holds it out for her, but keeps talking even as she takes the letter. The seal is a golden stag. “The messenger said he fell ill just over the border, apologises for the delay.”

“Are you sure he didn’t just fall into a whore house?” Octavia mutters darkly and the boy flushes and fumbles for the right words.

“How long was the delay?” Clarke asks, as she tears into the letter.

“Several weeks, m’lady.” The boy flinches at the glower she settles him with, and is glad to escape when she waves her hand to dismiss him.

Octavia hesitates in the doorway, but Clarke is so focused on her letter that she barely realises the soldier is still there. It is written in scrawling, spiralling words, the letters spiked with panic and fear. There are places where the ink is stained and smudged, as if smeared by wine or an unsteady hand,
and the writing veers from large, uneven letters to a tiny, cramped scrawl. Her eyes scan over the words, her stomach sinking as she reads, and a breath escapes her, so loud that Octavia says her name curiously.

“My lady?”

Clarke tears her gaze up, landing on Octavia and blinking as if she had forgotten the girl was there.

“Are you alright?” Octavia steps closer, her brows pulling together with concern. “What does it say?”

“Nothing.” Clarke answers, after a beat of silence, and strides across the room to toss the letter into the flames. “Only a letter from my mother. Could you check my trunk has been properly stowed?”

Octavia eyes her as if she doesn’t fully believe her, but when it seems that Clarke will not relent she nods, and turns to hurry from the room. Clarke’s feet feel frozen to the spot, her eyes drawn down to where the flames lick at the corners of the parchment, easing across her friend’s words. Wells’ letters have long been troubling, but this panicked spiral of words has left her feeling deeply unsettled and fearful. The prince writes of wrongs he has committed, and things which cannot be undone. He begs her forgiveness for burdening her with this, but she cannot decipher between the words what it is he has done, and the worry for her friend sends her hurrying to the trunk at the bottom of her bed to pull out parchment and a quill. In a letter so short she is almost ashamed to send it, she pleads that he be more direct and allow her to help him, but even as she seals it with a green wax rose, she knows it will not appease him. Her stomach curdles with her desire to travel to him and ensure his wellbeing, but instead she must be satisfied with thrusting the letter into the hands of a messenger when she makes her way down to the courtyard and instructing him to run all the way to Kingslanding.

“My lady, we are not quite ready to leave yet.” A knight who is part of their retinue tells her as she climbs into her carriage and she feels so suddenly trapped that she leans from the window and barks.

“Then you had better make haste, because I will be leaving now with or without you.”

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The journey to The Wall takes several days, if they keep at a good speed. Their caravan is small enough, with only Lady Clarke’s carriage to slow them, and Lexa rides near the head of the procession, her black mount glad of the chance to stretch his legs. She runs a hand down his neck as they keep a steady pace onwards, and enjoys the sound of the hoofbeats around her and the cold breeze plucking its fingers at her hair and cloak. She cheeks are flushed, her nose stinging with the cold, but she is intensely glad to be on the road again. It has been some time since she last checked in on the Wall, and the much needed provisions she supplies will be received gratefully, she is sure.

At her side Anya rides, ever faithfully at her side, her white cloak billowed out across her horse’s rear like one of the knights of old. Lexa smiles privately at that thought; certainly, Anya would not appreciate being compared to one of those prancing princes. Titus, to her quiet relief, remains in Winterfell, with Aden there to act as regent in her stead. She had spoken to him at length before she left, and though she knows he is ready and capable, and surrounded by Gustus and Luna to help him, she worries about how he will fare on his own. Still, it is not enough to dour her jovial spirits, with the land stretching out around her, she already feels refreshed and lighter than she had in the castle. When the sun finally reached its highest point she calls for a stop to feed and water both her horses and men.

They slide from their horses, the less skilled riders amongst them wincing already and rubbing at their backs and buttocks. There is much todo, with the clanging of swords and shouts of men
reaching Lexa as she guides her horse carefully back through the halted caravan, until she reaches the carriage that holds Lady Clarke. The vehicle itself is northern in design, made to withstand the cold temperatures and rough roads that will greet them the further north they travel, and beside its open door stands Octavia. The soldier leans inside, her face twisted with irritation as she argues with the woman inside and Lexa’s brows quirk. She pulls her mount to a halt and slips from the saddle, startling Octavia away from the carriage and handing her reins off to a nearby horse boy.

“Octavia, is everything well?” She steps closer, until she is able to peer inside the carriage at Lady Clarke. The woman sits on the edge of one of the benches, her hands clasped in a fur muff and a thick cloak sitting heavily around her shoulders. “Lady Clarke?”

“All is well, your majesty,” Clarke rolls her eyes, standing awkwardly, half bent thanks to the low ceiling of the carriage. Lexa edges back and holds out a hand to assist her from the carriage, smiling at the touch of her hands. “Octavia was just trying to persuade me to ride for the rest of the day, and I told her I would rather not.”

“Really?” Lexa looks at her with interest, folding her hands behind her back to ease the ache of losing her touch. “You do not like riding?”

“She does!” Octavia protests, fiercely, and mutters her apology when both Clarke and Lexa shoot her a glance, though her chin stays stubbornly jutted out.

“I seem to remember you telling me that.” Lexa agrees, reluctantly, and Clarke simply shakes her head, arching an eyebrow.

“A lady doesn’t ride a horse where I come from, it isn’t the dignified way to travel.”

The words pull a slight laugh from between Lexa’s lips, and she offers her arm to placate the lady, “But much more fun. Should you consider changing your mind you would be welcome to ride beside me.”

Clarke rolls her eyes, just barely, and Lexa’s smile only grows. “I won’t, but thank you, your majesty.”

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They make better time than expected on their first day, and stay in a village on the shore of Long Lake, a frosty body of water running along the eastern edge of the Woolfswood. Clarke is glad to stop travelling for the day; the second half of their journey had led them through the thickly wooded Wolfswood, where she knows from hearsay that the guard who had helped in her attempted assassination was found and killed. The fir trees stretch high and block out most of the sunlight, leaving them to tread the Kingsroad by torchlight. When she peered out the small window of her carriage, she had seen only darkness and trees, illuminated by the flickering flames, and it had been enough to make her shiver and retreat back into her dark carriage. Emerging onto the shore of Longlake had been like waking after a long sleep, and when she looked out this time, she could see the vast expanse of silvery water, frozen where it clung to the stony beaches.

The village is in a cleared copse, land reclaimed from the forest and constantly fought for if the tree stumps that scattered the edge of the village are anything to go by. It consists of a few houses, the largest of which looks like a crude long hall. They are all built from the dark timbers of the Wolfswood, and beside the wide white sky and shining lake there is something striking about them. The villagers immediately agree to Lexa’s polite request for shelter, especially when she reveals what she is willing to give them in return, and most of the soldiers are given a place to lay a bedroll in the long hall, while Clarke and Lexa are given beds in two family homes.
At suppertime, Clarke steps into the long hall, her cloak wrapped around her shoulders to keep away to cold northern night, and finds a loud, bright, jovial scene awaiting her. The long hall is filled with both Lexa’s soldiers and the villagers themselves. In the middle of the room burns a large fire, and the smoke escapes from a chimney in the roof. Upon the fire roast two pigs, their sweet smell filling the hall, and bread and mead has already been handed out. Around the fire people crowd, soaking up the warmth, and children and dogs wander around the hall, including the direwolves that Lexa had brought with her. Lexa herself sits near enough to the fire, on a high backed chair, with Anya at one side and the leader of the village at the other. She seems to be in deep conversation with the villager, but when Clarke steps inside she glances up, her lips tilting into a smile when their eyes meet.

Lexa gestures, and Octavia helps her to pick her way through the eating men and women to join her. Anya, to her surprise, gives up her seat to Clarke’s use, and as she sinks down Clarke basks in the warmth from the fire blazing before her. Something warm butts at her legs, and she finds Faith beside her, panting excitedly.

“Hello, I haven’t seen you all day,” She tells the direwolf fondly, rubbing between her ears.

“They’ll have been hunting,” Lexa says from her other side, and Clarke turns to give her a smile. “Good evening, Clarke.”

“Good evening,” She settles back into her seat, “This is… interesting. I can say I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“It’s a good way of keeping up spirits in our journey,” Lexa gazes out over her celebrating men and women, “And Thornwood was kind enough to give us use of the long hall for the night.”

The man on the other side of Lexa gives them a slight smile. He is clearly cowed in the presence of the queen, despite Lexa’s gentle treatment of him, and Clarke tries to offer some reassurance by nodding.

“Thank you, it’s very generous.”

“Anything for my queen.” He tells her, quite seriously, and she knows it is true.

“I hope you don’t mind forgoing a table, just for tonight,” Lexa teases her, lightly, as a girl scurries up with pork sandwiched between two thick slices of bread.

Clarke takes it gingerly, frowning a little when the grease drips over her hands, but her stomach growls and she takes a bite. A moan escapes her, and she flushes, chewing the rich, succulent meat as Lexa turns away to give her a little dignity, though Clarke can still see the smile on her face. Once she’s swallowed, Clarke manages to admit, “I think I can allow it, just for tonight.”

As the night eases onwards she settles into her seat, occupied by listening to Anya and Lexa talk and feeding Faith slithers of food every time Lexa’s attention wanes from them. Octavia disappears into the crowd to find her own food, and Clarke thinks she sees her talking with Ser Lincoln, of the Queensguard. A woman appears beside Thornwood, a cap covering her wild hair and an apron over her skirts, and behind him Clarke spots a small body, peering out from behind his mother’s skirts. Thornwood says something to her in a low voice, and the woman gestures at the queen and then down to the boy at her side. It’s enough to pull Lexa’s attention away from Anya, and Clarke watches with interest as Lexa gestures the woman forward.

“Your majesty,” Thornwood introduces them, “This is my wife Nessa, and my boy Matthew.”

Lexa’s expression clears to understanding and her eyes brighten, “Well met, Nessa, and you
“Well met, your majesty,” Nessa dips a clumsy curtsey, and the boy shifts further behind her, his hands clutching at her skirts. “Sorry to disturb you, only my boy… he wanted to meet you.”

“Of course,” Lexa’s smile softens, turns warm and friendly, “I’d love to meet him,” She does them the service of pretending the lad isn’t cowering behind his mother.

Nessa puts a firm hand on the boy’s shoulder and ushers him away from her. The boy’s eyes widen and he gaze flickers between his mother and father, wide with the betrayal, until they fasten onto the queen. Lexa doesn’t look very regal to Clarke in her comfortable riding clothes and dark cloak, only her direwolf pin and a few shining pins in her hair marking her out as anything more than a commoner, but the boy is utterly transfixed at the sight of her.

“Hello,” Lexa’s voice is gentle and friendly, as if she is tempting a flighty horse back to her side. “Your mother says you wanted to meet me. It’s very nice to meet you Matthew.”

He stares up at her, his mouth hanging open, and there is utter silence between them all for a few painful moments, before his mother speaks.

“He wanted to know about your wolves.”

Lexa’s eyebrows raise in surprise, and she tilts her head in interest, looking down at the boy. “My wolves? They’re with me now if you’d like to meet them?”

Matthew’s eyes widen in amazement and he nods so hard that Clarke thinks his head will fall cleanly from his shoulders. Lexa’s smile widens and she clicks her tongue until one of the wolves- dove grey, with whitened ears- paces closer. The wolf pauses before the boy, eyeing him thoughtfully, and though he trembles, Matthew plants his feet and stares up at it. The wolf is so big that it stands taller than him, and it tilts its head, for a moment an unnerving reflection of the queen herself, and observes him closely, its ears twitching. A beat of silence passes, and then the beast sits contentedly, its tail flicking around its legs.

“This is Patience,” Lexa says at last, reaching out to touch at the wolf’s ears. “She will not hurt you.”

As if envious of the attention, Faith appears at Clarke’s side again and settles her head upon pthe girl’s lap, closing her eyes blissfully when Clarke scratches between her ears. Before her, the boy takes a faltering step closer, and then extends his little hands until they brush experimentally against Patience’s coat. When the wolf does nothing but twitch her ears in response, he becomes braver, and closes the distance between them until he can pat at her nose and rub her neck, beaming.

“She likes you,” Lexa observes, a smile still playing at her lips, and the boy turns to look at her with delight.

The amazement must loosen his tongue, because he asks, excitedly. “Is it true you ride them into battle?”

His father’s mouth falls open, eyes widening with horror, but they are all disarmed when Lexa throws back her head and lets out a hearty chuckle.

“I’m afraid I ride a horse, but they come with me.” She tells him, kindly and the boy’s eyes shine.

“Is it true they can tear a man in half?”

“Only if you make them angry enough.” Lexa assures him, and his grin grows, eyes darting between
Patience, apparently tiring of the boy’s attentions, pulls away with a growl in the back of her throat and looks up at Lexa expectantly. The queen acquiesces easily, and when she throws a chunk of pork to the ground, both Patience and Faith dive for it. They fight for a moment, growling and snarling, and Clarke reels back. Despite seeing Faith kill a man before her, the wolf is so calm around her that she often forgets that the two animals are innately wild in a way that trained dogs are not. Unlike her, Matthew’s grin only grows, and he turns back to Lexa to continue questioning her.

She is gentle with him in a way that Clarke has never seen her before, answering his questions with a balance between truth and excitement, and the boy watches her with stars in his eyes. Soon, their conversation attracts other little feet, and several more children creep closer, their eyes like the moon as they listen to the queen speak. It is kind of her to entertain them, Clarke thinks, but a small part of her can’t help but think that Lexa is clever to tell tales to the young ears that will one day grow up to be her people. Something warm settles low in her belly, and runs through her veins, more than the mead she has been drinking all night, and the next morning she opts to ride, rather than travel in her carriage.

The sight of Lexa’s smile when she appears next to her in the procession is enough to make the chafing and aching legs worth it.

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They reach the Wall after two more days of travelling. It is visible from leagues away, a towering wall of ice and stone, the tallest structure in the north, gleaming blue in the sunlight. Privately, Lexa is pleased that the sky has brightened over their final afternoon on horseback, the sun shining brightly despite the blistering cold that settles beneath their bones. There is still snow on the ground this far north, and the sun reflects off the immense, icy wall until it is almost blinding. Stretching in every direction, the vast structure was created by the First Men to defend the Seven Kingdoms from the creatures and wildlings that lingered in the land beyond it. Lexa’s father had always told her that there was magic woven into the bones of the Wall, and now, with direwolves pacing around her, Lexa believes that it is true.

At her side, Lexa hears Clarke’s intake of breath when it first comes into view, and she has to press down her proud smile as they continue riding.

“I’ve never seen anything so…” Clarke murmurs, and Lexa turns to look at her. The girl cannot tear her eyes away from the side in front of her, “The Hightower in Oldtown maybe but this is…”

She trails off and Lexa lets her collect her thoughts, only the clanking of metal and the thud of hoofbeats to fill the silence, until eventually she says.

“I thought it would look different.”

“Really?” Lexa looks at her again, curiosity painted through her features, and enquires, “How so?”

“I pictured it dark and grey, frightening almost. From here it just seems beautiful.”

The words linger with Lexa as they approach the Wall. It is mid-afternoon when they arrive at Castle Black, the largest fortress on the Wall, the most heavily manned and the seat of the Lord Commander of the Nights Watch, the group of men who guard the Wall from invaders. Lexa knows the Lord Commander well; after the War of North and South was won they had exchanged many letters about the upkeep of the Nights Watch. A particular point of contention between north and south, Lexa had pushed hard and made concessions to ensure the continued assistance in funding the Nights Watch
from Thelonious Baratheon, and now the watch is better funded and armed than it has been in years, to Lexa’s relief. The stirrings of the direwolves had left her wondering, in the wake of her victory, whether the old magic was creeping back into the north. Tales of more wildling activity from beyond the Wall worried her, and with more people flooding into Winter Town every day, she hears stories of mages and spirits. With this playing on her mind, she sleeps easier knowing that those who protect them from what lies in the deep North are eating well and have sharp swords.

Castle Black is not a true castle, despite what its name suggests, instead it is a collection of towers and long houses, with a large training courtyard at its heart. The Wall stands at its North, towering so high that the top is covered by clouds. The only way up is a metal cage pulled up and down the wall by a pulley, unless one wants to climb the thousands of icy steps cut into its side. Lexa had sent word of their progress, and so the gates stand open, the Lord Commander at their centre to welcome them. Lord Commander Harris Arryn is a lithe, weathered man, with a shrewd gaze and a fair heart. Though originally from the south, Lexa had found him an easy man to talk with, and he often reassured her that he had given up his loyalty to his homeland when he had joined the Nights Watch. Smart and straight talking, Lexa privately thinks that much of the north has rubbed off on him in his many years as part of the Watch, and it is for this reason that she happily dismounts and strides forward to meet him in the gateway, nodding as he bows.

“Your majesty,” He greets her formally, just as she knows he would greet Thelonius Jaha is her stead. The Watch is sworn to stay out of the wars of men, and Arryn had kept that promise throughout the War of North and South, despite many of his men protesting. “A pleasure to have you back with us.”

“Only for a few days I’m afraid Lord Commander,” She gestures back to where Lady Clarke has slid from her own mount and is hesitating behind her, “May I introduce Lady Clarke of House Tyrell. Lady Clarke, this is Lord Commander Harris Arryn.”

“Lord Commander,” Clarke steps forward, and graciously accepts his bow, smiling prettily. “How nice to hear a familiar name.”

“My lady, you have your father’s eyes,” Lord Harris tells her, with an ease that surprises Lexa.

“You’re too kind,” Clarke flushes, her smile warming sincerely, “How nice to finally meet you.”

“We met when you were a babe,” the Lord Commander tells her, with certainty, “Before the last Winter, I spent some time in Kingslanding and met your father and mother.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were acquainted,” Lexa’s curious gaze turns to Clarke, “Or I would have brought you here sooner Lady Clarke.”

“Lord Marcus Arryn is a friend of my mother’s,” Lady Clarke explains, and the Lord Commander nods his support.

“Lady Abigail stayed with my brother Ivan when she was a girl. Lord Marcus is my nephew.”

“I see,” Lexa’s eyes find Clarke again, narrowing just slightly. Lord Jacob seems to be close friends with many of the high lords in Westeros, by all accounts he is a charming and friendly man so Lexa is sure he doesn’t struggle in that regard, but still she cannot help but think it is a sage path to take. She wonders whether his daughter inherited his wisdom.

“Let me welcome you inside, your majesty.” Lord Commander Harris steps back to allow them in, and Lexa nods her thanks. They enter on either side of the Lord Commander, and the members of the Watch gathered in the courtyard stare at them. Some bow, while others remain stiff and furious,
anger written into the set of their faces. Anya’s presence at her back brings her some comfort, but Lexa’s hand still rests upon the pommel of her sword. Despite the slowly changing attitudes in the north, the Nights Watch is still made up of only men, all of whom are forbidden by their vows to marry or lie with another person again. Though Lexa has visited Castle Black before herself, she usually does so in sensible riding gear and heavy cloaks. Lady Clarke, on the other hand, wears a northern gown made from heavy, red material, a necklace settled between her collarbones and a jewelled net in her hair, catching the unruly golden curls. Lexa can feel the eyes of the men upon her, like hungry vultures, and her jaw clenches, her eyes narrowing as she sees men’s lips slide into smirks.

She is glad when they are shown into the King’s Tower to freshen up after their long ride, and are hidden from the prying eyes of the brothers of the Nights Watch.

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Before the sun sinks below the skyline, Clarke steps out of the great metal cage that stretches up the Wall and onto the frozen wooden walkway which is embedded in the ice. Her legs tremble despite herself, from both the cold and her time spent suspended in the iron cage against the Wall, which had swayed whenever a particularly strong breeze came along. A hand wraps around her elbow, steadying her, and she finds Lexa’s eyes looking down at her, kind and ever so green. Her hand wraps around Lexa’s arm and they edge their way more steadily onto the Wall. The wind whips around them, tugging on their clothes, and Clarke is glad that she has her cloak, thick and heavy around her shoulders. They cross the wide walkway on the top of the Wall in silence. The men of the Nights Watch turn to look at them in curiosity, peering out from the warming hut in which a fire flickers. Pushed up against the edges of the walkway, where thick walls of snow and stone stand head high, are stationary catapults and barrels of stones to be thrown at the enemy. Wooden pillboxes and outlets stretch out into the air, to give a clear view of the land beyond, and it is to this that Lexa leads her.

The forests have been cleared away from the Wall, so that for about a league or two there is only icy snow, before it is taken over by fir trees thicker and larger than any Clarke has ever seen. If she had thought that the north was a wild wasteland, it is nothing compared to the scene that awaits her here. Beyond the Wall, the land seems to move differently. It twists, like a snake slithering from view, and refuses to be seen or understood. In the distance, she can see mountains rising from the forests, their peaks so high that they seem to reach into the clouds and call to the gods. There is a glimmer between the trees, a vast frozen lake perhaps, but when Clarke tries to peer more closely it disappears from view, and she is left wondering whether it existed at all. In the fading light the snow shines and glimmers, like diamonds, a pure, uninterrupted sheet. She almost feels as if she could jump from their outpost and land safely in the thick snowfall below.

There is something darker about the sight, however, a strange feeling that settles in her stomach and leaves her feeling as though she has missed something. The forests are dark and thick, so unlike the woodland glens of home that it is almost as if they were bird and beast. Memories come, unbidden, of the stories told around the fireside, of ice spiders and giants, white walkers and wildlings who would skin a man alive. The trees rustle, as if hearing her thoughts, and she takes a faltering step back.

“Clarke,” Lexa’s hand reaches out for her, concerned, and she pulls her gaze away from the view to find the woman before her. The sight of her is so utterly relieving, an anchor to the realm of the living and real, that Clarke reaches out to take her hand, squeezing it hard. It is warm and alive beneath hers and she steps in closer, shivering a little. “Are you well?” Lexa presses.

“Yes, yes I’m fine.” Her eyes flicker back to the view, and here, close to Lexa’s warm, solid form, it
looks less frightening. “I just… it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

“There is something awe inspiring about it, I think.” Lexa muses, “It makes you feel so very small.”

“Yes, yes exactly,” Clarke breathes out, relieved to have her feelings voiced so clearly and reasonably, and her relief pulls her words from her. “I’ve never felt… powerless like this before.”

“It is strange,” Lexa looks down at her, and snowflakes cling to her dark hair like diamonds, her eyes shining in the setting sun. “Are you glad you saw it?”

“Yes,” She murmurs, her heart suddenly tight, “Yes, so glad. You’re right, the snow can be beautiful.”

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Chapter End Notes

it’s so nice to just have them chill out a bit together (literally, the wall is damn cold!) thank you so much for reading, let me know what you thought below or over on tumblr (@onemilliongoldstars) i’m enjoying chatting to you guys so much!!
The next day dawns cold and white, a heavy cloud settling across the sky with the sort of peace that Lexa knows means snow. She can taste it in the air as she walks from her chambers in the King’s Tower, to the Lord Commander’s solar. Inside, it is warm with the flickering fire and Clarke already sits at a heavy round table, with the Lord Commander beside her, talking jovially, though they both fall quiet at her entrance, standing before she can gesture them back into their seats.

“Please,” She offers them both a friendly smile, sinking into the final seat at the table. “I think I am friends enough with both of you to dispel of those courtesies. Sit, eat, continue.”

“Thank you, your majesty.” The Lord Commander answers roughly, sinking into his seat again.

Clarke offers her a smile, their eyes meet and something small and secret passes between them even as Clarke sits and greets her.

“Your majesty, I hope the morning finds you well.”

“Very well, and yourself Lady Clarke?” Her lips take on something close to a smirk at the formality they wear around the Lord Commander.

“Well,” Clarke reaches for her goblet, “The northern air agrees with me.”

“It’s the purest air in all of the north,” The Lord Commander agrees, chewing on a hunk of bread. “Apologies, your majesty.”

“No, no,” Lexa shakes him away, “I agree.” She looks between the two of them curiously as they eat, accepting the eggs and bread that are placed before her. “So, I didn’t get the chance to ask last night how the two of you come to know each other so well?”

“I only know the Lord Commander through hearsay,” Clarke corrects her, looking up at the large man. “And the stories my parents told me. My father liked you very much.”

“Your father was afraid of me, I dare say.” The Lord Commander raises an eyebrow in her direction, “He was a good man, I’ll admit, but Lady Abigail became a part of the family during her stay in the Eyrie. Any man would fall short in our eyes.”

“Oh, I see,” Clarke deflates a little and Lexa watches as she sits up a little straighter, her tone draped with steel. “He’s an excellent man, I’m surprised you think otherwise. He is kind and fair and wise-”

“My lady,” the Lord Commander cuts through her with a gruff laugh, a twinkle in his eyes, “Your father is a great man, I’ll admit that now. You’ll know when you have daughters that no man ever seems good enough.”

“Oh, I see,” Clarke deflates a little and the Lord Commander reassures her kindly.

“Your loyalty to your father is admirable.”

“I love him dearly,” She tells him, her voice soft and honest, and Lexa feels a tug at her heart.
“You must miss him.” The Lord Commander observes, and Clarke nods falteringly, her eyes flickering down to her plate.

“Very much,” She admits, and a moment of silence settles between them all, heavy as thick cream. Lexa pushes her eggs about her plate, and opens her mouth to break the silence, when she is interrupted by a rushed knock on the door.

The Lord Commander has barely finished calling out for the visitor to come in before the door swings open and a messenger in Stark livery almost falls through the door. He is followed by the Measter of Castle Black, who is looking at him with a wrinkled nose even as he bows his head to those waiting.

“Apologies for the disturbance, Lord Commander,” The Measter tells him, his voice pinched and irritated. “A letter has come from the Citadel,” He slides a letter across the table towards the Lord Commander, and the man hums as he begins to open it. The Measter continues, “And this boy,” He nudges the messenger closer by his shoulder, “Would not wait until you were done.”

“I have an urgent message from Winterfell,” The boy snaps in return. He looks as if he has been riding for days, muddy and shivering, soaked with sweat but fierce with loyalty. The boy bows deeply to her, and Lexa offers him a smile when he passes her his note. “Your majesty.”

“Thank you,” She runs a thumb over the parchment, wondering what could have made Aden send her a note so urgently. “What’s your name?”

“Archie, your majesty,” He colours a little under her attentions, and she looks to the Measter.

“Please ensure that Archie is given a hot meal and a bed, and a fresh horse tomorrow.” She tells the Measter, and Archie thanks her enthusiastically as the Measter grudgingly leads him away.

The Lord Commander makes a low sound of concern and Lexa looks up at him as she uncurls her note. He meets her gaze across the table and in the low light, his eyes are shadowed.

“Did you know about this?”

Suspecting that she knows what he has just read, she nods, and he shakes his head, muttering, “Utterly foolish. Baratheon is not a young man, he cannot-”

“Baratheon?” Clarke’s eyes widen, looking between them with surprise, “What? What is it?” She looks between them, and the Lord Commander opens his mouth to answer her but before he can get a word out she darts forwards and takes the letter from his hand, saying urgently. “May I?”

As her eyes skim down the letter, Lexa glances down at her own note, her eyes narrowing with concern as she reads the few words Aden has sent to her.

“No!” Clarke’s cry draws her attention away again, and her eyes widen in surprise to see the horror written across the girl’s expression. “No, I- I don’t believe this.” She fixes the Lord Commander with a determined glare, but her hands are shaking. “Wells would never do this- he would- he wouldn’t just abandon his kingdom, his duty!”

“I’m afraid it is true,” Lexa says, as gently as she can. Clarke is so distressed she fears she could become hysterical. “I also received a raven about it.”

“You knew ?” Clarke turns on her, outraged, and she is so surprised by the rage in her eyes that she finds herself momentarily lost for words.
“I did,” Her brows raise, and she glances at the Lord Commander, who watches them closely. “Lady Clarke.”

Clarke doesn’t flinch, “You didn’t think to tell me? You didn’t think I could have helped?”

“Lady Clarke,” She starts, her voice low with her warning, but Clarke ignores her thoroughly.

“I can’t believe you let me just wander around not knowing, he is my prince Lexa, my friend, I deserved to know!”

“Lady Clarke!” Lexa stands, her chair legs scraping against the stone flagged floor loudly. “I didn’t discuss this with you because I am not in the habit of discussing the politics of the north with southerners. I’m sorry that your mother didn’t think to keep you informed, but that is not my responsibility.” Clarke stares at her, open mouthed and astonished by her sudden outburst, and Lexa doesn’t give herself the time to feel sorry, instead she squares her shoulders and tightens her jaw. Looking every bit the queen in the north, she fixes her eyes on the Lord Commander and continues, as calmly as possible. “I’m afraid our visit will have to be cut short, Lord Commander. Prince Aden is in need of me in Winterfell. I will find a moment to discuss the upkeep of Castle Black and the status of the wildlings before I leave, but I must tell my captain to make preparations for our departure.” Her gaze turns to Clarke, who’s eyes have narrowed, “Lady Clarke, after you.”

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As they arrange to leave, Anya argues against the journey fiercely.

“Aden has specifically told you not to return!” Her voice is loud as they stride down the stairs of the King’s Tower and into the courtyard, and Lexa shoots her a warning glance. Anya’s jaw clenches, furious, but she obediently lowers her voice. “He told you that he had everything under control, he’s been trained for this!”

“He’s been trained for diplomacy and to fight in a vanguard,” Lexa retorts, sharply, coming to a halt to check her horse’s tack before she mounts. “Not to ward off Karstark and Bolton when they claim I am too lenient with the south.”

“Do you not trust him?” Anya demands, as she swings herself into the saddle, and Lexa grunts in frustration.

“Of course I do!” Her agitation must translate to her body, because her horse sidesteps nervously beneath her. “I have to be there, to defend myself.”

“It’s going to snow,” Anya tells her, grabbing her horse’s reins so that she can’t move. “There’s a storm coming in, you know that as well as me.”

“We’ll make it to the Umber holdfast in time to wait out the storm.” Lexa snaps, angrily, and pulls the reins from Anya’s hands with such conviction that her captain stumbles. Peering around, she finds that there is no head of golden hair upon a mount close by, and in her frustration she demands of a passing stable boy. “Where is Lady Clarke?”

The boy gapes at her, and it is Anya who steps in to answer, coolly, “She didn’t want to ride with you, your majesty.”

A lance of something between hurt and anger races through her at the words, and she attempts to keep her expression even. “Fine then, but her carriage had better not slow us down.”

She pushes her riders too fast and too hard, and she knows it objectively, in the back of her mind, but
she will hear no complaint from Anya and instead urges them onwards, even as the snow starts to fall around their shoulders and the wind whips at their cloaks. The storm seems to move in from nowhere, the skies turning dark in a matter of moments, and soon the world around them is barely visible in the raging snow storm that surrounds them. Flakes sting at Lexa’s cheeks and fall into her eyes, and when Anya leans forward to touch at her shoulder, she eventually hesitates.

“We have to find shelter!” Anya shouts, above the roaring wind, and though she is loathe to stop before the Umber castle, Lexa finds herself nodding.

They plough onwards, it would be suicide to stop in the vast, open plains, where they are completely at the mercy of the weather. It is one of Lexa’s scouts that finally returns on his horse, galloping through the snow to shout.

“Shelter! A barn and a house, this way!”

Relief courses through her veins, and Lexa glances back at her party, utterly grateful not to have killed them all with her rash decision making. There is no time to linger on her thoughts, though, as they are led through the snow by the scout. Occasionally they are forced to stop, to clean the snow from the wheels of Lady Clarke’s carriage, and though Lexa knows she ought to demand the woman disembark, she doesn’t dare to face the utter fury which she knows is awaiting her. Despite their slow progress, in the distance a dark form mars the horizon, and takes the shape of the waiting house and barn.

The house is a small, ramshackle little thing, which Lexa suspects holds only one room, but the barn is large and built sturdy enough to withstand the battering of the elements. A farmer stands at the doorway of the barn, and Lexa swings herself from her horse when they get close enough, holding out her hand in greeting.

“Your majesty,” The man doesn’t seem to know what to do with himself, and eventually settles for taking her hand, his fingers wrapping around her elbow in the customary northern way, and bowing. “I’ve been expectin’ you, your scout said you needed somewhere to wai’ this out.”

“We do,” She admits, and watches as a farmhand hauls open the door to the barn. Inside, it is dark and dry enough, the floor covered with hay and a flock of sheep penned in the corner, shivering. The farmer ushers her out of the wind, and she steps inside gratefully.

“Well I got room to spare, ‘specially for a queen.” He glances back at the farmhand. “It’s only me and Tom out here tonigh’, we can fit mos’ o’ you in the barn, an’ you can take the ‘ouse, your majesty.”

“That’s not necessary,” She insists, but her eyes are drawn back to the waiting carriage, and she admits. “We may have enough guest who needs the house.”

“O’ course your majesty,” He nods, sound and sensible. “I’ve go’ some braziers and firewood, ough’ to warm your men up enough. You’ll wan’ to get those ‘orses in too, fine beasts like tha’ won’t last long in this cold.”

“Quite right,” She agrees, and gestures to Anya, who stands nearby listening to their conversation. Her captain nods tightly, turning to bark orders to the waiting soldiers. “Thank you again.” She tells the farmer, “I’ll see to it that you are greatly rewarded for this.” At his grateful nod, she turns back to the snow and braces herself, before striding through the cold towards the carriage.

Octavia lingers at its door, trembling despite herself, and she brushes snow from her hair as Lexa approaches. She knocks lightly at the door, and opens it only a crack to peer into the darkness that
awaits her. Lady Clarke is huddled under all of the furs she has, trembling lightly, and her eyes are wide and worried when she looks at Lexa.

“What is it? What’s going on?”

“We have found a place to take shelter for the night,” Lexa tells her, swallowing against the urge to reach out and reassure her. “A farmhouse, it is safe but I’d like to see you inside, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“A farmhouse?” Clarke’s eyes widen, but she steels herself and nods. Together, they battle through the snow storm, their heads bent against the ferocious winds, and push through the door of the farmhouse to step into the warm, dry room.

As Lexa had suspected, it’s no bigger than one room, flames flickering in the fireplace in one corner, shutters closed tightly across the only window on the other side of the room. In the dim light, they can see a bed pushed up against one wall, strewn with blankets and lumpy pillows, and a table against the far wall, upon which a few candles burn and half of a loaf of bread sits, peeking from its cloth rap. The floor is stone, covered in woven mats, and two wooden chairs are pulled up beside the table. Lexa’s eyes dart to Lady Clarke, who is hesitating in the doorway, and Clarke must feel her gaze because she looks up to meet her, her eyes hardening before she steps into the house.

“I hope this will be acceptable for the night, Lady Clarke.” She says, at last, when it seems that Clarke will not break the silence and Clarke startles, as if she’d forgotten she was there.

“Yes, of course,” The words roll from her tongue, pretty and polite, but they are belied by the wrinkle of her nose and Lexa glances back at where Anya and Octavia stand in the doorway.

“We will have food and firewood brought to you, if you need anything don’t hesitate to ask.” She makes to leave, but Clarke’s voice pulls her to a stop, her reluctant feet hesitating.

“Where will you sleep?”

“Oh,” She glances back at her, swallowing heavily. “In the barn, with everyone else.”

A noise of complaint escapes Anya, and Lexa casts her a frown which doesn’t deter her stubborn cousin. Anya’s brows have pulled together, her eyes clouding with disapproval.

“You can’t stay in the barn,” She tells her simply.

“I agree,” Clarke steps closer, and Anya’s eyes widen, clearly astonished to find them in agreement over something. “You’re the queen, you should take the farmhouse.”

“I can’t have you staying in the barn, my lady.” Lexa rejects the idea immediately, almost smiling at the thought of Clarke sleeping on the ground among her other soldiers. “That would be improper.”

“More improper than the queen sleeping on the ground?” Clarke counters, sharply and Anya hums her agreement.

“You can’t stay with the soldiers, Lexa, it would demean you in their eyes, especially when-” She cuts herself off, abruptly, but her eyes slide to Clarke and the southern lady is sharp enough to understand.

“Especially when a southerner has a real bed. You pull rank over me.”

Frustration bubbles in the back of her chest and she can’t help rolling her eyes at the two of them as
they argue. “I’ve slept on the floor plenty of times as a squire and at war.”

“That was before you were a queen.” Anya retorts, “Lady Clarke is… right.” The word seems to pain her to say and Lexa thinks she sees Clarke hide a smile in the corner of her lips. “You should pull rank, that’s what a real queen would do.”

“I am a real queen.” She barks, and her eyes move to Clarke, incredulous. “You would willingly sleep on the floor, surrounded by snoring, stinking soldiers?”

The words make Clarke hesitate, her nose wrinkling again as she considered the prospect, before her expression clears and she offers, a little uncertainly. “There’s room enough for two in here.”

Lexa’s eyes widen, her mouth dropping open as her stomach spins. Clarke has barely looked at her since their argument, and now she is proposing that they share an enclosed space for the night, or at least until the storm passes. It’s enough to make her mouth dry, and while she struggles for words Anya answers for her.

“That would be acceptable. We could have a bed roll brought in and laid out near the fire.”

Finally, Lexa finds her voice, though it breaks while she speaks. “You would be… comfortable with that?”

Under her gaze, she thinks she sees Clarke colour just slightly, her cheeks tinged with pink, but she gathers herself enough to lift her chin and say, defiantly. “Perfectly comfortable, your majesty, as long as you are.”

The words and the gleam in her eye leave Lexa spinning even after she steps from the small house to check on her soldiers, and she wonders at how she will cope spending an entire evening with a woman who hates her so fiercely.

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Clarke agonises over sitting on the bed. She is not, as Lexa seems to think, utterly out of touch with the lives of her people, but she has never been in a place like this farm house before. Her time in Kingslanding was spent accompanied by a retinue of guards and all of the luxuries the crown could provide, and Highgarden was so far from any town that she rarely left without her mother or father. Even the Smoking Log in Winter Town has a touch more luxury. To be in somebody’s home, and somebody who likely hates her simply because of where she was born, feels too private and personal. There are iron pots hung against the wall, and when she inspects them she finds that they are marked with years of care and use. A whittling table sits in the corner, covered in the shavings of a project half finished, and along the rough mantel above the fireplace there is a line of small, carved figurines, perhaps for the farm hand to play with, or the remnants of children now moved away. The candles are all burnt down low, dripping wax across the table, and an old rag rug covers the stone floor close to the fire.

Every touch of the home tells the story of a world existing far beyond her own, and she feels almost ridiculously out of place in her heavy, fur lined dress and cloak. Outside the sound of shouting and the clattering of wood and metal reaches her over the wind and snow, and when she eventually eases open the shutters across the window, she finds soldiers trampling in and out of the barn, carrying things inside and collecting firewood. The queen appears, her figure dark in the snow, and Clarke watches, unable to pull herself away, as she takes the farmer to one side and talks to him earnestly, before pressing something into his hands. The man’s eyes widen, and he seems to fumble to object for a moment. Lexa places a hand on his shoulder, her expression gentle, and Clarke darts back into the farmhouse when she raises her eyes and catches sight of her.
The shutters shut with a slam, the catch falling into place, and she sits on the bed so heavily that it’s almost jarring. Her hands stretch out to catch herself, and her fingers run over the stitches that hold together the patchwork quilt, faded with age, that covers the bed beneath her.

Lexa enters some time later. Nightfall has drawn its curtain around them and Octavia had appeared some time earlier, with a thin stew and bread. She had stoked the fire and sat close to Clarke while she ate, watching her from the corner of her eye and clearly trying to discern the reason behind her sour mood. In the doorway she had hesitated, as if she were about to speak, but one look at the dark expression on Clarke’s face had sent her running back to the barn. Since then she had stewed in her fury and watched the fire burn lower from her place on the bed.

Lexa’s return feels like being dowsed in cold water. She feels as if every nerve in her body is standing on end, intensely aware of how she moves cautiously, uncertainly into the room. Their conflict sits heavy and stifling between them, and like the snow it muffles all of the noise. Clarke watches from the bed as Lexa steps further into the house, shutting the door firmly behind her, and glances from Clarke to the almost guttering fire in the grate. There is a twitch of annoyance at the corner of her eyes, but she says nothing and Clarke is stonily silent as she crosses the room.

She bends to one knee beside the fire, and places the bedroll in her arms onto the floor. Reaching for the stack of firewood in the basket beside the grate, she gently, carefully coaxes the fire back to life, until it is raging hot and bright once again. Clarke’s eyes flicker away only when she stands again, and she watches from beneath her eyelashes, playing with a lose thread on the quilt, as Lexa unrolls the bed roll close to the fire.

It is Lexa who breaks the silence. “Did Octavia bring you some supper?”

Clarke’s fury wriggles in her gut, and she bites down the urge to roll her eyes. What a ridiculous question, as it was certainly Lexa who ordered the food brought to her in the first place. “Yes.” She answers shortly.

Lexa nods, her brows shifting together again, and she opens her mouth as if to say something else, but then seems to think better of it. Instead, she sits into the chair beside the table, about as far away from Clarke as possible, and retrieves her dagger from a sheath against her thigh. A whetstone appears from her cloak, and then she shrugs off the cloak to drape carefully over the back of the chair. The soft rasp of a blade being sharpened fills the room, and as much as Clarke tries to keep her eyes away from the queen, she can’t help but look at her in the firelight, her head bent over her task, a few strands escaping her braids to curl about her forehead and ears. The arch of her nose and the curve of her chin is intensely, irritatingly distracting, and a prickle of heat runs through her that she can only attribute to the stoked fire.

With sudden, jarred motions, she pushes her own cloak from around her shoulders, leaving it to sprawl on the bed like a forgotten lover, and stands, stalking to the whittling bench in the corner and then to the fireplace under the guise of examining the figurines across the mantel. Anger and boredom burn in her until she is so restless she can barely stand still, and when she feels Lexa’s eyes on her, the feeling only seems to double.

“Is everything well, Lady Clarke?”

Her voice is so calm and steady that it only infuriates Clarke more, and she turns to glower at the woman, ire in her eyes.

“I’m not used to being cooped up for so long.”

“Oh of course,” Lexa remains stately and unruffled, returning to her dagger. “Unfortunately there’s
nothing to be done until the storm passes.”

“I’m sure this isn’t what my mother had in mind when she sent me here,” Clarke snipes, despite herself and Lexa hums quietly in agreement.

“I’m sure it isn’t.”

“It’s certainly not what I’ve come to expect, either.” She continues, unable to stop herself and the sound of Lexa’s blade stutters for a moment.

When she answers, there is a note of tightness to her voice that makes Clarke turn to look at her.

“The farmer is being very generous allowing us to stay.”

“We shouldn’t have travelled when a storm was so close,” Clarke argues, her eyes following Lexa’s movements, hoping for a crack in her façade. “It was unwise to leave so hastily, all of this travelling for naught.”

“It is unfortunate,” Lexa admits, her hands slowing against the whetstone. “But necessary. Prince Aden needs me in Winterfell.”

“Was it so urgent to land us stuck in the middle of the north with no place suitable to shelter?” She demands, and Lexa’s eyes shoot up to her, narrowing as her composure slackens.

“I didn’t hear you voicing any complaints when we left Castle Black.”

“Voicing any complaints?” Clarke splutters, outraged, “You would barely look at me when we left Castle Black, let alone listen to my complaints! I’m surprised you remembered to take me with you at all.”

“Oh, Lady Clarke, no one could forget you.” Lexa assures her, and her tone is so venomous that Clarke is momentarily dumbstruck by her words.

“Yet you did,” She retorts, finally, “You did not think I was worth consulting on the most important news to come out of the south in the past five years.”

“I am not having this argument again.” Lexa tells her, darkly, and stands, stretching her legs. “Perhaps we should find something to engage you, if you are so restless.” Searching the small room, she finds a collection of stakes, used to manage cattle and other livestock, resting in the corner. Bending down, she collects two into her hands and holds one out to Clarke in offering. “Maybe you would feel better if we trained some more.”

“Trained?” Clarke takes the stake from her, holding it delicately between two hands. “But we are inside.”

“There is enough space,” Lexa tells her, firmly, “And we’ll be careful.”

“This is ridiculous,” Clarke frowns down at the stake between her hands.

“There is no one to see us,” Lexa gestures around. “It seems like the prefect opportunity to me, unless…” Here she levels Clarke with a challenging tilt of her eyebrows. “You are scared to face me?”

Though she knows the words are meant to goad, Clarke feels herself falling into the trap anyway.

“Of course not.” She fixes her grip on the stake. It’s heavy, but she manages to hold it with one
Hand, adjusting her fingers until she’s following Lexa’s lessons from last time.

Lexa nods once, a firm tilt of her chin, and hums her approval lowly in the back of her throat. “Place your feet apart, enough to steady yourself. You have to be able to balance if an enemy swings at you.”

Obeying her feels like a physical task, but Clarke does as she is told, planting her feet firmly about a shoulders width apart.

“Now, turn your body,” Lexa demonstrates, shifting until only her side is facing Clarke, and the noblewoman copies. “You make for a smaller target,” She swings her stake to demonstrate, swirling it through the empty air where Clarke’s body had once been.

Her stake slides through the air as if it weighs nothing and Clarke can’t help but be impressed at the display of strength and skill.

“The most common Westeros swords are heavy,” Lexa explains, her voice still cool, “Like these stakes, they’re best for slashing and hacking. You have to put a lot of power behind them to make an impact.” She swings her stake again, in a smooth arc before her, and after a moment of uncertainty, Clarke imitates her, swinging at the empty air between them. “Again.”

Clarke bristles at the command, but does as she’s told, swinging the stake through the air until her arm and shoulder burn with pain. When she is beginning to tire, Lexa’s own stake swoops down to meet hers with a loud crack of wood, and Clarke startles back, her eyes widening in surprise.

Lexa meets her gaze unapologetically and challenges. “What now?”

For a moment she is utterly unsure what to do, her gaze flickering between their weapons and Lexa’s unmoving face. Then, she twists the stake away and makes to collide her fantasy blade with Lexa’s side. The queen is too fast though, and her stake is met yet again, and this time pushed away with strength that forces her backwards a few steps. Lexa gives her a second to catch her breath, but moments later her stake soars through the air and Clarke only just catches it with her own in time. Lexa forces her back with her next few strikes, until Clarke is almost pressed to the door.

“Strike back,” Lexa urges, in between collisions, “Be brave!”

Clarke glowers at the words, and when Lexa next goes to meet her repetitive strikes, she swings her stake up and forces Lexa to catch her at the last moment, the wood cracking low between them. Lexa’s eyes are wide when they meet hers again, and exhilarated enjoyment sparkles behind them.

“Good!” She encourages, “Keep going!”

Clarke twists again, her weapon slicing through the air with such ferocity that Lexa has to take a step back to avoid her strike. On her momentum, she twists her body the other way, just as her dance teacher had instructed so many years ago, and slashes twice at Lexa’s body. Her movements are quick now, her breath coming hard and words spill from between her lips even as she forces Lexa back across the farmhouse.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Wells?” Their weapons meet and Clarke swirls back, furious and ferocious and more powerful than she’s ever felt before. “I had a right to know!” Her next two swipes force Lexa far enough back that she stumbles into the table, her hand going out to catch herself. “He’s my best friend!” Lexa meets her stake easily this time, and her momentum carries her a stumbling step forward, their weapons still pressed against each other, until she is close enough that she can feel Lexa’s breath against her cheek and count the fragments of colour in her eyes.
Something presses against her side, through the bodice of her dress and she looks down to find Lexa’s dagger held steadily against the embroidery.

“Lesson number two,” Lexa’s voice is low and hoarse, “Your enemies won’t play fair. You shouldn’t either.”

Clarke flinches away, violently, but the movement is so sudden that the hem of her heavy dress and petticoats twists around her ankle like an errant tree root and pulls the floor from beneath her. She yelps, hands flailing as she tries to catch herself, but it is only two strong arms around her that saves her from colliding with the stone floor so fiercely that she would have been sure to break something. She finds herself crushed against Lexa’s body, her hands coming to rest against the arms that hold her, and her breath escapes her in a sudden, heady gasp as she feels the warmth and flexing muscles beneath her fingers. Lexa’s eyes are wide, her cheeks flushed, and Clarke is lost in her gaze, falling into pools of endless green, the dark of creaking fir trees and the brightness of new shoots of grass, a hazy, soft gold like the magic of ancient ancestors that Clarke is sure runs in this girl’s veins. Lexa’s lips part, rosebud pink and soft and Clarke feels heat steal across her chest and over her cheeks, utterly unexplainable. More soft curls have fallen from Lexa’s braids and she barely resists the urge to tuck them gently behind her ears, just for an excuse to feel the delicate skin of her cheek beneath her knuckles.

The harsh rap of knuckles against the door sends them spiralling apart, and when Lexa calls out an entry, her voice is rough in a way that brings fresh colour to Clarke’s cheeks.

A squire slips inside to stoke the fire, and ask if they need anything more, and as Lexa dismisses him, Clarke sits heavily onto the bed. The abandoned stakes still lie on the floor where they had been discarded, now cracked and splintered, and she keeps her eyes fixed to them as Lexa sees the boy out and shuts the door firmly behind him.

There is a long moment of silence, until the bed dips beside her and Clarke’s gaze darts up to see the queen sitting only a few inches away from her upon the bed. Lexa’s eyes watch the fire across the room as it begins to lick at the fresh kindling, and when she speaks it is quiet.

“I’m sorry that you found out about Prince Wells that way.”

Clarke’s breath hitches at her words, and she swallows heavily. “I shouldn’t have expected you to tell me, I know it’s complicated… politically.”

“If I had known that you didn’t know… or even that it meant so much to you, I would have told you.” Lexa promises, and Clarke catches sight of her fingers twisting together anxiously.

“I know. Thank you, Lexa.”

Lexa nods, her gaze finally flickering back to Clarke, filled with things unsaid. “I’m sorry that your mother didn’t think to tell you.”

Clarke scoffs quietly. “My mother has always tried to keep me as far away from the politics of the south as possible, but my father.” Her voice breaks over the word and she is surprised to find tears welling in her eyes at the thought of him. The absence of his letters burns deeply in her heart, and she fears she is being slowly forgotten. Brusquely, she wipes at her cheeks, “I thought he might. Or even Prince Wells himself.”

“I wish I could tell you more,” Lexa sighs, “But I only know that he withdrew his claim to the throne when he joined the Order of Maesters.”
“The next in line is Lord Daniel Baratheon, the king’s brother, but he has no children.” Clarke shakes her head and Lexa hums beside her.

“There is still time for the king to take a new wife and create heirs. Even if he does not love his new consort, she would bear heirs and continue his reign.”

“Maybe,” Clarke admits, reluctantly, her thoughts dark and cloudy. “I don’t know why... Wells was always such a good son.”

“You were childhood friends?” Lexa asks, softly and Clarke gives a slight smile, correcting her gently.

“We are still friends, best friends.” Her face falls, “I knew he was distressed but I don’t know what could have made him give up the throne. He was so loyal to his father, so determined to be a good king, so godly and honourable.”

“I had heard that about him,” Lexa gives a faint smile, “We met once, when I was arranging a peace treaty with his father. He always seemed a kind, good son. His honour reminded me of a north man.”

Clarke gives a wry smile at that, “Yes, I suppose he was that way inclined. But he never gave any inkling that he would give up the throne, at least not to me.”

“You cannot blame yourself, Clarke,” Lexa’s voice is kind and reassuring beside her, earnest in a way that draws Clarke’s gaze up to hers. “You like to take everything upon yourself, I know, but you must not do so here, you were leagues away.”

“I know, I-” She takes a moment to gather herself, “When we were children we would spend hours together, tell each other everything. I thought that one day we might get married.” She laughs, quiet and watery, at that and sees an answering smile play at the corners of Lexa’s kind mouth. “Of course we both knew that would never really work, I was far too wild for him. Wells was always reigniting me in, keeping me safe, grounding me. Without him I fear I may... float away.”

A hand touches her, so tentative and gentle that Clarke barely feels it at first, but then fingers curl around her palm, firm and warm, and she lets her eyes find their way back to Lexa’s face to see her honest, open eyes looking back.

“You will be alright Clarke. You’re strong and capable, you won’t float away.”

She twists her hand over, until their fingers can interlock, and if her voice cracks when she speaks again, she tries to ignore it. “Thank you, Lexa.”

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The winds howl around the little farmhouse so loudly that Lexa fears they will lift the place from the ground, tearing it out from its roots to leave them sprawled across the snowy farmland. The fireplace lies dark and empty, despite their many attempts throughout the night to keep the fire alive, and their wood supply had dwindled until at last they were left with nothing but the light of a few candles burning on the table across the room. In the darkness, Lexa stares up at the ceiling and tries not to think about the cold seeping in from the floor below her. She has spent many worse nights sheltered by only a tent on the damp ground, but on those days she had usually spent the day running and fighting, her arms heavy with fatigue, and was dragged into sleep by the weight of her day. Now, however, she feels restless and shivers in her bedroll. Her mind drifts to Aden, alone in the castle to defend her against Karstark and Bolton, and shifts under her covers anxiously.

“You’re cold.”
The voice startles her, her head twisting to peer through the dim light at where Clarke is leaning up on her elbow to look at her.

“I thought you were asleep.” Her voice is hoarse, too loud in the night and she clears her throat. “Are you cold?”

“A little,” Clarke pauses for a moment, before asking. “Are you?”

Lexa hesitates, her gaze going back to the ceiling as she considers her answer, but in the darkness she feels as if she can speak true. “Yes.”

“Come into bed.” Clarke offers, and Lexa’s eyes widen, her breath escaping her in a startled gasp that seems to fill the room. As she splutters, she sees Clarke roll her eyes and say, impatiently. “You don’t have bedwarmers in the north? In Highgarden my ladies and I often shared a bed in the winter.”

“No, no… in the north bedwarmer means something quite different,” Lexa’s voice is strangled and she thinks she sees Clarke’s mouth drop open. She tries not to imagine the pretty blush that is probably colouring her cheeks.

“Oh,” There is a long silence and Lexa thinks that this conversation will be forgotten, ignored as a mirage brought on by the night, but then Clarke speaks again. “It wouldn’t have to be… like that.” She read Lexa’s surprise in the silence that follows, because she continues hurriedly, “I mean, of course, it wouldn’t be like that. I only meant that it could help to keep us both warm, if we shared this bed.”

Lexa feels as if her voice has been stolen from her, “I’m fine, thank you.”

“Lexa,” In the darkness, Clarke’s exasperation is almost endearing, and Lexa has to bite on her lip to keep from smiling. “There is no sense in allowing yourself to remain uncomfortable. Just come up here, be sensible.”

“I’ve slept in worse places,” Lexa argues, stubbornly, from the floor and Clarke scoffs.

“The endurance of past discomfort is not a justification for current stupidity,” She tells her, plainly, and Lexa does laugh at that, a soft exhalation of amusement. It seems to soften Clarke, because her voice has dropped a notch when she speaks again. “Please Lexa, maybe we’ll both sleep better.”

A gust of wind slips down the chimney and seems to wrap around her, sending a chill straight down to her bones, and Lexa shivers, contemplating for a moment more before she slips from the bedroll. She still wears her belt and boots, but hesitates before climbing into the bed and slips them off, sure that Lady Clarke would not appreciate their presence. From her place beside the bed, she watches from beneath her eyelashes as Clarke shuffles along in the bed. The Tyrell girl’s eyes are fixed to her fingers, watching as she slips her belt through its loops and straps, and something about the darkness and the curve of her lips sends a heat straight through Lexa’s veins, enough to warm her whole army. Her fingers tremble a little when she peels away the boots, and then there is nothing between her and Clarke, and the girl pulls back the covers to invite her in.

Carefully, she lowers herself onto the bed, feeling it shift with her weight, and eases herself below the covers. Clarke is right, bedwarmers are not a common occurrence in the north, and so she has never shared a bed with someone like this, never lain so close to another body and felt it breathe beside her. It is strange and intensely intimate, though they are not touching at all. Beside her, she can feel Clarke’s warmth radiating from her body and hear the steady, calm sound of her breath, the rise and fall of her bosom silhouetted in the darkness. Every inch of her skin is prickling with
awareness, tingling and trembling, and she lies so still on her back that she feels like a corpse. Forcing her breath to steady, in case Clarke should think worse of her for her nerves, she listens to Clarke breathing beside her and forces her eyes shut, and somewhere between then and the dawn she slides into a dreamless, deep sleep.

If they wake to the knocking on the dark and find that their bodies are curled together, Clarke’s hand along her stomach and her own resting on the blonde’s hip, they blame the moonlight and the darkness.

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The portcullis of Winterfell stands open in wait for them, and in the courtyard stand both her Queensguard and Prince Aden, his hands behind his back, a slightly exasperated, amused smile lingering on his face as he watches her ride into the courtyard. He is flanked by Sage and Valour, who prowls a little closer as Lexa’s caravan approaches, placing himself between the prince and the newcomers. Both Lord Karstark and Lord Bolton stand nearby, and for a moment Lexa is terrified that Aden is being held captive, but then she reads the anxious, vaguely fearful expressions on the lords’ faces and realises, with a flush of awe and relief, that their men are hastily packing up their goods in the courtyard.

She swings herself from her mount, landing with the heavy thump of her boots, striding across the courtyard. She wears a thick black cloak around her shoulders, her daggers and her sword hanging against her waist and a silver direwolf pin against her cloak. Honour walks at her side like her shadow, towering and growling, the whites of his teeth showing between his dark jaws.

Lexa hesitates a few steps away from the prince, her eyes flickering to Karstark and Bolton. Valour, his dark brown coat bristling, scents the air for a moment, recognising her, before lowering his hackles.

“Prince Aden,” Lexa’s eyes travel over her brother, looking closely for any sign of duress or injury.

“Your majesty,” Aden offers her a bow, which is echoed by the others in the courtyard, but his eyes twinkle with a tease. “We didn’t expect you back so soon.”

“We cut our trip short,” She is still suspicious, her eyes cutting back to the two lords. “Lord Karstark and Lord Bolton, I see you're here.”

“Unfortunately they were just about to leave, your majesty,” Aden explains, giving the two men a friendly smile laced with poison.

“Oh, I see, what a shame to have missed you.” Lexa’s voice remains cool, her expression stony. “I hope we’ll have the chance to welcome you back to Winterfell very soon, my lords.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Lord Karstark gives her a gruff answer and bows slightly, and Bolton’s beady eyes run over her.

“We have much to attend to at home, your majesty.” His voice is thin and reedy, and he flinches back when Liberty places herself between them both.

“I’m sure,” Lexa offers them a slight smile, dangerous and deadly. “Then I won’t waylay you any further my lords, safe travels.”

The men bow again, but Lexa turns away from them and steps towards her brother. She calls to Anya, her eyes still fixed to Aden.
“The prince and I are going to retire to my solar.” Without waiting for acknowledgement, she strides into the castle, feeling the eyes of everyone in the courtyard prickling against her neck. Aden falls into step behind her, but doesn’t try to speak with her until the door of her solar is shut against curious eyes and ears.

As she shrugs off her cloak to leave it sprawled across the back of the high backed chair behind her desk, she hears the clicking of a flint and finds her brother lighting straw and kindling upon the hearth. She watches, quiet and curious, as he coxes a fire into life in the grate, and settles into one of the armchairs, gesturing that he should take the second. As the room warms and brightens from the fire, Lexa casts her glance over to her brother and watches as Aden draws in a long breath.

“You didn’t need to come back.”

She inclines her head in a nod, humming quietly in agreement. “I know.”

“I told you that you didn’t need to return,” Aden continues, ignoring her, “I specifically said in my raven that you needn’t come back, that I could handle this.”

“I know,” She repeats, softly, and he turns to look at her at last, fury and annoyance written across his features.

“You cut short your time at the Wall for nothing. You travelled all the way back for nothing.”

“Oh,” Her brother deflates, his shoulders slumping and for a moment he is the young boy she grew up with. “Alright.”

“I was worried about you,” She admits, finally, “You’re my brother, my younger brother, and it was my name being questioned. I wouldn’t have been able to live myself if you were hurt protecting my name.”

“You’re my queen,” Aden shakes his head, exasperated, “It’s your name I fight for, always. And I’m good Lexa, I’m not a child any more.” His gaze softens, and becomes tender, “You trained me for this, remember?”

“I remember,” She assures him, affection slipping through her tone, “It’s sometimes hard to forget that you’re not that little boy any more. So, Prince Aden,” She straightens, her tone hardening and Aden squares his shoulders, his eyes widening at her formal words. “Explain to me what you said to Karstark and Bolton.”

“They were insisting that we attack the south now, while they are weak and unstable.” Aden tells her, succinctly, “I informed them that we had no need to go to war with the south, when Thelonious Baratheon has already given in to so many of our requests, and reminded them that Lady Tris is a guest in the south.” He hesitates and when he speaks again, is it with a layer of darkness, “I also told them that the queen in the north has an army far larger than any of theirs, and that any rebellion would be quickly quashed. I may have recalled the number of pages and kitchen maids who claim to have seen you transform into a monstrous wolf with the full moon.”

At that, Lexa’s mouth drops open and an amused, startled laugh is pulled from her lips. “Aden!” She admonishes, though it is bellied by her chuckle. “Clearly it was enough to send them fleeing with their tails between their legs.” She eyes him in the firelight, her mouth set in a contemplative line. “You showed diplomacy and skill Aden, I’m proud of you.”
He colours under her attentions, but his spine straightens, and he gives her a respectful nod. “I’m only using what you taught me, your majesty.”

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Chapter End Notes

this chapter was super self-indulgent, but I hope you liked it anyway! let me know what you thought either below or over on tumblr @onemilliongoldstars!
Book One: Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

sorry for the wait, I hope this chapter makes up for it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Book One: Chapter 13

Lexa isn’t sure whether she should allow Anya the luxuries that she does. Surely, she ponders to herself, a queen should not allow someone to lounge back upon one of her armchairs, her feet kicked over one of the arms and her boots dangling as she picks from the plate of food before her, while the queen herself is measured for a gown. It seems improper in a way that Lexa can’t quite place, even as she lifts her arms obligingly for her seamstress. But there is little she can do about it now, and with no one to teach her the ways of royalty other than Titus, she supposes there’s no harm to it, as long as none but her most trusted spot the captain so in her element. She lowers her arms again at her seamstress’s command, and twists to look at her cousin again as the seamstress murmurs over the measurements of the skirt to her apprentice.

Anya catches her gaze and raises an eyebrow, her gaze travelling over her. “Going through a growth spurt?”

Lexa snorts, inelegantly, “I should hope not.” She brushes a hand over the emerald green material, tracing the silver embroidery, “It’s for Aden’s name day banquet.”

“You didn’t want to wear one you already had?” Anya asks, casually, plucking a piece of cheese from the platter and chewing noisily and Lexa’s eyes flicker away as she answers, carefully neutral.

“I thought a change would be good.”

Anya only hums, and mercifully changes the subject. “You plan to name Aden heir at the banquet?”

Lexa nods, a smile stealing across her features. “I thought it would be a good occasion, yes. He proved himself with Karstark and Bolton.”

Anya’s brows furrow at the sound of those names, and she spears of piece of chicken aggressively with her knife, eating around the blade.

“Regardless,” Lexa ignores her annoyance, remembering Anya’s fervent instance that she simply behead the lords and have it done with. “He is heir in all but name anyway, and there should be an heir in place officially, in case something happens.”

“Titus will be pleased,” Anya remarks, bitterly and Lexa shakes her head, allowing herself to be turned this way and that as the seamstresses place the thick silver girdle, a delicate piece showing intertwined leaves and wolves, around her waist. She hears Anya’s boots hit the floor.

“Titus does not have to approve of my choice of heir, he is sworn to serve Winterfell whoever may be ruling it, and I am the queen.”

“So I understand,” Anya appears at her side, and pokes at the girdle, her brows raising again,
“Expecting an assassination attempt, your majesty?”

The seamstress gives Anya a look that could freeze stone and even her cousin is cowed enough to retreat back to her seat. Lexa gives her a triumphant look from over the seamstress’s shoulder, and Anya rolls her eyes.

“The boy is a good choice,” Her cousin continues, after a moment’s pause, “He’s a skilled fighter, and he’s charming enough that the lords of the north should melt at his feet like butter.”

“He has been well taught,” Lexa agrees, and though she means Anya’s training in the yard, she can’t help but think of Aden’s reports from the lords of the north, poisoned secrets reported with an easy smile.

“Have you told him yet?” Anya asks, curiously and Lexa shakes her head.

“I will soon, it’s only fair I tell him in private first.” Her eyes flicker to her cousin and when she speaks again it is with measured surety. “I also intend to legitimise him.”

Anya, to her relief, only nods her agreement and says, her voice lilting with the slightest hint of reluctant tenderness. “The boy has been a Stark in all but name for his whole life. Your father treated him as a full blood son, and you as a legitimate brother. I don’t think it will come as any great shock to the northern houses to hear him named officially Stark.”

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The Smoking Log is almost too warm, a feeling that Clarke thought she had long forgotten in the north. It has been some time since she wished her corset were looser and felt the prickle of heat running up her arms and neck, and the change is sincerely welcome after the freezing chill of the far north and the Wall. Smallfolk crowd the tavern, pushing past one another to get to the bar, and leaning against the walls when there are no more seats left, and the sound of conversation and laughter fills the room with a comfortable buzz of activity. At their table in the back corner of the tavern, they are afforded a little more space and room to breathe, in part thanks to Octavia’s heavy sword and Faith’s stark white figure sat beside Clarke’s chair.

The Tyrell isn’t quite sure if the wolf likes being in the crowded, rowdy tavern, but Faith seems to have accepted her fate with a reluctant, martyred attitude, and when she rests her head upon Clarke’s lap, Clarke scratches the spot between her ears that makes her rumble pleasantly.

“I win again,” Clarke casts a triumphant smile across the table, where Raven is glowering at the dice before her as if they have personally betrayed her.

“Lucky,” The smith mutters, reaching across the table to collect her dice with a grumble and Octavia rolls her eyes when Clarke continues to gloat.

“Not luck, skill.”

“Another game,” Raven insists, and as she stretches out her leg, Clarke glances to the side, watching Octavia’s distracted gaze.

Snow has been distracted all evening, unable to settle and quiet, and while she usually doesn’t deign to involve herself in their games, she usually has at least one or two scathing comments to input. Clarke twists, following her gaze, and though for a moment she sees nothing, her eyes fall upon Ser Lincoln, leaning against the fireplace, talking with someone. Her eyes widen, and she looks to Octavia again curiously, remembering the many times she had found the young knight outside her door, and the time Octavia spent with him at Longlake.
“You should go and speak to him.” She says, as casually as she can and she keeps her eyes on the dice as she throws her turn, though she can feel Octavia’s glare.

“Speak to who?” Raven’s head perks up from where she’s been rubbing at her leg, and she looks between them eagerly.

Octavia stays stoic and silent, but Clarke has no qualms and she can feel the spiced wine heating her blood and loosening her tongue. “Octavia can’t keep her eyes away from Ser Lincoln.”

“Ser Lincoln?” Raven echoes, her voice ticking up a notch, teasingly, and she follows Clarke’s pointed gaze to the man leaning against the fireplace and hums her appreciation. “I see.”

“You’re both being ridiculous,” Octavia breaks her silence to snap, and Clarke smirks.

“Ridiculous enough that you’re blushing?”

“I am not,” Octavia insists, furiously. “It’s hot in here.”

When Clarke glances up again, she finds Ser Lincoln’s eyes upon them and her lips pull into a small smile. He gives her a respectful nod, his eyes flickering to Octavia with a sort of hopeful glimmer that makes the tiniest part of Clarke swoon. Octavia’s eyes dart away from him, widening and she gives Clarke the foulest look she’s ever seen. Ser Lincoln pushes himself away from the fireplace and says something to his companion, and Clarke’s smile rises triumphantly at the sight of him approaching.

“He’s coming this way,” Raven points out and Octavia’s head swings around to look so furiously that Clarke fears it may fall from her shoulders and roll across the floor all the way to Ser Lincoln’s feet.

“I-I have to go,” Octavia makes to rise, but Raven clamps a hand on her shoulder and holds her down.

“Can’t have that Snow,” She tells her plainly, and then continues at Octavia’s affronted look. “You’re the best entertainment we’ve had all evening.”

Before Octavia can make to stand again, Ser Lincoln appears at their table from between the crowd. He seems even taller than usually, stood above them while they sit, and he gives them a smile that is all good humour and charm. He offers Clarke a half bow, and greets her respectfully.

“My lady,” His eyes twist to Raven and Octavia, “Mistress Reyes… hello Octavia.”

When it seems that Octavia is too likely to trip over her own tongue, Clark interjects. “Ser Lincoln, it’s good to see you.”

“And you, my lady. You seem well after your troubled travels.” He says, politely and she nods.

“I was lucky to have the assistance of the Queensguard,” She allows, with a smile.

“And now you’re celebrating?” His eyes twinkle with a hint of mirth, but there is no malice in it and Clarke allows herself a bashful smile. “Can I bring you ladies anything more to drink?”

“Yes, three mugs of spiced wine would do nicely,“ Raven requests, and then her eyes swing exaggeratedly to Octavia, “That’s far too much to carry alone, Octavia, you’d better help him.”

“What?” Octavia demands, furiously, and Clarke has to bite on her lip to keep herself from laughing.
“Oh, I can manage-” Ser Lincoln offers, chivalrously, but Raven shakes her head insistently.

“Nonsense,” She all but shoves Octavia from her seat. “Octavia will help you.”

Octavia stumbles to her feet and for a moment she and Ser Lincoln only stare at one another, before the man manages to regain his composure and gestures for her to go first.

They watch the pair squeeze through the crowd towards the bar, and Clarke sits back, scratching at the spot between Faith’s ears and feeling a swell of self-satisfaction.

“I’ve never seen her moon over someone like that before,” Raven says, idly, her eyes following them until they’re out of sight.

“Do you know him?” Clarke asks, curiously, and Raven half shrugs.

“Only in passing, I grew up in Winter Town and around the forge, you get to know who people are.”

“You’ve never really talked about growing up here,” Clarke observes, quietly, and throws the dice to distract them both.

“There’s not much to tell,” Raven shrugs, collecting the dice into her hands and shaking them. She’s calmer than Clarke would expect, but there’s something in the downturn of her eyes. “My mother was brought here by my father from Bravos, and when he died she never learnt to love Westeros, so she turned to drink. A drunk mother doesn’t have much use for a baby girl born with a bum leg, so I learnt to care for myself pretty early on.”

“You’re partly Bravosi?” Clarke’s eyes widen and she looks at Raven in a new light. Now, with a practiced eye, she can see something in the tan of her skin and the dark sheen of her hair that alludes to her heritage.

“Barely. I can speak and read the language some, but other than that all I know is the drunken tales my mother would tell.”

“So you were born with your leg?” She isn’t sure if she should pry, but the healer’s training her mother and grandmother passed down to her prompts her to ask. “Does it pain you much?”

Raven glances up at her, her gaze searching, and when she eventually nods, and pulls in a long breath, it is as if she’s building up the courage to speak. “Yes… I actually… it’s getting worse.”

“It is?” Clarke’s brows furrow, and Raven continues, unable to quite meet her eyes.

“I think I’m going to go down to Kings Landing.”

“What?”

Raven presses her lips together firmly. “The healers are better down there, I hear. I’ve seen every healer in Winter Town, even the queen’s, there’s nothing more they can do for me.”

“But the journey… surely that will hurt your leg more.” Clarke shakes her head, unable to contemplate the idea of the north without Raven in it. Even the thought of it makes her heart squeeze tightly in her chest, a panging ache of loneliness that she has come to know too well.

As if hearing her thoughts, Raven says. “I’ll come back when I’m better, and maybe while I’m there I can learn from some of the Kings Landing forgers.”
“Let me help you,” Clarke begs, finally, “I know some people in Kings Landing, a letter with my seal could really help you. I could pay for a carriage, to help your leg.”

“I won’t take charity,” Raven says, sternly, but after a second of hesitation she adds. “But the letter could be useful… thank you, my lady.”

“Clarke,” She corrects her, and Raven offers her a smile that feels like a warm balm to the sting in her heart.

—

The evening has drawn a dark cloak around the castle, blanketing them in the peace of dusk, and Lexa can see the sky turning from blue to washed indigo from her place staring out of the library windows. She feels safe here, in the room where she had taught Aden so many lessons as a child, with guards at every door to prevent any disruption. The table still sits pushed up against the window, from her time with Clarke, and upon it is a parcel of dark fabric. She feels uncharacteristically nervous, though she has no reason to. She knows that Aden will not refuse her this, he’s been groomed for it for most of his life, and yet there is still a flicker of fear which dances in her stomach like the flame of a dying candle.

The door creaks open and for a moment she keeps her gaze fixed to the window, as she listens to the footsteps come closer to her. When she does turn, it is at the sound of her brother’s voice.

“You wanted to see me?”

He seems suddenly older than he ever has before, and her eyes travel from his feet to his eyes as she wonders when he had truly become a man, in the time she wasn’t looking. Aden frowns at her, clearly curious, and she clears her throat.

“I have something for you.” Being from the north, they have never been people of many words or ceremony. “An early birthday gift, if you will.”

“Alright,” Aden is curious, but as amiable as always. He watches her expectantly, and she is surprised to find that when she turns to take up the pile of black fabric, her hands are shaking.

“Here,” She places it into his arms as delicately as though it were a newborn babe, and he unravels it, admiring the fine material.

“A cloak,” His eyes flicker to her, nonplussed, and she rolls her eyes, crossing the space between them to point at the silver crest stitched finely on the breast, right over his heart. His eyes widen, and his lips part in amazement. Something flickers across his face, between disbelief and amazement, and she bites down on her lip to stop her smile. “This… this is…”

“Aden,” Her voice is solemn enough to draw his eyes up from the crest, “I would like you to become Aden Stark, officially.”

“Aden Stark,” He echoes, his lips curling around the words as if he can’t understand them, and he looks back to the crest, unable to stop himself. “Stark.”

“You have always been my brother, in my heart,” She tells him, quietly, “And I believe that our father considered you his true son. I thought it was time the world understood that.”

“You want to legitimise me,” He stares at her, his eyes as round as saucers, and she reaches out to touch his shoulder, grounding him.
“I mean to make you my heir.”

“Your heir,” He pulls in a sharp breath at the word and she nods, seriously.

“I know we’ve spoken of it before, but this is your chance. I am placing the future of our father’s kingdom in your hands, little brother. Can you rule it?”

His chin tilts up, and his shoulders straighten. “I can,” He promises her, earnestly, “I want to.”

“Good,” Her composure breaks and she allows herself to smile, “That’s even more important.”

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When her handmaiden knocks for the third time upon her door and asks if she’s ready to retire, her shoulders drooping when Lexa shakes her head from her place at her table, Lexa sends her away with a wave of her hand and her assurance that she can find her own way to bed just fine. The letters that scatter her desk come from north and south alike, and they demand her attention like an urgent lamb calls for his mother, though they all say the same thing. Lords both north and south write to ask her what she means to do about the absence of an heir to the southern throne, and though she know that any ambition she had for the Iron Throne and all of Westeros would be best acted upon now, she cannot find it in herself. She was not raised to want more than what was owed to her. Extending her love and duty to the people of the north was not hard; as the Lady of Winterfell, she would have been Warden of the North anyway. The north runs in her veins, she feels it in the prickle of her blood and the cold of her breath, so fighting for its freedom when the southern reach become too much was no task. But she has never lusted for the chance to rule all of Westeros- what does she know of the lands to the south? Baked under the sun and heavy with wealth and opulence, deceit and ill-will: there is nothing about the south that calls to her.

Yet many of these lord and ladies would have her pounce in a moment if it would benefit them. They hide their selfish desires under concerns for the stability of the king, and the influence of his small council, but Lexa knows that they would not chase this outcome if not for their own gain. She has no desire to thrust her people back into war when the spring has only just come.

Her mind feels as if it is filled with wild horses, so that when her eyes begin to water from reading by low candlelight for so long, she finds herself unable to sleep. Instead, she pulls on her hose and boots, and a thick jerkin, swings her cloak around her shoulders and steps out of her room, intending to make the most of the quiet night air. The battlements give her the peace she so desires, and for some time she leans upon walls and stares out at her kingdom, glowing under the bright light of the moon. Her thoughts are quiet and her mind is still. After some time, Sage appears at her side and settles beside her to follow her gaze out onto the land.

The sound of voices draws her back to herself after some time, and lazily she pushes herself away from the wall, shaking out the idle stiffness to her bones to peer down into the courtyard. Her eyes widen when she sees several figures, one of which has a shock of familiar golden hair. They are arguing, albeit quietly, and the others seem to be keeping Lady Clarke upright. A dog boy passes, and one figure collars him and sends him running in the direction of the castle. At their distraction, Clarke tries to turn back to the portcullis, but is quickly apprehended. For a moment, Lexa considers staying where she is and watching this unfold from afar, but her curiosity eventually overcomes her.

By the time she’s made her way down into the courtyard, the group have been joined by another figure, who Lexa recognises as one of her own handmaidens who she sent into Clarke’s service. Lady Clarke is leaning heavily against Raven Reyes, and arguing with Ser Lincoln, who seems amused, and Octavia Snow, who seems irritated. Her handmaiden’s eyes widen when she notices her approaching, and it is her curtsy that alerts the rest of them to her presence. As she gets closer to
them, she watches on in amusement as Clarke gives a wonky curtsey and Lincoln stiffens.

“Your majesty,” He’s the first to greet her, stepping forward. “I didn’t realise you were awake.”

“I am,” She cranes her neck around him to raise an eyebrow in Clarke’s direction. “Is Lady Clarke alright?”

Lincoln sighs regretfully, but steps back to give her a closer look. “I’m afraid it was my fault, your majesty, I… over indulged her at the Smoking Log.”

“You were too nice to say no,” Octavia puts in, sharply, and her features don’t soften under Lexa’s gaze, though she bows her head.

“You were at the Smoking Log?” Lexa’s brows quirk up in surprise, and she watches Raven Reyes shift Clarke uncomfortably.

“You said I could go anywhere as long as I was accompanied by my guard,” Clarke puts in, smartly, though her words slur a little.

“I did,” Lexa allows, still surprised, “I suppose I just didn’t expect…” She trails off, and looks between them all. “I’ll assist Lady Clarke to her room, may I suggest that you all get some sleep yourselves.” Her eyes fix on Lincoln, and she smirks. “I suspect you have work to get to in the morning.”

“Young majesty, I can get her to her room.” Her handmaiden steps in to help her, but Lexa shakes her off as she crosses the space between herself and Lady Clarke.

“There’s no need, let me help.” She glances down at Lady Clarke, caught for a moment in her swirling blue eyes and the quirk of her lips, lingering on a fond smile. “May I, my lady?”

“Of course,” Clarke all but breathes, and Lexa is gentle when she winds an arm around the lady’s waist, feeling the slim silhouette and soft, silky fabric of her dress. Clarke reaches up to steady herself against her shoulder and when she shifts her weight to be supported by Lexa, she is suddenly warm and heavy at her side. Their eyes meet again, and Lexa has to tear herself away after a moment, for fear that she will be caught up for the rest of eternity.

“Get some rest, I will see that Lady Clarke gets to her room safely.”

Ser Lincoln, Raven Reyes and Octavia murmur their thanks, offering parting bows as they leave, and Lexa and the handmaiden work together to get Clarke up the narrow spiral stairs to her quarters. At the door, Lexa glances over her handmaiden and sees that she is in her nightgown, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders to keep out the cold.

“Mira,” She begins, hesitantly, when the handmaiden goes to push open the door. Mira looks at her, curious and expectant, and she dredges up the courage to continue. “I can… I’ll make sure that Lady Clarke is alright, you seem like you would appreciate the rest.”

“It’s my job to look after her, your majesty,” Mira reminds her, with the gently sternness that she appreciates in her handmaidens. “Should you not be resting yourself.”

“I was struggling to sleep,” Lexa shrugs, “And as the queen I can probably afford to sleep a little later in the morning, if I need to.”

Mira gives her a look that seems to read but I know you will not, but acquiesces. Lexa isn’t quite sure what made her daring enough to ask, apart from the dreamy look in Clarke’s eyes and her
achingly desire to be alone with her since the farmhouse. Perhaps it is the cover of darkness that allows something so taboo, but when she helps Lady Clarke into her room and assists her past her solar and to the bed, she finds herself unsure.

Regardless, she has too much pride to call back Mira now, and she isn’t quite sure she trusts Clarke in anyone else’s hands when she is so incapacitated, even her trusted handmaiden. Softly, she moves around the room lighting candles and stirring the fire into life. By the time she’s done, she turns to find Lady Clarke lying back against her bed, her legs still dangling from the mattress, and she can’t help the smile that steals across her face.

“Clarke,” She sits carefully behind her on the bed, and touches at her shoulder to rouse her. In the warm candlelight, she watches Clarke’s eyelashes flutter against her cheeks as she wakes, and tries not to think of the morning they awoke in the same bed, touching in too many places to count. Clarke’s brows furrow, and she tries to turn away from her, but Lexa touches her again, more insistently. “I’m sorry, you must at least take off your dress if you wish to go to bed.”

“Why?” Clarke’s voice is muffled by the covers, but she allows herself to be nudged upwards, until she’s sitting on the bed. Lexa shuffles in behind her, drawing her feet up onto the bed and propping her in the bracket of her hips to unclasp her cape and let it sprawl between them.

“Because you will be more comfortable that way,” Lexa explains, patiently, and begins unpicking the jewels tangled in her golden hair. “Especially without these pins in your hair.”

“Did you fetch me from the tavern?” Clarke twists, curiously, but stops with Lexa tuts at her, settling back into her grip with an annoyed sigh.

“No, Ser Lincoln brought you back to the castle,” Lexa feels her voice tighten a little, and can’t help but add. “He should have done so much sooner.”

“It isn’t his fault,” Clarke attempts to appease her, her words slurred. “He looked after us.”

“I didn’t even know you frequented the tavern,” Lexa grumbles, trying to pulling a sapphire pin from between the braids in her hair without hurting her. “Especially dressed like this.”

“I’m perfectly safe, Faith is with me.” Clarke tells her, looking over to where Faith and Sage are both curled up beside the fire. “And Octavia and Raven.” Her expression crumples and this time when she turns to face her, there is nothing Lexa can do to stop her. “Did you know Raven is going south? For her leg?”

“No,” She frowns, “I’m sorry, I know she’s your friend.”

“I’ll miss her,” Clarke admits, and Lexa feels abruptly uncertain. She is sure Clarke wouldn’t admit such things sober and to hear such confessions from her feels like a deception.

Still, she asks. “I’m sorry for that, I hope you’re not lonely.”

“I’m not,” Clarke assure her, letting out a sigh and relaxing back into her grip, and Lexa’s arms wind around her more certainly, holding her as she tips her head back against her shoulder, and her blue eyes flicker over her. When she speaks again, her voice is soft and quiet. “You can admit it, you know.”

“Admit what?” Lexa’s gaze is drawn inescapably down to hers, like the sirens in Lannisport, she feels as if she would drown just to hear her voice again.

“That you wanted to dance with me at the festival,” Clarke gives her a slight smile, tinged with the
edge of sadness, and pushes herself away, standing on unsteady feet while Lexa swallows down the knot in her throat.

Clarke fumbles with the buttons and laces that hold her dress together, and Lexa pushes herself from the bed. The night is terribly quiet and the room feels suddenly warm and dim when she places her hands over Clarke’s and says, softly.

“Let me help.”

Clarke’s eyes meet hers, wide and soft and ever so tender, and the world feels far away and unreal when she nods and lets her hands slowly drop away from her dress. Carefully, Lexa unclips the girdle that sits about her hips and places it gently to one side. Her hands find the lacing at the back of her dress, pulled tight to reveal the figure created by her corset beneath it, and she feels Clarke pulls in a breath when she carefully begins unlacing it. It is a delicate and difficult task, and for a time her attention is fixed on the laces, until she suddenly realises that the soft white cloth she is revealing beneath is Clarke’s shift and corset. Her fingers hesitate, and she is glad that Clarke is facing away from her so that she can’t see the blush fighting its way across her cheeks. Once the laces are loose enough, Clarke shrugs away her dress and lets it pool at her feet, and Lexa bites at her lip at the sight of her clad only in her shift and corset. Her heart is thundering in her chest, but she fears that if she hesitates too long Clarke will turn and see her state of disarray, so she begins to unlace the corset as well, watching as the fabric and boning give way to the curves of Clarke’s body. The gods take some pity on her, and when she has loosened most of the laces Clarke steps away from her hands and pulls the rest of the lacing away herself.

When she begins to push the corset down her body, Lexa balks, coming to her senses enough to turn her back. She stares at the tapestry on the far wall so intently that she fears she will burn a hole in it, leaving a searing patch between the embroidered grains and sunbeams. So focused is she, that the tap to her shoulder draws her back to herself.

Clarke is wrapped mercifully in a thick robe, periwinkle blue and fur lined, and she is smiling softly in the moonlight, still swaying a little. Lexa leads her back to the bed with a gentle hand on her shoulder, and helps her to sit and Clarke gives her a smile that seems more tired than anything else.

“Thank you, your majesty,” She shakes her head to herself, “I fear I shall regret this in the morning.”

“Don’t,” Lexa impeaches her, quietly and passionately, “I enjoy our time together… however we may spend it.”

Clarke gives her another smile, the sort that Lexa will collect and remember when she lies in her bed tonight, staring at the canopy. “Please don’t be upset with Octavia… for taking me to the tavern. It was my fault, I insisted.”

“I’m not upset,” Lexa promises, “Snow owes me her life, I know she would never betray me.”

“And putting me in danger would be a betrayal?” She cocks her head to the side, curious and open and Lexa feels a swell of tenderness when she answers.

“The greatest betrayal.” She gives a short bow, “Goodnight, my lady.”

“Goodnight, your majesty.”

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The festivities for Aden’s birthday are smaller than the festival of the first bloom, but they still draw in lords and ladies from throughout the north. Noticeably absent are the lords Karstark and Bolton,
who had written of family illness or fief troubles which kept them, regrettably, away, but other than
that the flags of the major houses of the north are slung across the walls of the Great Hall. Lexa
watches on, a small smile lingering on her face as the lords approach throughout their feast and gift
Aden with tomes that she is sure he will not read, great crystal glasses and exotic fruits, and enough
swords and bows and lances to fill the entire armoury. Though she has said nothing, rumours have
spread of what she intends to do this night and the lords of the north are eager to earn the favour of
their future king.

From her side, Anya leans over and says, lowly in her ear, “He is sure to be the most spoilt boy in
the north.”

Lexa lets out a soft laugh as Aden stares, wide eyed and uncertain, as Lord Whitehall runs a finger
through the fletching on an arrow to show off the colours. His weapon of choice has never been the
bow.

“As befits a prince,” She answers, quietly, and when the lord finally gives a low bow and backs
away, Aden glances back at her and asks.

“Are there many more?”

“Are you tiring of your gifts?” She teases, but when his expression only becomes more pained, she
laughs and shakes her head. “Not many more I should think.”

He lets out a sigh of relief, and turns back to the knight waiting for him, a wan smile pasted upon his
face as the knight explains the dusty book he’s sliding onto the table. Lexa watches as he nods and
asks a few vaguely interesting sounding questions, but movement from behind him catches her eye.
Lady Clarke is getting to her feet, from her place at a table just below the high table. Faith trots at her
heels, and she casts a striking figure, with her hair pulled back from her face in delicate, soft northern
braids, and a pale blue gown with long sleeves and delicate, jewelled embroidery around the collar.
Around her hips sits another girdle, delicate silver roses intertwined, with sapphires inlaid at their
centre.

Aden has also caught sight of the Tyrell girl, his eyes dart to her, distracted, as she gestures for
someone to come forward and is handed something carefully, cradled in a linen cloth. The knight
must notice his future king’s distraction, because he glances back, and his eyes widen. How could
they not, Lexa thinks quietly, with Lady Clarke so beautiful behind him.

“Excuse me for interrupting,” Clarke gives him a pretty southern smile that sends the man bowing
and scraping, gesturing her onwards. “But my gift for the prince will not wait.”

Aden is half standing already, his lips pulling into a smile, and Lexa finds herself leaning forward,
curious, to see what Clarke has brought.

Carefully, Clarke steps closer and pulls away the cloth hiding the squirming pup in her arms. Lexa
hears Aden’s sharp intake of breath at the sight, and watches as he leans across the table. The beast is
young, with eyes barely opened, and white with a speckle of brown running through its coat, and it
wriggles in Clarke’s grasp.

“She’s from your own kennels,” Clarke explains, as Aden’s hands reach out automatically to take the
puppy into his arms. “Purebred, a good hunting dog, but her mother rejected her. I thought you could
give her the love she was looking for.”

“She’s perfect,” Aden runs a finger tenderly down her nose and over her floppy ears, only laughing
when the pup nips at him. “Absolutely perfect.”
“I think she likes you too,” Clarke smiles when the dog licks at Aden’s fingers eagerly, and Aden readily dips his fingers into the thin gravy on his plate and lets her lick it off him.

“Thank you, Lady Clarke, so much,” Aden’s eyes shine when he looks at her, and Lexa knows in that moment that the dog will walk at Aden’s side for all of her years, and no gold or swords could compare to this gift.

“A young prince should have a loyal companion,” She says, at last, and meets Clarke’s eyes to give her a warm smile. “It’s a fine gift, my lady.”

“Thank you, your majesty,” Clarke returns her smile threefold and drops a slight curtsey.

Standing, Lexa glances over at where Aden is cradling his new dog in his arms, and gestures for one of the serving boys to come collect it. When the prince reluctantly hands it over, Lexa assures him.

“She won’t go far.”

At his nod, they step away from the table, and circle it to stand in front of it. Lady Clarke edges back to give them some room, joining the watching crowds, and Lexa nods at Anya to bring her forward Aden’s cloak. Clearing her throat, she calls above the noise.

“Lords and ladies,” The crowded room quietens, people hush one another until their eyes are turned to Lexa and Aden, and Lexa gives them a polite smile, “People of the north, thank you for joining us. Tonight we honour Prince Aden, my little brother,” She glances at him and finds Aden grinning, “He has proven himself time and time again to be a fine man, a skilled soldier and a wise leader.”

Aden’s shoulders straighten, his chin lifting as he surveys the room. “And it is for this reason, and because he has always been my brother, that I would like to gift him with this.”

Anya steps forward and she takes the folded cloak from her hands, opening it up to swing it around Aden’s shoulders and clip it beneath his chin. The silver dire wolf is stark and shining for anyone to see, and she hears a ripple of murmurs pass through the crowd. Ignoring them, she reaches back for the second thing Anya holds, a scroll with her seal and signature at the bottom, and passes it to Aden, whose fingers are steady when he takes it into his hand.

“By royal decree, Aden Snow shall henceforth be known as Prince Aden Stark, the Prince of the North. He is entitled to take on the Stark name and lands, should he choose to.” Here she pauses for a moment. Her eyes flicker across the waiting audience, and she pulls in a breath, steeling herself before she continues, with immense certainty. “Let it also be known that Prince Aden Stark is my chosen successor and the heir to the throne of the north.”

Another, louder murmur passes through the crowd, and Lexa speaks above it.

“This is my will and it shall be carried out, before the old gods and the new. Long live Prince Aden!”

It is Anya and those closest to her that take up the call first, but it is soon caught by the watching masses, and Lexa exchanges a small smile with her brother as her people cheer for him. He is slightly flushed, from the warmth of the room and the attention and pleasure of her proclamation, but a charming smile passes over his face as he raises his hand to acknowledge them. Lexa is sure that he will be a wonderful king.

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Perhaps the wine tonight is stronger than it usually is. Lexa knows that they had opened several vintages from Highgarden and Sunspear to celebrate the evening, do they make their wine so much stronger in the south? She learnt how to hold her ale at a young age, drinking with the soldiers and
the lords of the north meant that she had to keep her head, but this wine is flowing straight to her
head and she finds that she can’t tear her eyes away from the sight in front of her. Aden holds Clarke
in his arms, his face wide with a smile as they dance. He twists her gracefully, and when she spins
her skirt swirls around her legs and the candlelight catches in her hair, making the strands glow.

Lexa stands, suddenly, and if she’s a little unsteady on her feet it’s only Anya that notices, her
captain sending her a disapproving look. She ignores her, moving around the table to hover at the
edge of the space in the middle of the great hall, where the dancers swing each other around. Several
lords and ladies pass her and offer a bow and a smile, and though she returns it, her eyes are fixed
only to one pair. Lady Clarke is so striking in this moment, so utterly beautiful, that Lexa can’t find it
in herself to care that most of the north is watching as she crosses to put a hand on Aden’s shoulder,
stilling them both. Her brother twists to look at her curiously, but she keeps her gaze fixed on the soft
blue eyes that watch her intently.

“Do you mind?” She asks, and her voice doesn’t sound like her own, low and throaty.

Aden steps back, he says something but Lexa barely hears him, and Clarke’s smile is slight and
teasing when she takes her gently into her arms. Her fingers feel momentarily stiff and uncooperative
as she winds them around Clarke’s waist, until she feels Clarke’s hands circle her neck, and feels
their bodies press closely together. Her breath catches and her eyes find Clarke’s again, widening
when she realises that a pretty pink blush is feathering across the southern girl’s face. For a moment,
they only hold one another, and Clarke murmurs.

“I knew you wanted to dance with me.”

“I don’t do it very often,” Her confession trips, unbidden, from her tongue and Clarke’s smile
softens.

“I remember,” Her hands tighten around Lexa’s neck, a brief, comforting squeeze, before one drops
to her shoulder and the other clasps her hand, raising it into the proper position. “Don’t worry, I can
teach you.”

At Clarke’s gentle guidance, Lexa finds that her feet fall into the patterns trained into her at a young
age with surprising ease. There is something about the careful push and pull of their bodies that
brings back the memory of twirling around the room with her father, laughing wildly as he lifted her
high in the air. A smile steals across her face at the thought and when Clarke returns it, she feels a
flutter of joy through her stomach. Clarke twirls them elegantly around the floor, guiding them
effortlessly. Clarke is used to this, she is sure, although the thought of Clarke leading the elegant men
and women of the south around the grand half of Kingslanding or Highgarden sends a shiver of
something close to envy through her. Still, when her eyes meet her partner’s again, she sees no sign
of a façade, instead her gaze is soft with joy.

They twist again, around another pair of dancers, and the motions sends Clarke closer into her arms.
Lexa’s grip tightens around her waist and for a moment they are breathless, staring at one another,
before Clarke slips them back into motion with a turn of her foot. There is something intensely
effortless and easy about this, holding Clarke so close feels like being reunited with a part of herself
that she never knew was missing, and dancing with her gives Lexa more joy than she knew she
could feel. They are so close that she can smell the waft of sweet, lavender scent from the oils Clarke
has rubbed into her wrists and neck. Her companions golden hair flies out in soft, heavy curls, and
the sapphires pinned into her curls make her eyes sparkle like a summer day. Clarke is like the
summer, sweet smelling like the flowers that bloom in the Winterfell courtyard, and filled with the
promise of better things to come.

The eyes of those watching feel far away now, as Clarke’s skirt swirls against hers and her fingers
tighten. A breath of laughter escapes her when Lexa twirls them and for one awful, heady moment, Lexa knows that she would go to war again for that laugh. When they come together again, Clarke’s hand presses against her shoulder, clutching at the fur at the collar of her dress to pull them closer together. The song finally draws to a close and they come to a reluctant halt, their eyes fixed together. She can’t stand to break this moment, the bubble of sunlight that Clarke has cast them both in, but with the music briefly paused she is aware once again of the eyes upon her and the murmurs that are passing through the watching lords and ladies. It crawls across her skin like ice, goosebumps rising, and she slowly pulls herself from Clarke’s grasp.

The flash of hurt and disappointment through the lady’s eyes is what pulls her back to Clarke’s side, to murmur.

“I think I need some air.”

Clarke’s lips- so soft, so pink- open in a slight o of surprise, and she nods. “The godswood should be… quiet enough for you, your majesty.”

“The godswood,” Lexa agrees, and squeezes her hand gently once more, before stepping away, hoping intently that Clarke understands her.

Escaping the bustle of the great hall isn’t difficult, but waiting in the godswood is. For some time she paces across the new grass beneath the heart tree, her heart thrumming in her chest, but the eyes of the trees feel as if they are upon her, judging her, and eventually she simply sinks onto the stone bench and forces her hands to still in her lap. Slowly, she draws in a breath of the cold air, letting the iciness settle within her lungs and bring her down to earth again. The night is dark here, with nothing but the lantern she carries and the moon shining brightly above. A shallow pond sits before her, so still that the light of the moon stares back at her, a perfect replica, and she allows her eyes to travel over it. The water is inky and the trees above show their usual plumage of blood red leaves. The old gods linger here, making their homes in the roots and the branches. When she was a child she used to think that if she sat as still and as quiet as she could, she would spot them, but even now, sitting as still as if she were made from stone, there is nothing but the wind against the battlements and her own breath in the cold air.

The sound of feet breaks the silence, and fear forces her eyes to stay on the pond. A leaf falls from the tree above, and breaks the surface of the water, sending ripples which fracture the reflection of the moon and the approaching candlelight. She is fixated, watching the golden glow move closer in the water’s reflection, until she feels a warm presence beside her, and Clarke’s face appears, looking down at the pond beside her.

For a moment they are silent, watching the ripples fade away until the pond is once again still, and then Clarke speaks, quietly.

“I was worried you wanted to be alone.”

“I didn’t,” Lexa assures her, after a measured breath, and her voice barely shakes.

“It’s peaceful here,” Clarke observes, her eyes flickering away to take in the dark night sky and the still leaves. “And beautiful.”

“Do you remember when I found you here?” She asks, finally lifting her eyes to meet Clarke’s own, her gaze finding her golden and glowing in the candlelight.

“Yes,” Clarke’s smile is soft, like a secret that Lexa feels blessed to know. “It was the first time we ever really… spoke.”
“I’m glad that I found you,” Her hand slips around Clarke’s, and Clarke’s fingers intertwine with hers and squeeze gently.

“So am I. You taught me that I could find some happiness here.”

She feels almost too afraid to ask, “And have you?”

Clarke’s eyes glow and she shakes her head, as if in disbelief, “More than you could ever know.”

When she leans forward, it feels both inevitable and impossible. A hand cradles her face, a thumb so soft it feels like satin drawing a circle upon her skin, and Clarke leans in, so close that Lexa can see the flush upon her cheeks and the tentative hope in her eyes. For a moment they are still and silent, as Clarke hesitates, her lips only inches away. Lexa knows that despite everything, this will be the most dangerous thing she has ever done and yet, as if she is being drawn by fate, she allows herself to lean forwards and catch Clarke’s lips with her own. She feels Clarke gasp softly against her, and for a moment she wonders- but then Clarke’s lips move against her own, and she presses forward, her hands curling at Lexa’s waist. Their noses brush together, soft and certain and Lexa feels a chill run through her.

Every lesson she has learnt flies away from her when she has Clarke of House Tyrell in her arms, and it is utterly terrifying.

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Chapter End Notes

ahhhh I hope that lived up to expectations! things are gonna get juicy now so let me know what you think will happen next either down below or over on tumblr @onemilliongoldstars. thank you so much for reading and commenting! <3
Chapter Notes

sorry for the wait guys! I've been in a bit of a rough patch, but I'm trying to pull myself back on track and getting back to writing is one of the first steps! buckle in, because we're about to get to our Plot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Book Two: Chapter 1

The day after the prince’s name day feast dawns cold and bright. Clarke lies awake in her bed, the covers pulled tight up to her chin, and watches the thin morning light slip through the cracks in her shutters, sending slants of brightness into the room. It cuts through the tapestry above her, gold and blue, with some of the richest embroidery Clarke has ever seen, and her eyes follow its path. She lies very still, upon her back, intensely aware of every movement of her body: the rise and fall of her chest as she breathes slowly, the twitch of her fingers against the covers, the flutter of her eyelashes when she blinks. The night before still lingers, if she shuts her eyes she can still feel Lexa’s fingers against her waist, and cupping her cheek. She’s been kissed so many times before, too many to count if she really admits it, but the thought of Lexa’s lips sits around her like a morning dew, soft and heavy with promise. She knows she will never again be able to walk into the godswood without thinking of their bodies pressed close, secrets and tender words whispered in the quiet of the night, fingers brushing, lips careening together as if they couldn’t stand to be apart. Now that she knows the taste of Lexa’s lips, the lips of the queen in the north, she knows she will not rest properly until she can taste them again.

The thought brings a smile to her lips and a flutter of joy to her chest, and she turns, burying her face in the pillows and wrapping her hands around her body, squeezing tightly in hopes that she can imprint this feeling into her bones and never lose it. She is loose and free with possibility, drunk on a future with Lexa at her side, and the knock on her door startles her upwards.

“Enter,” Her voice is hoarse, she clears her throat and pushes herself up in the bed, a smile still playing on her lips as her guard for the night shows in a messenger.

“M’lady,” The guard offers her a slight bow, glancing at the messenger suspiciously. “This lad says ‘e ’as a message for yer that can’t wait.”

“Really?” Clarke frowns, looking at the boy in surprise, “It’s barely sunrise.”

The boy steps closer and a slant of light from the window hits him. Clarke’s eyes widen when she recognises him as one of the bird boys, responsible for the ravens at Winterfell.

“Dario,” She slides from the bed, ignoring the way that the two men flush and fumble, and grabs the heavy robe cast carelessly over futon at its base to pull over her nightclothes. Pulling it closed, she moves towards them, looking at the boy closely. Something in his look sends a shiver running through her, a warning, like the sudden fluttering of a murder of crows at the sign of otherwise unseen danger.
Dario offers her a low bow, “My lady, apologies for waking you, but a raven came in the night.”

“It has come all the way from Highgarden?” Clarke takes the scroll he holds out, and it feels as if it will burn her hands.

Dario hesitates, “From Kings Landing, my lady.”

“Kings Landing?” Clarke’s eyes widen, and she turns the scroll in her hands to examine the seal. The sight of it makes her heart pound: a rose in green wax, the seal of her father, from whom she has heard nothing since her banishment to the north. Her fingers shake as she breaks it open, and the parchment rolls out to reveal the slanted, agitated handwriting of her mother.

As she reads, the world seems to drop away around her. The men before her become distant spectres, their voices unheard, and she doesn’t realise that her knees are weak until Dario appears at her side, his arms tucking around her to guide her gently back to the bed. Her eyes scan the same words over and over, hoping with a desperate ache that the ink will shift and change them. Her throat is dry, her stomach roiling, and her fingers grip the parchment so fiercely that it almost rips beneath her grip. She isn’t sure how long she sits there before Octavia appears at her side, dressed in old hose and a hastily fastened jerkin, her eyes wide with concern. She crouches, and hands on her knees finally draw Clarke’s eyes away from the parchment. Octavia is speaking, but Clarke can hear nothing but a low buzz in her ears.

“I have to see the queen,” She cuts through Octavia’s words, her own voice distant, “I must meet with her, immediately.”

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Standing in the great hall, she feels very different to the girl who danced and drank and laughed here only the night before. Her hair falls in a limp braid down her back, and her dress is simple and plain. Her fingers still tremble where they hold the scroll in front of her, but when she looks up to see the Queen of the North seated upon her throne of iron and wood, her advisors in formation behind her, she clenches her jaw and forces her voice to remain steady.

“Lady Clarke of House Tyrell,” Though Lexa sounds calm and even, Clarke can see the flicker of uncertainty running through her eyes. “Why did you request an official audience?”

She tries to stand tall, tries to remind herself that she is a Tyrell, the blood of her ancestors flows through her veins just as the blood of the north flows through Lexa’s, but even the thought of her home and her family make her heart constrict.

“Your majesty, I have received word from Kings Landing that my father is grievously ill.” Her fingers run over the scroll, opening it, though she has read it so many times she fears she will never forget those words. “My mother writes that his ailment befell him very quickly, she fears he will not—” Here, her words break, and she swallows heavily, biting at her lip to stop her tears from falling. Regardless, her voice shakes when she continues. “Please, let me go to him. Let me be by his side if he dies.”

“Lord Tyrell,” Lexa’s eyes are wide, boring into her with astonishment and grief, “I’m very sorry to hear this, my lady.”

A spark of hope flickers in Clarke’s soul. “I would return when he… whatever the outcome may be, I would return.”

“I’m sure you would,” Lexa’s eyes flicker back, to her advisors, and her gaze hardens, like river
water turning to ice. “But it isn’t possible.”

Her composure cracks. “Please, Lexa please you have to let me.” She is trembling, her fingers still grasping the shred of parchment, knuckles white.

“You know I cannot,” Lexa’s jaw is tense, her eyes dark and suddenly Clarke sees her how the rest of her people do: the Queen of the North, with ice in her veins, her throne rising high behind her and her crown sparkling on her head, a queen forged of blood and strength and fear. “The terms of our agreement were that you would stay here until further negotiations could be made.”

“He’s my father,” She takes a staggering step forward, and on the dias Lord Mormont’s hand settles on the pommel of his sword. “You know what it is to lose a father!” She sees Aden’s expression twist with pain at the words.

“I do,” There is a trembling edge to Lexa’s voice, and she can’t decide if it is anger or pity. “And I’m so terribly sorry for your loss.”

“He isn’t dead yet!” Her voice ricochets up, furiously. “But he could be dying while we sit here debating this.”

Lexa’s jaw tenses, her gaze icy once again. “There is no debate, this is out of my hands Clarke.” She stands, waving a hand to a waiting handmaiden, “Please look after Lady Clarke, and ensure that she doesn’t do anything foolish in her grief.” Her eyes flicker to Clarke again and the Tyrell girl spots a crack of regret and sadness, shining through like the morning light through her shutters. “I am really awfully sorry, Clarke.”

“Your majesty, please!” Her knees crack hard against the stone slabbed floor, a sharp pain running through them and she can no longer bite back the tears edging her throat. “I beg of you! I plead for your mercy—”

“Clarke, no!” Lexa has crossed the space between them so rapidly that Clarke is startled by the sight of her shoes before her. “Please,” Lexa’s hands touch at her hair and then she appears at eye level, abruptly kneeling beside her. A gasp runs through her attendants and Lord Mormont lumbers forwards.

“Your majesty!”

Lexa waves him away impatiently, her hands cradling Clarke’s face close and lifting it. “You never have to prostrate yourself like this,” though her touch is gentle her words are firm. “Do you understand? I will never ask this of you. I will never be waiting for you to beg.”

“You have to let me go,” Her fingers brush against Lexa’s, clinging tightly. “Please, Lexa.”

Lexa looks abruptly young and turns to peer back at her advisors helplessly.

“You have to let me go,” Maester Titus steps forwards, his face frosty. “Though I never approved of the decision to accept Lady Clarke as a peace offering, I must advise against now allowing her to leave. The Lady is ours to keep, allowing her to go would be a sign of weakness.”

“But Lord Tyrell was one of our most loyal allies in the south, the most committed to peace between the north and south,” Anya argues vehemently, “If he dies Lady Clarke will be required to continue the Tyrell line, keeping her here will be seen as an act of war.”

The words pull a flinch from Clarke, and Lexa’s fingers tighten around hers, comforting, before she pulls herself to her feet, helping Clarke up with her.
“Surely Lady Clarke’s presence in Winterfell was supposed to show unity and good will,” Aden inputs, and when Clarke’s wet eyes swing to him, she finds that he’s edged closer, hesitating on the steps of the dias. “Keeping her here would completely undermine that.”

“The northern lords would see it as a sign of weakness to let her leave,” Titus insists, and Lexa shakes her head, holding up a hand. The argument halts immediately as everyone quiets. Lexa’s eyes swing to Clarke’s, and they are as deep and green as the forests of the north, searching and earnest.

“You say you will return, Lady Clarke?” Though it is cool and detached, there is something to the slight tremble of her voice and the twitch of her lips which gives away her fear. Clarke feels her throat tighten and her eyes do not leave Lexa’s when she answers, soft and certain.

“Always. If it were not my father…”

“Hush,” Lexa quietens her gently, her thumb rubbing a tender circle over the palm of her hand. “You don’t need to explain, not to me.” Her eyes shut for a second, as if steeling herself, and when they open again Clarke can see a new tenacity to them, and a courage which is uniquely Lexa. “You may go, Lady Clarke. See to your father, be by his side.”

“Thank you,” The words escape her on a breath and she doesn’t care about the watching eyes when she throws her arms around Lexa’s neck and pulls her close, burying her nose in the crook of her neck and pulling in her pinewood scent. Lexa’s arms wind around her waist firmly and Clarke knows that Lexa too is committing this to memory, despite her promises.

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Her quill scratches against the parchment comfortingly, the only sound in her otherwise quiet solar, and with her eyes trained on the words before her, Lexa is able to ignore the aching dread that has settled like an iron pit in her stomach. The letter she writes will be passed into Clarke’s hands, to be delivered by her only to King Thelonious. Another letter, already sealed, sits at her side, wishing Lady Tyrell her best and sending prayers for her husband’s health. The letter to Thelonious Baratheon asks the southern king how he intends to proceed, and- in the politest language possible-informs him that the lords of both the north and the south will not wait long with this sort of civil unrest. Talk of riots in the capital have already reached her in Winterfell, but she dare not speak this frankly to her southern counterpart without the knowledge that the letter will be read by no other.

A knock to her door gives her pause, though she doesn’t look up from her work when she calls out. “Enter.”

Any steps into the room, lingering in the doorway to watch her with a stern, unreadable expression. “Lady Clarke is asking to see you.”

Lexa’s quill falters, her ink smudging, but her voice remains even and calm when she answers. “I am waiting for Octavia Snow to join me, unfortunately. Please tell Lady Clarke to focus on her preparations for a speedy departure, I will be sure to see her on her way.”

There is a long silence, and when Lexa finally deigns to look up from her letter, there is a crack of concern in Anya’s eyes. “Lexa,” She is gentle and Lexa knows that this is her cousin speaking, not her Queensguard. “I know that you have a… fondness for the southern girl. Why not just see her?”

“I am busy,” Her retort is sharp and irritable, and she pulls in a long breath to steady herself before she continues, “And Lady Clarke must focus on leaving. I would only… distract her.”
“Would you not prefer to see her in private before-”

“Anya.” Her cousin presses her lips together, and Lexa swallows. She glances away, unable to meet her eyes. “Trust me, it is better for us both that I do not.”

Another knock on the door provides a blessed distraction, and when the guard sees in Octavia Snow, she lets out a sigh of relief. Snow’s eyes are wide, flickering around the solar in amazement, lingering on the wolves curled in the corner and the luxurious tapestries upon the walls. When Lexa stands, she snaps to attention, offering a low bow.

“You wanted to see me, your majesty?” Her voice lilts up curiously.

“Yes, Snow.” Lexa steps around the desk, gesturing to Anya. “If you’ll excuse us, Lady Anya.”

Her cousin’s lips tighten, her brows furrowing, but she shows no other signs of disapproval in front of the younger soldier. Anya nods, pulling the door to the solar firmly shut behind her and leaving only Lexa and Octavia in a room together. It is perhaps the first time they have been alone together since that fateful day so many years ago, and when Lexa looks upon the girl she can feel her years like a heavy weight around her shoulders. She takes a seat in one of the arm chairs, gesturing that Octavia should do the same, and after a few moments of astonished hesitation, Snow follows her lead. She perches inelegantly on the edge of the chair, fingers grasped in her lap and Lexa takes a moment to consider her words before she speaks.

“You have done an admirable job in the past few months, Snow.”

Octavia flushes darkly under the praise, unable to stop the gleam in her eyes. “Thank you, your majesty.”

“I know that Lady Clarke has not always been… the easiest of charges.” She allows herself a small, amused smile, and Octavia relaxes a little at the sight of it. “But your loyalty towards her has been unprecedented.”

“Thank you,” Octavia says again, and then, with a small breath of courage. “Lady Clarke is a good person. We didn’t… start off too well, but now she’s… she’s…”

“Your friend,” Lexa provides, offering a soft smile when the soldier nods. “That is good to hear. Do you know why I chose you for this role, Octavia?”

The use of her first name seems to jolt the soldier, whose eyes widen. She shakes her head, and Lexa explains.

“It is not because you are the best of my soldiers, or the most disciplined, though you are very good. It is because you are the most loyal.”

“Your majesty?”

“I do not claim to know all of my soldiers, but I know you Octavia.” Lexa gives her a slight, sad smile. “One could say we grew up together, in a way. We have known each other most of our lives.”

“We have, your majesty, and I’m grateful for all of the opportunities.” Octavia begins, earnestly, but Lexa waves away her thanks.

“I have to ask you for something, Snow,” She watches the soldier seriously, “Something I really have no right to ask for.”
“I’ll do anything for you, your majesty.” Snow’s answer is earnest and eager, and Lexa’s eyes soften a little.

“I would ask you to go with Lady Clarke to Kings Landing.” The soldier’s eyes widen, her lips parting in surprise, and Lexa continues, steadily. “I know this is a lot to ask of you, but I fear for Lady Clarke’s safety and I have an important letter for her to give to King Thelonious. I trust no other but you with her safety.”

“You… you want me to go south. I haven’t been south since…”

“I know, this is a lot to ask of you.” Lexa watches her closely, the indecision warring across her face. “But I would only ask that you deliver her into her mother’s care. When you return, I would see to it that Ser Indra begin training you to become a member of my Queensguard.”

It isn’t fair, she knows, to bribe Octavia so blatantly, but at the mention of the Queensguard Octavia draws in a sharp breath, delight spreading across her face.

“Your Queensguard, your majesty?”

“It will prove to me that you are ready.” Lexa tells her, seriously and Octavia nods.

“Then yes, of course your majesty. I’ll see Lady Clarke safely to her mother.”

“Thank you, Snow,” Together, they stand, and Octavia bows again, meeting her eyes and speaking sincerely.

“I won’t fail you, your majesty.”

Lexa nods, watching the girl leave from her place by the fire, and praying to every god she knows that she will not.

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The morning flies by like wind on a raven’s wing, and Clarke is grateful for it. The activity distracts, keeps her mind occupied so that it may not linger too long on anything but trunks and horses and ships. The queen has kindly offered fresh horses to get them to White Harbour, where they will board a royal ship and sail to Kings Landing. The journey should take no more than five days, if the wind is kind, but even the thought of those days passing makes her feel sick with worry and she wonders how she will fair, trapped in a rocking cabin with only her worries for company. Lexa has also kindly offered her Octavia’s service, and though she tried to refuse, Octavia had insisted that she accompany her so fervently that she had acquiesced. Her mind is too full, and her heart too fragile to fight such a battle now.

Stepping out of her rooms, she glances back once more from the doorway. She is not sad to see the last of them; Reya’s ghost still lingers in the shadows and she wonders distantly whether she will ask Lexa for new rooms upon her return. Faith presses close to her side, a warm, comforting presence, and Clarke runs a hand over her head, scratching behind her ears in the way that makes the direwolf rumble pleasantly. Ser Lincoln waits at the top of the stairs to accompany her, and she takes his offered arm with a small smile. These stairs had seemed so daunting to her when she first arrived in Winterfell, but now she knows she could run them with her eyes closed. When they arrive in the courtyard, Ser Lincoln pats at her arm and says, gently.

“I will be sad to see you go, my lady.”

Clarke’s attention flickers to him, smiling weakly. “I will miss you, Ser Lincoln.” Her gaze flickers to
the waiting carriage. “As will Octavia, I’m sure.”

“The queen is wise to choose her to go with you, she will protect you.” Despite his words, his own eyes find the soldier checking her packs and saddle, and there is a wistfulness to him.

“You should speak with her,” Clarke advises, “I’m sure hearing that from you would give her great comfort.”

“You think so?” Ser Lincoln’s gaze darts back to her, open and earnest and she nods, watching him go with a slight smile on her lips.

“Lady Clarke,” The voice pulls her attention around and she sees Prince Aden descending the last few steps and striding towards her, his pup in his arms.

“Your highness,” She peers into his arms, her smile brightening at the sight of the dozing puppy. “Have you thought of a name for her yet?”

Aden flushes a little, his cheeks colouring, but he raises his chin and straightens her shoulders when he answers, graciously. “Rose, for the woman who gave her to me.”

It is the first true smile she has given all day, pleasure bubbling in her chest and she steps closer, running her hand down the sleeping puppy’s velvet nose. “A fine name.”

“When you return she will be much bigger,” Aden’s eyes are pulled with a hopeful uncertainty, and when he continues, hesitantly, she is reminded that he is still a boy. “You will return, won’t you?”

“I hope so,” Her voice wavers, just a little, but she gives a false smile. “If only to see how well you train her. I expect her to be out of your arms and well behaved by the time I come back.”

“We’ll train every day,” Aden promises her, seriously and Clarke nods. “I’m sorry for your father, I hope he gets well.”

Tears well in her throat, and she nods her agreement, swallowing painfully. “As do I.”

She holds out her hand for a formal farewell, but Aden ignores it, opening his arms for a gentle hug, careful of the pup between them. He is small and wiry beneath her hands, a little shorter than her still, and her heart aches to think of him growing while she is away, becoming more of a man than a boy. Still, his tender heart and compassion is something she knows he will never lose and when she steps out of his arms, it is with a sincere soul that she says.

“Thank you, Aden, you were the first person to make me feel welcome here.”

His lip trembles, and she watches his throat bob as he nods. “You’ll always be welcome here.”

A call from behind her draws her away, and she turns to see her soldiers mounted, squires and knights settling their restless horses. Her heart drops to know that it is time to leave, and she glances around the courtyard. Raven, at least, has already left for the south, which means she has one less goodbye to sit through. She finds Lexa waiting a few steps away, three wolves at her side, Lady Anya and Measter Titus a few steps away. The queen gives her a small smile, and Clarke steps away from Aden to approach her, her heart thundering in her chest.

“Your majesty,” She dips a small curtsey, for the sake of the watching attendants, and takes Lexa’s hand when it is held out to her. Neither of them wear gloves, and the feel of warm, calloused fingers beneath her own makes her tremble with indecision. “Thank you for allowing me to go.”
“See to your father, my lady.” The words are so soft, and her tongue wraps around the title just so
that Clarke wonders whether Lexa truly think of her as her lady. Lexa seems to struggle over her
words for a moment. “You will be welcomed back here, most gladly.” She settles on, at last, and her
eyes say what her words cannot, soft and tender and sad.

“My return will be a happy day for me, also.” Clarke promises, and her fingers squeeze Lexa’s so
tightly she fears she will never let go. Her eyes flicker back to Lady Anya and Maester Titus, both
watching their exchange with faces tight with displeasure. “Lady Anya, Maester, thank you for
welcoming me.”

Maester Titus only bows his head, but Anya says, roughly. “Travel safe, Lady Clarke.”

“I’ll see you to your carriage,” Lexa tells her, quietly and Clarke is deeply, fervently glad not to have
to let go of her hand yet.

The walk to her carriage seems to take an age, and yet also just a moment. When a footman goes to
open the door, Lexa waves him away, pulling it open herself for Clarke to climb inside. There,
sheltered by the open door and the carriage from the prying eyes of advisors and attendants, Lexa’s
fingers tighten and when her gaze finds Clarke’s, her eyes glitter with unshed tears.

“Thank you, for everything,” Her voice wavers when she speaks, and Lexa shakes her head
passionately.

“Thank you, I wish I could… explain how much I have enjoyed your time here.”

“You don’t have to,” Clarke assures her, on a breath. “I wish I didn’t have to go… I wish I could
stay here with you, if only for one more night.”

“Your father,” Lexa reminds her gently, and runs the pad of her thumb over her knuckles. “You
must go to him.”

“When he is well I will return.” Clarke swears, her chest stuttering with uneven breaths.

“Then I await that day,” Lexa takes their clasped hands and presses them against her heart, and
Clarke feels a tear escape her and trail down her cheek. “And every day I will pray for his health,
and your happiness.”

“I fear that I’m leaving my happiness here,” Her confession is soft, and shaking. “With my heart.”

Lexa’s eyes flicker shut for a moment, as if she is trying to compose herself, and she pulls in a breath
so deep that her shoulders rise and fall, before she opens her eyes again. “Write to me, when you
arrive in Kings Landing.”

“I will,” Slowly, she untangles their hands to rub at Faith’s ears. The direwolf is still eagerly at her
side, peering into the carriage with interest, and she kneels down to throw her arms around the wolf’s
neck, and press a kiss to her head. “I’m sorry Faith, but you have to stay here.” Faith whines
curiously when she stands, and in that moment Clarke knows that if she doesn’t leave now, she
never will.

Gathering her skirts about herself, she clambers into the carriage. Lexa leans in after her, her hand
against the carriage door, hesitating. “Be safe,” She says, quietly and Clarke nods. She drinks Lexa
in, the dark hair in intricate braids, the silver circlet that falls delicately across her forehead and
cloudy green eyes staring up at her as if she may never see her again. Lexa’s lips tighten and Clarke
sees her swallow. When she speaks again, her voice is no louder than a whisper, almost lost on the
northern winds. “Come back to me.”
As they ride down the Kingsroad, she can hear the wolves howling for hours.

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Chapter End Notes

ahh! i agonised over this chapter after seeing how much you guys enjoyed the last one, but in the end I decided we've had a fair amount of tame, happy stuff with these two and it's about time to get to some of the plot which has been looming in the background for thirteen chapters. plus this is a game of thrones au, so it was never going to be all sunshine and rainbows! let me know what you thought of this chapter and what you think will happen next down below or over on tumblr (@onemilliongoldstars)!

(ps. sorry if i didn’t reply to your comment from the last chapter, ao3 has been making it really difficult and i like to get to them all!)
Book Two: Chapter 2

White Harbour is a small, well ordered town to the south of Winterfell. They travel through the night, pausing only once at a tavern to exchange the horses for fresh ones, and allow the soldiers a chance to switch for those who have been resting in the wagon all day. Clarke stirs, but does not rouse properly until the morning light flickers in through the shutters on the carriage. She rubs at her eyes, red and sore from the tears shed into her furs, and swallows heavily. She is chilled to the bone, and the lantern has burned out, but she manages to pry open the shutters. She is greeted by the watery colours of the dawn sky, and the heavy smell of salt and fish in the air. White Harbour stretches out, well named with its white stone roads and small white houses. The roads are crowded with fishermen hauling in their morning catch and children selling muscles and prawns, but people part at the sight of the queen’s standard flying high over their caravan. When they finally stop, Clarke doesn’t wait for someone to open the carriage door for her and instead clambers out herself, breathing in the cold sea air and pushing back her hair to feel the morning sun on her face.

The harbour is bustling and busy, crowded with war ships and fishing boats and every vessel in between. Despite the fear and heartache that gnaws away at her, she feels a sense of wonder at seeing the ocean again. Winterfell is so far from the shore, the closest she has come to the sea in months is the reflecting pool in the godswood, but there is nothing quite like the smell of salt on the air and the caw of hungry sea birds above. She pulls in a breath, so deep it is as if she is trying to swallow the ocean whole, and only releases when the presence behind her clears her throat.

Octavia seems pale and ashy. “The ship will be ready the moment everything is loaded.”

Clarke nods, and she watches from her place on the docks, Octavia a few paces away but quiet, as the harbour bustles. Fishermen wake earlier than anyone she knows, will have been awake for hours before this to bring in the first fresh catch of the day, so the harbour is lively. Girls in skirts that brush their ankles and cropped capes sell cockles and mussels from their baskets, and boys run with heavy whitefish held in their hands. No one dares to approach her, with Octavia at her side, but after a few minutes a knight appears, bowing respectfully.

“My lady, the queen asked that this be given to you before you board the ship.”

“She watches as he opens the jewelled chest in his hands, revealing soft, plush velvet cradling a thin, wicked looking dagger. Clarke’s eyes widen, and she plucks up the piece of parchment that sits upon the dagger, peering at it curiously.

Be safe.

The words bring a thick lump to her throat and she has to glance away, for fear that her tears will once again begin to fall. Carefully, she exchanges the parchment for the dagger. It’s small and thin, light enough that she can wield it easily and conceal it beneath her cloak. The pommel is inlaid with gold and swirling roses, shining brightly in the watery sunlight, and Clarke places it gently within the chest again.

“Have it taken onto the ship with the rest of my personal effects.”

“Of course, my lady.” The knight glances back at the soldiers hauling chests and barrels onto the ship. “I think they’re almost ready to leave, if you’d like to board now.”
The ship is a towering vessel, not quite a war ship but rivalling it in size and grandeur. She knows very little about ships, but she can tell by the shine of the wood and the sails rising like clouds from the ocean, that this is a fine vessel. The Stark flag flies proudly from its masts and when she crosses the gangplank, the sailors wait in an orderly line to offer her bows of their heads. At their head stands the captain, dressed in a fine coat and broad rimmed hat, with a neatly trimmed black beard and locks tied at the nape of his neck to keep them away from the sea wind.

He bows in greeting to her, giving a sensible, serious smile as he introduces himself. “Good morning, m’lady. Captain Argas at your service.”

“Lady Clarke, of House Tyrell.” She glances about his sailors with a polite smile. “Thank you for assembling your sailors so quickly, Captain.”

He bows his head, acknowledging her gratitude, before gesturing for her. “I’ll show you to your cabin m’lady.” With Octavia at her back, she follows him through the maze of corridors to the small, opulent cabin waiting for her. She suspects it may be the captain’s cabin, with its wide windows and rich, masculine furnishings. “The journey should take five days, if the winds stay favourable.” He tells her, and eyes her uncertainly. “Are you- eh- good on the sea, m’lady?”

“Yes,” Her lips twitch at his relieved smile. “I’ve sailed several times before.”

“Excellent,” He bows his head again. “Let us know if there’s anything we can do to make your journey more comfortable.”

He leaves them alone, and Clarke turns once, examining the wide, soft bed and the desk pushed up in the corner. A few of her chests are stacked in the corner and Lexa’s gift sits upon the table, waiting for her. There are a few tapestries hung around the room, blue and green, and a dish of fruits upon the table. The boat shudders into motion beneath them both, a cacophony of shouting coming from above them and from the corner of her eye she sees Octavia grab the corner of the bed.

“Are you alright?” She turns to look at the soldier, and Octavia gives a weak nod.

“I don’t like the sea,” She confesses, as the boat heaves again, artfully slipping from the harbour. “It’s just... bad memories.”

Clarke frowns, curious, but before she can inquire any further, Octavia pushes herself away from the bed, and- looking distinctly green already- hastens to the door, mumbling her excuses. Slowly, she turns back to the table, eyeing the chest in which the dagger sits. The lid swings open easily and she runs her fingers carefully down the sharp blade, a shiver running through her.

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The captain’s estimations turn out to be right, and their journey takes them around five days of sailing day and night. They are fortunate; the wind favours them and the sea is calm, but still Octavia’s stomach is unsettled and her mood dark for the duration of their journey. She often finds the girl on the deck, staring up at the sky and struggling not to heave up what little she has managed to eat over the side of the ship. The journey finds Clarke acting more as nursemaid than lady, feeding Octavia water and thinly sliced bread in hopes of settling her stomach. Octavia doesn’t see fit to explain her dislike of sailing, and in her state, Clarke has no desire to push for an answer.

They are both relieved to see the towers of the Red Keep rise from the shore, towering upon the high cliffs of the Blackwater Rush, and strikingly red against the blue sky. Behind it, Kings Landing sprawls out. Though she has seen the capital city many times before, Clarke leans against the railings of the ship’s deck, eager to take in the sight. It seems even larger than it had when she left, the red
and white buildings a stark contrast to the stone and wood of Winter Town. Kings Landing sits within the city’s walls, tanneries pressed against fish merchants, taverns crammed between smiths and weavers. In the centre of it all rises the rounded drum of the Great Sept, dwarfed only by the Red Keep, its seven towers reaching for the sky. On one of the three hills within the walls, Clarke can see the abandoned dome of the Dragon Pit, and at the foot of that hill, she knows the slums of Flea Bottom sit.

Beside her, Octavia draws in a low breath at the sight and Clarke glances over at her, watching the soldier’s fingers tighten against the railings. She cannot remember the first time she saw the southern capital, but she is sure it’s overwhelming for someone used to the quaint bustle of Winter Town.

The docks are crowded with ships and fishing boats, gathering against the many quays like birds around a carcass. People turn to stare at the mighty ship cruising past them, their eyes widening at the sight of the Stark flag flying high and point fingers, shouting to one another. On the shore, the children of the slums pick through the waste that washes up with the tide, and they look up from their task to shout and scream, running along the shore until the ship is out of sight. They round the corner, to the Red Keep’s private dock, and Clarke is ushered onto a smaller ship, Octavia staying stubbornly by her side, to be rowed past the towering cliffs, towards the small, private beach. Here the water is clearer and the sand is clean and golden in the sunlight. Along the single, stone quay stand a procession awaiting them, though she recognises none of their faces. Her stomach swoops anxiously, dread wriggling into her bones and making a home there, and she can see Octavia glancing at her from the corner of her eye, uncomfortable and unsure.

The boat is tied to the quay, a gangplank laid out and as she stands in the swaying ship, Clarke’s eyes find the waiting knights and lords. Lord Arthur Flowers, one of her father’s cousins, stands at the gangplank, and his ashy expression makes her catch her breath. Her fingers tremble when she takes his waiting hand, and is led onto the quay, and she opens her mouth to speak, but can’t seem to find the words.

“Lady Clarke,” The voice pulls her attention away, and she remembers those waiting on the quay for her arrival. Lord Pike of House Lannister is dressed in a fine red doublet, tall and well built, his skin shining in the sunlight. His mouth is set into a thin line and his eyes are grave and serious. Clarke’s fingers tighten around Lord Arthur’s fingers, and when she glances to her uncle, she finds that he is swallowing back tears of his own.

“My father…” Despite herself, her voice trembles on the edge of tears.

Lord Arthur bows his head, and there is a long silence. The words settle around them, like the winter snow in the north, but they do not feel real. Everything is far away, and strange, and Clarke lifts her chin, thinking of her mother and of Lexa, all of those who would want her to be strong now, and says, quietly.

“Take me to him.”

They do as she says without hesitation. She is shown to an ornate carriage, and her uncle slides into the seat beside her. Together, they journey through the streets of Kings Landing in silence; though Lord Arthur is one of her closest relatives, she barely knows the man. He had been in Highgarden frequently when she was young, but when the War of North and South broke out, he and his sons spent many years fighting in the Reach for control of the North. Several of her cousins had died in that war, and since then her uncle had preferred his own, smaller fief and rarely ventured into either Highgarden or Kings Landing.

Her eyes stay fixed to the passing streets, unseeing. Every rattle of the carriage, every passing house, every pair of staring eyes seem to drift away from her, as if she is wrapped in incense, heady and
strange. She cannot think on where they are going, or why, and instead there is nothing, only white blankness.

The carriage comes to a halt outside the Great Sept, and she ignores her uncle’s offered hand when she clammers out. Brushing her hands down the front of her gown, she straightens her shoulders and squares her jaw, climbing the long set of steps. The Great Sept rises before her, towering, a window in the shape of the seven pointed star staring down at her. People pause to watch her go, guards hurrying to catch up with her, but she keeps her eyes fixed to that star, watching the way the sunlight catches against the coloured glass. By the time she reaches the top of the stairs, the star is out of view, but she can still feel it’s gaze upon her.

Inside, the Great Sept is cool and dark, and she pauses in the doorway to allow her eyes to adjust. Inside, the sept is a grandiose space, with a ceiling so high that she can hardly see the gilded gold and marble dome that rises between the roofs of Kings Landing. A raised walkway runs around the perimeter of the sept, from which chapels glow with candlelight for each of the Seven. The walkway surrounds the main sanctuary, a lowered area in which light spills in from the high, coloured windows. The marble floor is decorated with a seven pointed star, and each arm reaches out to the towering statues of the gods. They face inwards, so that when she walks down into the main sanctuary, she can feel their eyes upon her: the Father, the Mother, the Warrior, the Maiden, the Smith, the Crone, and the Stranger.

In the centre of the main sanctuary, upon a raised tomb, a body sits in state. Her feet hesitate, stilling where she stands, and for a moment she fears she will not be able to go any further, before she grits her teeth and forces herself closer. The sound of her feet against the marble echoes up through the high domed roof, and her steps are measured and careful, pausing when she is beside the dais.

Her father is dressed in a fine blue and gold doublet, a pin in the shape of a rose upon his chest. His face is pale and drawn, and two stones with painted eyes sit where he once would have. His hair is combed back neatly, and his hands are folded upon his chest, fingers closed around his longsword. She recognises the pommel, the golden rose that he used to polish until it shined, and it is that thought that makes her legs tremble beneath her, and her stomach roil with bile. The candlelight flickers into starbursts before her eyes, and it takes her a long time to realise that it’s because she is crying. Her tears slide silently down her cheeks, dripping onto her father’s body and staining the doublet. She puts a hand over his, and the cold of his skin startles a gasp from her. She will never feel this hand warm again, she realises slowly, will never hear his laugh or see his smile. His eyes will never light up with joy and warmth, and they will never sit over a game of cyvasse again. He will never see her marry, see her love, he will never meet her children.

There is a strange sound in the sept, grating and keening, and when she raises her eyes, blinking through her tears to find the source, she realises that the sound is coming from her.

It is some time before she is found, kneeling at her father’s side. Her knees ache against the harsh marble floor, and her head rests against the dais, so she doesn’t know she is no longer alone until the figure places a hand upon her shoulder. Slowly, she raises her head, and watches as King Thelonious sinks to his knees beside her and wraps an arm around her shoulder, letting her twist until her face is pressed into his chest and her tears soak into his doublet.

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Her bed in the Red Keep is warm and plush, in a room filled with every luxury she could want. She keeps the curtains pulled around her bed, and the shutters on the windows tightly closed against the sun. After so long in Winterfell, the heat in the south is stifling, and she curls herself beneath thin blankets, and buries her head in her pillows. They don’t disturb her, but to bring her water and food.
The meals are soft and light, meant to ease her grief, but she can’t think to touch them and instead only drinks the water brought in heavy clay jugs. Every time she closes her eyes, she sees her father’s face before them. She thinks of the last time she spoke to him, how long ago was it? Three months? Four? Five? Time in Winterfell had passed strangely, and his lack of contact had left her angry and confused, until she had stubbornly refused to write to him herself.

Now, she would give anything to send him a letter. She doesn’t pray, cannot think to at a time like this, and though her isolation is self-imposed, it is darkly lonely. Clarke aches for her father, for his smile and his arms around her, and though she has spent months hating her, she wishes her mother were here.

“Your mother is gone,” Thelonious had explained to her quietly, in the peace of the Great Sept. “She left a day or so after your father’s death, with no warning. We thought she may be with you.”

She leaves her room only for the funeral, at Octavia’s insistence, and it is a strange affair. With her mother absent, it is to her that every noble in Kings Landing offers their condolences, and she accepts their words with tight lips and the barest nods of her head. Everything feels so far away, even when she sees her father’s body again, it is as if it isn’t him at all, just a stranger with her father’s clothes. Her uncle stays at her side, casting her uncertain glances, and at one point King Thelonious pulls her away and places his hands on her shoulders, speaking earnestly to her. It is a relief to escape back to the darkness of her room, ignoring all requests for her company, but her restless silence is shattered by voices outside of her room, only a few days later.

“Lady Clarke must be told, it’s important.” A stranger insists, and Clarke pulls herself from the bed, her nightgown flowing around her feet, and pads silently to the door, pressing her ear against it to listen.

“Lady Clarke should have been told beforehand.” Octavia’s angry retort startles her a little.

“Well her ladyship wasn’t accepting any guests, Lord Arthur couldn’t wait any longer.” The stranger answers, sharply.

“A message would have done just as well,” Octavia snaps, “She should have been able to go with her uncle.”

“The streets are becoming too dangerous,” The stranger retorts, “He had to leave as soon as he could.”

Her fingers curl around the door handle before she can think any further, and she pulls it open with a yank. The two figures outside her door spin to face her, their eyes widening, and Octavia is the first to bow her head, glaring at the squire until he does the same. The corridor outside her room is bright, the sun shining in warmly through the arched windows, and Clarke squints a little, now so used to the darkness of her room.

“What’s going on?” She demands, but her voice wavers and scratches from so long unused.

“Lord Arthur has left the city, my lady,” Octavia scowls at the squire again, who levels her a glare in return. “Earlier this morning, and we have only just been informed.”

Her eyes widen and she feels a pang of loneliness again, now as familiar as an old friend. Though she and Lord Arthur had not been close, he was still her uncle. “Left?”

“His lordship had to see to his lands, my lady.” The squire excuses his lord, but when she turns her eyes on him he squirms uncomfortably and offers, weakly, “We thought you were grieving.”
“I am,” Her voice breaks over the word, and she blinks back her tears furiously. “Why did he leave with such haste?”

“The streets are becoming unruly, my lady.” The squire explains, in a nasal tone, “Since the prince left the city there has been a lot of unrest in the land. The people want the stability of an air, there are… rumours.”

“What rumours?”

“Ridiculous smallfolk gossip.” Octavia interrupts, her scowl only darkening. “He’s exaggerating, my lady.”

“Lord Flowers thought it best to leave as soon as possible.” The squire repeats, stubbornly and Clarke shakes her head, her fury rushing through her like a wave.

“My uncle thought only of himself and his own lands, as usual.” She waves a hand at him so violently that the squire flinches back. “Go! If you wish to catch my uncle before the streets are impassable, you must leave.”

She turns her back on him, marching into her room before he can answer. Her fury and frustration eats away at her, gnawing on her insides until she feels like she is consumed by them, an inferno shaking in her heart. For so long she has languished in her bed, hiding herself away in hopes of pretending the world didn’t exist, that this rush of fire leaves her feeling light headed and breathless in her ire. With her mother and uncle gone, she is alone in Kings Landing, left to pick up the pieces her father’s death without aid, and though she feels as though she could shatter to pieces, she knows that now her family’s name and reputation rest upon her shoulders.

“My lady,” Octavia hesitates in the doorway, and Clarke can’t bear to look at her. “My lady, I’m sorry that your uncle left, he should have taken you with him—”

“No.” The word falls from her lips, sharp and curt. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“But don’t you want to go home?” Octavia asks, earnestly, “Where you can mourn in peace?”

“There is no more time for mourning,” Her voice shakes, but she perseveres. “I am the only one left to ensure my family’s place in court, this is my responsibility.”

“You’re still grieving,” Behind her, Octavia steps closer into the room, her voice rising with her agitation. “That’s the most important thing, not… politics.”

“And what would you know of politics?” She whirls around, her breasts heaving with her fury, “What are you even still doing here? You got me to the south safely, now go.”

Octavia’s expression sets into anger and stubborn lines crease between her brows, her mouth tightening. “No. The queen told me to deliver you to your mother, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“I don’t need to be delivered anywhere!” The words are like a crack of thunder, “I’m not some parcel to be traipsed from one place to another! No one else is here to protect my family name, so I have to do it!”

“Fine then!” Octavia shouts, “I’m staying, until you decide to go to your mother!”

“Do what you want!” Clarke retorts, “But I’m not going anywhere!”

“Neither am I!” With that, Octavia turns on her heel and slams the door shut behind her.
Clarke dines with the king that evening. She has known Thelonious Baratheon since she was a babe and considers him more family than king. He and her father had grown up together, spending long summers in each other’s company when the young prince had been training in Highgarden, and then cajoled each other into manhood when her grandfather had sent his son to Kings Landing in his teenage years. Though a few days ride, the journey from Highgarden to Kings Landing had never been a trial, and so Clarke had spent her childhood split between the capital and her own home, and her father’s role as Hand of the King had kept him in Kings Landing often, even in times of peace. She had learnt to walk in the Tower of the Hand, had ridden a horse for the first time in the Red Keep gardens, and had first kissed a handsome stable boy in rose gardens.

She still remembers Wells’ face when she ran back to him, giggling, and the thought makes an ache jolt through her heart as the king waves away his cup bearer. From his place across the small table in his solar, Clarke thinks that Thelonious seems tired and drawn. There are lines on his forehead that she doesn’t remember, and a sprinkling of salt in his dark hair. His eyes are sad and his shoulders are heavy, as if the golden crown he wears sits uncomfortably. Still, when he offers her a sad smile, it is the same kind face she remembers.

“I wish we could reunite in better circumstances, Clarke.” He pushes his venison around his plate, barely touching it, and when she glances down at her own untouched food she can’t help but think of lemon cakes and how Leanne would scold her if she saw this.

“And I,” The wine in her cup is her only saviour, and she finds that the more she drinks, the lighter the ache in her chest becomes. “Who could have imagined that when we saw each other again it would be like this… just the two of us.”

“I wish your mother had stayed.” Thelonious’s eyes pull with unhappiness and unease, “But she was so distressed, she couldn’t be reasoned with.”

“My mother rarely can,” She thinks she smiles at the words, but her lips barely cooperate. “If only Wells were here… he would know what to say.” The king flinches at her words and she swallows, placing her goblet down to look at him closely. “He didn’t tell me what he was going to do, you know. If he had I would have stopped him.”

“He was… unhappy here.” Thelonious can’t seem to meet her eyes, his tone troubled. “In a way he never has been before. Something changed in him, but he wouldn’t confide in me. He left during the night and when I went to Oldtown to reason with him, he would not see me.”

“His letters were almost illegible,” She shakes her head, “It was as if he wanted to tell me, but he couldn’t find the words.”

Thelonious’s jaw tightens and he stands quite suddenly, pacing to the wide windows that look down upon the city, his lips pursed in thought. “Regardless, he has left a mess behind him.” His words are tight.

“A squire said there was unrest in the streets.” Clarke rises, crossing the room to join him at the window, and she sees him sigh from the corner of her eye.

“More than unrest, it’s close to civil war. The people of Kings Landing want a secure lineage, and there are rumours about your father’s death and Wells’ departure.”

“What rumours?” Clarke turns to peer at him in the evening light, her brows furrowing as Thelonious lets out a sharp laugh.
“The sorts of rumours that keep the smallfolk entertained, plots and treachery.” He must see the concern in her gaze, because he gives her a reassuring smile that doesn’t meet his eyes. “Stuff of nonsense, Clarke, but it can catch like wildfire. I’ve sent the city guard out to quiet any rioters, but there are only three hundred Gold Cloaks and thousands of unhappy citizens in the city.”

“What will you do?” She asks quietly, and he lets out a weary sigh.

“Lord Pike is helping me to find a bride, another royal wedding should make the people happy, especially if it will lead to heirs.”

“If it does not, who will you name heir?”

Thelonious pushes himself away from the window to take up his goblet of wine again. “I have no brothers or sisters, no nephews or nieces to pass the throne onto. The closest would be Lord Finn, as my nephew by marriage.” He shakes his head, “But the boy cannot be king, he is too young and naïve. I will simply have to produce heirs.”

“I’m sorry,” Her soft voice draws his eyes up, “I’m sorry that Wells disappointed you.”

“I only wish I knew what drove him away,” He is silent for a moment, staring down into his wine as if it will give him the answers he so craves. “I am sorry for your father too. Jacob would know what to do at a time like this.”

She can only nod, and for a time they are both quiet, thinking on what they have lost, before Thelonious says, more seriously.

“You should go to the Vale, where your mother is. Take her back to Highgarden and grieve together.”

“You need me here,” Clarke argues, but Thelonious shakes his head.

“Finding a bride for a king is no real trial, Clarke. Thank you for delivering the Queen in the North’s letter to me, but you have done your duty now. It is time to rest and take stock of what you have lost. I will be fine.”

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She is awoken by the tolling of the bells, long and doleful. Twisting in the bed, she peers around, momentarily disorientated. The room is still dark, the fire cold and the shutters fastened tightly over the windows, and she feels as if she has barely laid her head upon her pillow when she slides from the bed. Her feet have only just touched the cold stone floor, when a pounding comes to her door which makes her jump and her heart thump loudly in her chest. Thoughts of the assassin in Winterfell come to mind, the darkness in his eyes and the feel of his hands on her body, and she pulls a robe about her body as she stands, pausing by the chest by the table to pick up the dagger Lexa gifted her with. As she approaches the door, the pounding comes again and her breath catches in her throat as she hesitates beside the door. Pulling in a steadying breath, she puts her hand on the handle, the other holding the dagger tightly, before calling out.

“Who is it?”

“Lord Pike of House Lannister, my lady.” The voice is strange and deep, and she swallows heavily against her dry throat.

“My lord? Why are you outside my door at such an hour?” Her fingers tremble where they are pressed against the handle.
“There is a threat to the castle, my lady. You must come, and quickly!” Her eyes widen, and slowly, she pulls open the door, her grip still tight around the handle of her dagger.

Outside, the hallway is lit with torchlight, and she spies Pike’s pinched face peering in at her. Letting the door fall further open, she frowns at the armoured men around him.

“A threat, my lord?”

“I’m afraid so,” Pike is grave and serious, “Some of the peasant rebellions in the city have spiralled out of control, and they are attempting to storm the Red Keep!”

“What?” It’s unthinkable, but the shouts of men that flicker in from the courtyard bely her disbelief. “How is that possible?”

“They are many in number and caught us unprepared,” Pike gestures, and she finds herself stepping from her room, ushered by the non-too-gentle guards. “The Gold Cloaks and Kingsguard will soon have them subdued, but until then it’s best that you wait with the rest of the children and ladies in Maegor’s Holdfast.”

“The Kingsguard are fighting?” Clarke pulls her robe tighter around her body, shivering as they descend the steps and are hurried out into the courtyard. “Shouldn’t they be protecting the king?”

“The king is fighting with them.” Lord Pike sounds surprised, “As the brave soldier that he is.” Underfoot, the ground turns from cold cobblestones to the wooden flats of the drawbridge, as they cross the dry moat that surrounds the Holdfast. Clarke knows that if the fighting takes a turn for the worst, the drawbridge will be drawn up to protect those left inside. They walk quickly to a heavily guarded door. Pike’s eyes flicker down to the dagger she still holds, and they widen. “Really my lady, such a weapon shouldn’t be in the hands of those who do not know how to wield it.” His tone is one of amusement and condescension, which makes Clarke prickle. He holds out his hand, expectant. “I will take care of it for you.”

“It was a gift.” She argues, weakly, but surrounded by Lannister soldiers, she feels she has little choice but to press the blade into his hand.

“No weapons are allowed in the Queen’s Ballroom at a time like this.” Lord Pike gives her a thin, shallow smile. “I’ll ensure it’s returned to you once all is safe again.”

With that, she is led into the Queen’s Ballroom, her bare feet slapping against the stone floor. It is a tall, elegant hall, smaller than the Great Hall, which holds the iron throne, but still large enough to comfortably hold a hundred. The chandeliers and delicate torches in the walls are lit and the room is stuffy and hot, filled as it is with the ladies and children who currently inhabit the castle. There are cots made up along the walls, and bedrolls for the handmaids and servants that attend them. A young lady plays the lute in the corner, a slow, despondent melody, and several ladies sit in circles praying. Others cluck around near the table on which food is laid out, gossiping and creating hysterical stories, while yet more entertain children and attend to sewing and needlework. Almost everyone is in some state of undress, clearly being pulled from their beds in the middle of the night just as she was, and when Clarke peers around, she sees no sign of Octavia.

Slowly, she pads her way further into the room, feeling eyes turn upon her as she walks, and sits slowly upon an unclaimed cot. People cast glances her way, and she can tell from their lowered voices that they are speaking of her, but she pays it no heed. Instead, she straightens out her robe, glad she had the foresight to pull it on and not be caught in just her nightdress. Her hair sits in disarray around her face, and she unties the ribbon within it and begins combing her fingers through it as best she can.
A lady approaches after several minutes, hesitating a respectful pace away, and bobs half a curtsey. Clarke doesn’t recognise her, but she has a kind face and dark hair, her lips wide and her robe plain but pretty.

“My lady, I’m Lady Fern of House Waynwood.” The lady gives a smile, and Clarke bows her head in greeting, accepting the wine that Lady Fern holds out for her. “I thought you may be in need of refreshment.”

“Thank you,” Clarke gives her a polite smile, cradling the wine between her hands. “I’m very grateful.”

“I’m sure it was rather a shock, being woken at such an hour,” Lady Fern smiles, ruefully, “But one cannot manage when men choose to fight their battles.”

“One certainly cannot,” Clarke agrees, glancing about the ballroom, and then back at Lady Fern, who is wearing slippers and whose hair is neatly pinned back. “Though I must say you look far more presentable than the rest of us, Lady Fern.”

“I’m lucky,” She admits, with a slight smile, and gestures to a servant. “My handmaiden was sleeping in my chambers, she came with me. Here, she can help you. Margo, come here please.” At her request, a girl comes trotting over, hearty and cheerful, with freckles scattered across her nose. She couldn’t have been more than fourteen summers, but she sets to the task assigned to her with great vigour.

“Thank you,” Clarke pats the cot, “Would you like to join me?”

“I would,” Lady Fern sinks into her seat, smiling gratefully. “I have heard much about you, my lady. It’s an honour to meet you.”

“You are House Waynwood?” She asks, humming softly in understanding when the lady nods. “So, you are from the Vale, you know Lord Marcus Arryn. He is friends with my mother.”

“We have only met a few times,” Lady Fern corrects her, flushing a little. “I am a younger sister of House Waynwood, we are not often invited to the Eyrie, and besides I have been in the capital for almost a year. I actually know you from tales here at court.”

“At court?” Clarke’s brows rise, surprise twisting her features. “Forgive me if we met when I was in the capital…”

“Oh no,” Lady Fern flushes again, laughing a little self consciously as her handmaiden begins to carefully braid Clarke’s hair. “We didn’t, it’s only… many people have been speculating on your time in the north.”

“Oh.” Clarke blinks, and slowly the tired parts of her mind begin to put things together. “I see, of course, that makes sense.”

The Lady Fern opens her mouth to say something more, but they are disrupted by the arrival of two more ladies and their handmaiden. The first Clarke’s recognises, if dimly, Lady Myra Redwyne, a dark haired, fiery young woman who sometimes accompanied her father on trips to Highgarden, to pay his due to his lord, Jacob Tyrell. Lady Myra has a sharp tongue and vast wit, and Clarke has seen her cut ladies with a gentler decorum down before her eyes. At her side stands an unfamiliar face, a pale, light haired woman, reasonably fair of face but otherwise unremarkable. The handmaiden who accompanies them is lithe, with tanned skin and long hair in complicated braids down her back.
Lady Myra offers her a wide smile, the sincerity of which Clarke struggles to discern, and curtseys, offering out her hands to clasp Clarke’s. “My lady! It is so good to have you returned to us!”

“Lady Myra,” Clarke gives her a slight smile, squeezing her fingers once before releasing. “I didn’t realise you were in the city.”

“I am, my lady, I have been for some time.” Lady Myra grimaces delicately. “I’m so sorry for your lord father, I was at the funeral.”

“Thank you,” The mention of her father startles her. “I didn’t see you there.”

“You were distracted,” Lady Myra offers another sympathetic smile, but swiftly turns to her friend. “This is my friend Lady Peasebury.” The pale girl’s eyes are wide, but she manages a trembling curtsey, and Clarke tries to set her at ease.

“Well met, Lady Peasebury.”

“We have been waiting and waiting for your return,” Lady Myra gestures imperiously, and the handmaiden fetches two velvet cushions for them to lounge upon, making themselves comfortable as they pick at the plates of food they have brought. “We were beginning to think you had been frozen to ice.” She gives a musical laugh and the other two ladies chuckle along weakly.

Clarke only hums, sipping on her wine quietly. “I was not.”

“I must say, it’s no surprise that that northern queen requested you as her guest,” Lady Myra continues, leaning across her cushions, “You are the most eligible noble woman in all of the south, many say, and your father’s closeness with the king…” She trails off, a self-satisfied smile upon her face, like nothing more needs to be said. Clarke isn’t quite sure how to respond, but fortunately the kindly Lady Fern steps in.

“How was the north, my lady?”

“It was…” She considers for a moment, struggling over her words. This is the first time anyone has asked her; King Thelonious had been more interested in the workings of the queen’s court, which she had honestly been able to tell him little of, and Lexa’s ambitions, than her time there. “Different,” She settles on, at last, and clearly it is unsatisfactory for the waiting ladies.

“What is the queen like?” Lady Myra presses, unforgiving.

“Yes, the queen!” Lady Peasebury pipes up, her eyes alight with excitement. “One hears so many stories.”

The words bring a smile to her lips and she quirks an eyebrow at them. “I’m sure that no stories can truly do her justice.”

“Is she a savage, as they say?” Lady Myra’s eyes glint with the prospect of gossip, but they darken at Clarke’s scoff.

“Not at all.”

“They say she can transform into a wolf,” Lady Peasebury tells them, her voice breathless, “My brother swears he saw it happen when he fought in the war.”

“No,” Clarke casts her a strange look, “Though she does have seven direwolves.”
“But they’re *myth*!” Lady Fern exclaims from beside her, “How on earth could she have conjured those…”

“The old northern magic,” Lady Peasebury glances around herself, as if afraid that the children of the forest would be lurking in this very room.

“I’ve heard she has connection across the sea, with the Iron Bank,” Lady Myra leans in, softening her voice conspiratorially. “They give her the use of the Faceless Men, that’s how she won the war.”

“The what?” Lady Peasebury’s brows furrow, confused, and her cheeks colour when Lady Myra rolls her eyes, viciously.

“Oh Alice, you’re so quaint. My handmaiden,” Here, she waves forward the dark haired girl from before, “Is from Bravosi and she’s told me all about them.”

“Tell us,” Lady Fern impeaches, as Clarke sips at her wine, her eyes focused on the Bravosi girl with interest.

The girl glances at her mistress uncertainly and then says, her voice slow and careful. “I cannot say much. They have people everywhere.”

“You must know that none of us are spies,” Lady Myra rolls her eyes again, gesturing dramatically.

The girl swallows, but continues, “They are assassins trained in Bravos. Many say they are under the control of the Iron Bank. They can… change their faces.”

“Like a disguise?” Lady Peasebury sounds breathless with terror.

“No,” Lady Myra takes over, obviously unhappy with her handmaiden’s cautious account. “They can actually *take off their faces* and don a new one.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Lady Fern shakes her head sensibly, “Such a thing cannot be done.”

“So, you will accept direwolves in the north, but not man who can change their faces.” Lady Myra challenges, and Lady Fern huffs.

“The direwolves are animals, faceless men don’t make any sense at all.”

“I wouldn’t expect the queen would use such underhand tricks,” Clarke puts in, at last. “Assassins and spies… she is too noble for that.”

Lady Myra latches on to the words like a cat searches for food in the alleyways. “You sound as if you admire her.”

“I was her guest for many moons,” Clarke musters up the dignity to say, and hopes her voice is cool and detached. “She was kind to me, I came to know her in some way.”

“And you came to like her,” Lady Myra challenges, brazenly.

Clarke sets her with a narrowed eyed gaze, “We were companionable yes, Lady Myra.”

“I had heard that you were a close friend of the prince,” Lady Fern inputs, clearly hoping to steer the conversation back into safer territory, and Clarke turns to look at her, feeling a flush rising to her cheeks. Lady Fern looks at her with sympathy. “I’m sorry, it must have been hard to hear about his abdication.”
She pulls in a long breath, considering her words. “It was, Prince Wells was a dear friend.”

“She were all very shocked,” Lady Fern continues, kindly. “Many of us were thinking he was like to
take a wife soon and then…”

“It has left the kingdom in some turmoil.” Lady Myra observes, seemingly regaining her manners,
and together they are silent for a moment, listening to hear any of the disruption outside. As it is,
there is little to hear above the chattering of the other ladies in the room.

“I expect that the king will be seeking a new wife soon, to provide him with an heir,” Lady Fern
says, smiling at her handmaiden when the girl steps back from Clarke’s braided hair.

“The king will, Lady Myra gestures regally for her handmaiden to bring another plate of
sweetcakes. “If he does not the crown will pass to Lord Finn of House Swann.”

“How so?” Lady Peasebury appears puzzled, and Clarke watches Lady Myra pull in a breath to
rebuke her, stepping in to speak before she can.

“Lord Finn’s father is brother to the late queen. He is next in line through marriage, though it has
never really been a problem until now. Everyone assumed that Prince Wells would be the next king.”

“He is in the capital, my lady.” Lady Fern tells her, seriously. “He arrived last night, with the moon.”

“I would suppose the king wants to keep him close at hand until another heir is born.” Lady Myra
says, slyly, and Clarke frowns, staring down at the dregs within her goblet.

“I didn’t realise he was here.” The revelation sits strangely in her stomach; not only is she unsure
how she feels about seeing Lord Finn again, after so many months of unanswered letters, but
something pricks at the edge of her consciousness when she considers his sudden arrival. She is
quiet and uninviting for the rest of the conversation, wrapped up as she is in her own thoughts, and
when Lady Fern is called away to see to her crying child, a little boy with curly dark hair, their group
soon disbands.

Dawn is creeping through the windows when they are finally disturbed. The longer the fighting had
gone on, the more anxious the room had become. Clarke kneels in prayer with some of the other
ladies, but her mind is mostly empty, and the clasped hands around hers are more helpful in keeping
away prying eyes than finding mercy from the gods. The thick oak doors, guarded heavily both
inside and out, open with a tremendous crash that sends ladies startling away, and guards ripping
their swords from their sheaths with a screech. Soldiers, bloody from battle, pile through the doors,
and for a moment they are caught in fear, sure that the castle has been overcome, until someone
shouts their victory. Women run sobbing to their husbands and sons, clasping them within their arms,
and for a moment Clarke feels utterly stranded in the storm, a rock adrift the waning tide, until her
eyes light upon familiar brown eyes, and dark hair pushed back from a handsome face.

Finn Swann crosses the room quickly once he sees her, and she is caught up in a tide of familiarity,
her breath catching in her throat at the sight of her old friend. When he catches her about the waist,
she can do little else but return his embrace, pressing her face into his shoulder when his urgent voice
comes to her.

“Lady Clarke, I’m so glad you’re here.”

“And you, my lord,” She begins to say, but he tightens his grip on her, his breath coming fast and
laboured.

“Clarke… the king is dead.”
i'm finally back! more info in the later AN on my delay, but to apologise I have done the unthinkable and made this a double (!!) update!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Book Two: Chapter 3

The bells ring for three days and three nights after the king dies. Their tolling slips into her dreams, but when they stop the silence feels strangely oppressive. The funeral is held on the fourth day, in stately, sombre mourning. Almost every noble family in the south sends a representative, bedecked in black, with their family emblems sparkling on pins and broaches. So many people arrive to attend the funeral that even the Great Sept struggles to hold them, and many have to stand on the steps and listen through the door as the High Septon speaks. Clarke does not suffer that indignity, and instead stands between her cousin and her ailing grandmother, who had been too frail to travel for her father’s funeral. They watch in silence as the Septon speaks over the king’s body, the Silent Sisters waiting behind him to carry away his body and bury in it the crypts below the Sept. They stand, their shrivelled hands clasped together, and their bodies draped in dark robes. Veils cover their faces and mouths, so that all that can be seen are their dark eyes, looking out at the waiting congregation. It is a chilling reminder that one day they will all be in the hands of the Silent Sisters.

Lord Finn of House Swann stands at the head of the congregation, surrounded by his advisors. Though not yet king in name, most of the south is already jostling for his approval and notice, and Finn seems bewildered and uncertain, though he can smile and nod with the best of them. Clarke can’t help the way her eyes flicker to him, curious and wondering. The absence of Prince Wells from these proceedings has not gone unnoticed. Though she knew that Wells would have to give up all family ties and stay in the Citadel- where all young maesters are trained- she had thought that perhaps the death of his father would convince him to return. It seems not.

What keeps him away? What stops him from answering her letters and ravens? Her questions go unanswered, though the letter she received from her mother that morning plays on her mind. The thought of it sends a chill through her, and she can see her grandmother eyeing her strangely from the corner of her eye. She hopes that her thoughts don’t show too clearly. The letter had been disturbing and terrifying, and even to think of its contents now would leave her vulnerable to interrogation, so she casts it to the back of her mind. The funeral drags on, the Sept warm under the midday sun and so filled with people. Her sadness for the king sits like a stone in her stomach, next to the constant ache reserved for her father and Wells and… Lexa. Even thinking of her name sends a churning of regret to Clarke’s heart, and though she knows it would change nothing, she longs for the simpler days of Winterfell.

Finally, the High Septon leads the procession out of the Sept. They fall into step a few paces behind the heir apparent and his advisors, and Clarke catches Finn’s eye as he goes past. His face brightens at the sight of her and he offers her a small, wavering smile, which she returns even as he is ushered along by Lord Pike. They step out onto the steps, and the sunlight is almost blinding after the darkness of the Sept. A waiting crowd of smallfolk are gathered outside the Sept, held at bay by guards and soldiers alike, and when Lord Finn steps into the sunlight and raises his hand to wave at
them, they erupt into a roar of cheering.

A wry smile pulls at Clarke’s lips and her gaze flickers to Lord Pike, stood only a few steps away. The Master of Coin did a remarkable job in the turmoil that followed the king’s death. It didn’t take long for word of Lord Finn’s daring and bravery during the battle to make its way around the kingdom. Every time Clarke hears it, the story has changed. Supposedly he arrived the day before the fighting broke out, and barely had time to sleep before donning his armour, or did he ride through the gates of Kings Landing and straight into the battle? Lord Finn slew twenty men, or was it forty, or a hundred? Whatever the truth may be, the royal heir is now a hero for all to see, a young and handsome king, strong and brave in battle, to lead them into a golden age.

At her side, she hears her grandmother scoff, and glances at her from the corner of her eye. Lady Tila Tyrell, the Dowager Lady of the Reach, is old and frail and has little time for the frolicking of knights and kings. Her tongue is sharp, but as the days go by her body weakens and she struggles to leave Highgarden now. Only an event such as this would draw her from the reaches of the rose covered fortress.

“Can I help you to your room, grandmother?” One of her cousins darts forward to ask, and her grandmother shakes her away, scowling.

“I may be old,” She says, in a rumbling growl, her hands shaking against her ornate cane as she starts down the steps of the Sept. “But I’m not that old Lyra. Go and see to your husband, before he becomes too familiar with the ladies from Sunspear.”

The words pull a pale pallor over her cousin’s face, and Clarke watches with a half satisfied smile as Lyra darts away to find her husband.

“Mother-” Lord Arthur attempts to reason with her, but his wife, a sensible woman from the Vale named Joan who Clarke has always liked, puts a hand on his arm and quietens him.

“Clarke,” Lady Tila barks, and when she floats to her side, her grandmother takes her arm and says, with a stern look in her eyes. “You will accompany me around the gardens.”

“Yes grandmother.” She agrees, docile and easy.

They journey back to the castle together, through streets which still bare the signs of damage from the uprising only a week ago. They are busy, as people strain to get a look at their new king and the lords and ladies of the south, but the heavy retinue of guards and soldiers that accompany them means it is peaceful, for the most part. The gardens of the Red Keep are fairly quiet, as most of the congregation from the Sept retire back to their rooms to change and gossip, and as they walk through the sunlit paths, hedges on either side, Clarke finds herself a little more at peace. Octavia walks a pace behind them, respectful, but every present and her grandmother glances over her shoulder at her with a wrinkled brow.

“You trust this girl?” She demands, bluntly, and Clarke gives a nod.

“With my life.”

Lady Tila grunts sceptically, but takes Clarke’s arm and sets a slow pace around the gardens. “Your mother is not fulfilling her duties,” She says, her hand gnarled and wrinkled against Clarke’s arm.

“She is in mourning,” Clarke offers, placidly and her grandmother scowls.

“We are all mourning my son’s death. You don’t see any of us running away to the Eyrie and making wild, ridiculous claims.”
Clarke hesitates, and pulls her grandmother to a stop beside a stone bench, sinking down to consider her words. “She has said these things to you, as well?”

“Indeed, she wrote to me.” Lady Tila sniffs, her lips pinching. “And even if they are true, she should be at home, as should you be.”

“I can’t leave grandmother,” Clarke pulls in a breath, her chin tilting determinedly. “Not now, especially not if she’s right.”

Lady Tila inspects her with narrowed, shrewd eyes, “What do you expect to do about it, here?”

“More than I can do from Highgarden.” She glances over her shoulder, relieved to find only Octavia stood a few respectful paces away, watching for any intruders. She drops her voice, “The new king is an old friend of mine, he may need company in this trying and difficult time.”

Lady Tila’s brows raise, surprised and interested. “The Tyrell family has long been a close ally of the crown,” She says at last, settling her hands atop her cane and surveying her. “You were always the sharpest of my grandchildren, the quickest. It is good to have you returned from the north.”

“I think… it is best that I am here, despite everything.” Her voice wavers a little and she hopes that her grandmother doesn’t pick up on it.

“Then here you shall stay,” Lady Tila nods firmly, and levers herself to her feet on shaking legs. Clarke stands beside her, and lets her grandmother take her hands and hold them close. In a moment of surprising tenderness, she says. “Remember who you are, my child. A rose may seem easily crushed, but you have thorns- use them.”

Her grandmother retires back to her rooms shortly thereafter, and Clarke walks back to her own, alone but for Octavia’s shadow at her back. At her own door, she pauses and looks back at the soldier. Octavia meets her eyes, sombre and serious, and says, quietly.

“I assume you will not be going to your mother.”

“I will not.” She confirms, a spark of guilt flickering through her at the resigned expression she pulls from Octavia. Snow nods once, and when she turns her back to take her post outside of the rooms, Clarke closes the door behind her.

The key to the locked chest hidden beneath her bed sits within her bosom, a iron shape pressing against her and held steady by her stays. Carefully, she kneels beside the bed and reaches down to pull out the chest. The Braavosi lock, made to withstand any amount of picking, clicks open with a turn of the key and she pushes open the lid to retrieve her mother’s letter, received only this morning by a messenger who didn’t stay long enough to hear her thanks. Her mother’s writing is spiking and sprawling as always, and there are marks on the parchment where her ink has spilled or she has pressed too fiercely with the quill and punctured it.

Methodically, Clarke moves to the decanter in the corner of her room, pouring herself a goblet of watered down wine, and settling in the chair at the writing desk, where the sunlight spills in from the window. Sipping her wine, she reads the letter once again. Addressed to my dear daughter, the pronouncement of motherly love would make her laugh if not for what followed. Outlandish claims, a damning indictment of all that Clarke had truly missed in the court during her time in Winterfell. A mother’s desperate plea for her child to go to safety, as soon as possible, one which surely cannot be answered when the words murder and poison are being thrown around so willingly.

There is nothing more for it, she knows, and as she sips her wine, she listens to the hustle and bustle
of Kings Landing outside, and knows that if her father was truly murdered, Kings Landing is not safe for anybody.

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The city is abuzz with activity after the proper time for mourning the king passes. Lord Finn is king in all but name and efforts for his coronation bring the smallfolk together. With spring in the air, it is a time of new beginnings, and yet Clarke can’t seem to shake away the sour taste at the back of her mouth that carries on the scents of the flowers from the Red Keep gardens and the delicate food presented to her. Returning to the capital brings a change to her days; after months of solitude in Winterfell, it is strange to find couriers and messengers on her doorstep every morning, asking for her presence at gatherings and walks and all manner of frivolous events. Things she enjoyed immensely before her time in the north now feel shallow, with little meaning, and though she attempts to hold court and entertain as she once did, it is taxing.

On her morning walk around the grounds of the Red Keep, she finds herself accompanied by Lady Miya and Lady Fern, both of whom are eager to hear the gossip of the new day. As the weather warms, Clarke finds that she has to throw off the northern styles that she had once resented and now come to admire, and once again return to the floating silks and gauze of the south. As the capital transitions from a time of mourning to one of celebration, she wears indigos and violets, with golden embroidery and damask, allowing her hair to once again be piled into the high southern styles that show off the arch of her neck and curve of her jaw.

“I’m having silk imported from Essos for the coronation,” Lady Myra tells them, with a tilt of her chin, and Lady Fern makes a soft, impressed noise.

“How wonderful, Essos silk is the finest in the world I hear.”

“It really is,” Lady Myra smiles, proudly and glances back at where her handmaiden walks, a few paces behind them, accompanied by Octavia. “My handmaiden says it is better even than they have in Bravos.”

“We have little need for silk in the Vale,” Lady Fern admits, pushing a long, red curl back from her cheeks. “It’s far too cold. I expect you found that in the north, my lady?”

It takes Clarke a moment of silence to realise that they are speaking to her, and she trips over her tongue, before responding, smoothly. “Indeed, Lady Fern. The northern climates are as harsh as they come.”

“You must be so glad to be away from such a place,” Lady Myra wrinkles her nose in disgust, and Lady Fern adds, with a soft laugh.

“To be warm again.”

The question probes at the ache in Clarke’s heart, and she offers them both a warm smile. “There were some parts of the castle that were very warm, I never suffered there.” When their faces form into surprised expressions, she continues, “But it is nice to wake up to the sun every day.”

The addendum meets their expectations, and their faces clear into smiles, as they round a corner and nearly walk straight into an approaching figure. Clarke lets out a soft sound of surprise as their bodies collide, stumbling a step backwards before two strong hands reach out to steady her. Wide eyes find Lord Finn, dressed in a fine jerkin, his shock transforming quickly to pleasure when he realises who they are.
“Lady Clarke, my apologies.”

“Your majesty,” She blinks at him as he steps away, gently unhanding her, and finally manages to smile. “The fault is all mine.”

“Not at all,” He shakes his head gallantly as his Master of Laws, Lord Thomas Gaunt, a vassal of House Lannister, lingers behind him. Finn’s lips quirk into the boyish grin she recognises from childhood, and he teases, “I have never known you to take the blame for anything, my lady, I cannot let you start now.”

She colours at his words, and glances away, pretty and demure as she was taught. There is a spark in her voice when she answers him, however, which brings a grin to his face. “You dishonour me, your majesty. And I am sure I never took the blame because I was innocent.”

Finn’s smile widens and he offers a bow, “Of course, my lady, I would never seek to tarnish your reputation.”

“Your majesty,” Lord Thomas Gaunt urges him from behind, “We will be late to the meeting.”

“Ah, of course,” Finn’s face falls a little, before he gives them all another charming smile. “Forgive me for interrupting your promenade, my ladies.” His eyes linger on her, and Clarke can feel them like a prickle against her skin. “I hope to see you again soon.”

“Your majesty,” They bob their curtsies, and Clarke can’t help but turn to watch over her shoulder as he is ushered away, Lord Thomas Gaunt’s hand upon his shoulder. It is as if the Lannister family already have their claws dug deeply into his chest.

“Lady Clarke,” Lady Fern’s voice is soft and tentative, and when she turns back, she finds that both women are looking at her, Lady Fern with a soft smile, while Lady Myra’s eyes are cold.

Together, they walk to the veranda at the end of the path, a stone structure sat on the cliffs, overlooking the Blackwater Rush. Surrounded by the lush, beautiful gardens of the Red Keep, they settle into the chairs strewn with embroidered cushions awaiting them. Lady Fern glances back at the path, where they can still see the retreating figure of the king, and says.

“You knew the king as a child, didn’t you my lady?”

The question surprises her, and Clarke tilts her head, curious, to watch the other lady. “Yes, we played together when we were young. He visited Highgarden several times.”

A smile plays on Lady Fern’s lips and she says, with all the glee of a woman now married and past flirtation, “I think he carries a torch for you, my lady.”

“Of course,” Lady Myra puts in, before Clarke can respond, a slight bitterness curling at her lips. “Every royal of Westeros carries a torch for Lady Clarke, just as Prince Wells did.”

“Prince Wells and I were only ever close friends,” She corrects her, with a bite to her voice, and Lady Myra arches an eyebrow and asks cruelly.

“Then, did he deign to tell his friend what made him give up the crown so quickly?”

The words leave her breathless and dumbstruck, and Lady Fern takes the moment to beckon forwards a waiting attendant and ask for cakes and wine to be brought for them. In the ensuing quiet, Clarke glances back at the path leading to the veranda and spots the retreating figure of a young girl, sandy haired and too tall for her body, in britches and a surcoat. Her brows tick together, and she
gestures, leaning closer to Lady Fern to ask.

“Who is that?”

“You have not met Lady Tris?” Lady Fern’s eyes widen with surprise and Clarke’s lips part. In all of the troubles of Kings Landing, she had utterly forgotten about Lady Anya’s sister, sent here as her parallel, to ensure peace between north and south. She had seen the girl during the king’s funeral—perhaps she had been present for her own father’s, though the memory seems distant to Clarke now—but the girl had been dressed quite differently then.

“Could you fetch her for me, please?” She asks Lady Myra’s handmaiden, whose eyes flicker over her thoughtfully, before she nods and hurries down the promenade. They watch with interest as the handmaiden catches up to the girl and they converse. “Do you know her well?”

“Not at all,” Lady Fern explains, apologetically. “She is kept busy by her studies and she has more interest in sword fighting and horse riding than embroidery or music.”

The words bring a smile to Clarke’s face, and she speaks before she can stop herself. “They’re not as dissimilar as you would think.”

The arrival of Lady Tris, with Lady Myra’s handmaiden in tow, prevents her from answering the curious gazes of Lady Myra and Lady Fern. Their attention is drawn to the girl before them, a scrawny young thing with long hair braided sensibly away from her face and an awkward curtsey, which she half offers them when ushered into the veranda. The girl wears a bear pin on her lapel, a sign of her Mormont heritage, and something about the way her sharp eyes observe them reminds Clarke unerringly of her older sister.

“Lady Tris,” She offers the girl a warm smile. “I’m so glad to finally meet my counterpart.”

Lady Tris’s expression falters a little, and she continues, a little uncertainly. “I’m very sorry about your father.”

“Thank you,” The words pull at the ache in her stomach, but she steadfastly ignores it. “It is a sad thing to lose a father and a king so close together.”

“Of course, I’m sorry for your king as well.” Lady Tris glances around the veranda, her eyes hesitating on Octavia. “Is this your attendant?”

“She is Lady Clarke’s gift from the Queen in the North,” Lady Myra remarks, snidely and Clarke purses her lips, steadying her temper before she speaks again.

“Octavia Snow is my guard, Lady Tris. I pay her a fair wage for her work, but she is from the north.”

“My lady,” Octavia bows to Lady Tris, lower than she ever has to any southern lady, Clarke notes with a smile.

“It’s good to hear a familiar accent,” Lady Tris’s pleasure is obvious in her voice, and she continues
curiously. “Are you from Winter Town?”

“I grew up there, my lady.” Octavia tells her, plainly. “Arrived in my fifth year.”

“You’re a guard for Lady Clarke now?” Lady Tris’ gaze flickers to Clarke, clearly surprised, and they catch eyes. There is no way that they can confess Lexa’s instructions to Octavia without risking gossip and rumours, so Clarke watches on as Octavia says, simply.

“I was assigned to look after Lady Clarke in her time at Winterfell, and when she invited me to travel south with her, I accepted.”

“I see,” There is a level of disapproval in Lady Tris’s voice, but she has the good sense not to let it show too plainly. “How are you finding Kings Landing?”

“It is…” Here Octavia meets her gaze again, “Different.”

“Very different,” Lady Tris admits, and the moment of soft sadness is not lost on Clarke.

She rises in a billow of floating skirts around her legs, and nods at the attendants now setting up a table of cakes and cheeses for them to dine on. “Would you care for something to eat, Lady Tris?”

Together, they are able to step away from the two other nobles, gathering around the table to ruminate over their food choices. As Lady Fern begins talking to Lady Myra about her young son, Clarke is able to speak softly as she selects a slice of almond cake and places it carefully onto her plate.

“How are you finding your time in the south?”

“Fine,” Lady Tris’s eyes dart over her, clearly uncertain, and Clarke hums, nodding.

“I saw your sister a fair amount when I was in Winterfell.”

Tris’s eyes brighten, and when she speaks Clarke is reminded that she is still a young girl. “You did? How is she?”

Clarke considers the words for a moment, wondering what the girl has heard of the Mormont dagger used to kill Reya and try to take her own life. In the end, she settles for: “Well enough, I think. Strong and fighting at the queen’s side, as she should be.” Tris nods, staring at her eagerly, clearly desperate for news. “I think she misses you dearly.”

“I miss her too,” Tris’s voice wavers, and Clarke passes her a slice of almond cake, letting her hold it between her hands and take the sorts of big bites that children are allowed. “And my father?” She asks, around a mouthful.

“I saw him less, but he seemed well.” She admits, and Tris nods.

“They write to me, but I don’t think they tell me the whole truth.” She admits, at last, and Clarke feels a stirring of pity for her.

“I know how that feels.”

A shout of Lady Tris’s name pulls them both from their quiet conversation, their heads rising from where they were bent in intense discussion, and Clarke sees a stern, short woman, dressed in a Septa’s habit, walking towards them with more purpose than she has ever seen before. The woman stops at the entrance to the veranda, her beady eyes fixed to Lady Tris, who guiltily chews through
the rest of her almond cake.

“My ladies,” The woman bows her head, glancing over them all briefly before her eyes fix back to her wayward charge. “Lady Tris, this was not what I meant by a short walk to stretch your legs.”

“You will have to excuse her,” Clarke gives the woman a small smile, but places her hand on Tris’s shoulder and squeezes gently. “It was my fault, I distracted her.”

“No need, my lady.” The Septa tells her, in such a strained voice that Clarke is surprised she does not falter. “But I shall have to take Lady Tris back now, she has lessons to attend to.”

“Of course,” Clarke glances down at the girl, meeting her eyes as she says, her voice a touch quieter. “I hope I shall see more of you, Lady Tris.”

“Oh, you too.” Tris trips over her words, and when Clarke drops her hand from her shoulder, reluctantly goes back to the charge of her Septa.

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When she was young, Octavia remembers that people would speak of Kings Landing as the pinnacle of human civilisation. The capital of Westeros, and its biggest city, filled with commerce and ready and ripe for any man to find his fortune. It was said that a man could go from peasant to lord in a year in Kings Landing, but one thing the stories didn’t mention was the intense stench of the capital. Marinating under the heat of the southern sun, Kings Landing swells with unhappiness and poverty. The cobbled streets are crowded with the poor, begging for scraps and sleeping in the doorways. Beneath her boots, the streets are slick with waste and shit, pooling into disgusting puddles. Though she isn’t squeamish in the slightest, the smell made her nose wrinkle and her stomach turn when she first arrived, but after a week or so of the stench she’s used to it.

Growing up on the streets has taught her to always be aware of her surroundings. The bustle of the city is loud and rowdy, and she makes sure to keep one hand on her coin pouch as she slips between the crowds. Men and women alike shout their wares on the streets, holding out pieces of fruit which shine under the summer sun. It would be appealing if she hadn’t just seen their children washing the fruit in the gutter water. Voices spill out from taverns, loud and raucous, but almost drowned out beneath the sound of hammers working anvils and carpenters chopping through wood. A new smell lingers on the air, pleasant and salty, and when she turns the corner, Octavia finds what she expected to see: Aegon’s Square, sometimes called Pie Maker’s Square by the locals. The best pies in the city are hawked here, and with that comes city guards in their gold cloaks and travellers hoping for a cheap way to fill their stomachs, ever accompanied by taverns and whores.

She pushes her way through the crowds, until finally the crush of bodies gives way and she is able to see the high statue in the middle of the courtyard. Once a flattering depiction of Aegon the Conquerer, a king of old, the face has now been smashed in, leaving the old monarch with a gaping hole where once a proud nose and chiselled jawline were. A few other remnants of the violence that consumed the city only a week ago are scattered across the square: splintered window shutters hanging from their frames; a house scorched from fire; a blood stains on the white marble of the statue. It’s incredible to her how quickly the people of Kings Landing returned to normal life after such an uprising. She had been caught outside the castle when the violence had broken out, and fought alongside the city guards to safe her own skin if nothing else.

Old Man Tom hands her the mutton pastry with a nod, barely pausing to count out her coppers. Octavia lopes across the square to take her usual place leaning against the wall of a tanners, shielded by the shadows. The heat of Kings Landing effects her more than she’d like to admit, and she almost envies Clarke for being able to don such floaty, revealing clothing. From here she is hidden, and it
allows her to observe the people walking past freely. The city guards offer her a nod, reluctantly respectful after her efforts beside them in the uprising, but none of them trust her enough to approach her.

The warmth of the sun, and the satisfied feeling of being well fed settles around her like incense. It’s easy to become complacent like this; as a child on the streets the feeling she remembers most is the gnawing feeling of hunger in her stomach. It kept her alert and sharp, aware of everything around her, but warm and fed she is vulnerable, which is the only way she can explain her distraction when two cart drivers crash into each other at the mouth of the square. Her eyes are turned away for only moments, but it’s long enough for deft fingers to pluck her coin purse away from her hip.

Everything snaps into focus the moment she registers it, and she snatches at the air where her coin purse once was, fingers grasping at nothing. Her head snaps around and she sees the shock of dark hair darting away through the crowd. Her feet are moving before she can even register it, launching herself away from the shadows to give chase to the thief. As lax as she’d become, there are things that living on the streets taught her that she will never forget, and as she spirals and ducks around the crowd she can feel her instincts kicking in. Whoever stole her purse must have been lucky, because they have no real skill in navigating the streets. It takes only moments for Octavia to get close enough to grab their cloak and pull them to a choking stop. The thief struggles and Octavia slams them back into the wall with an arm braced against their shoulders, drawing a grunt from their lips.

“Fuck!”

The voice pulls her to a sudden stop, and she peers through the shadows, her mouth dropping open and her grip loosening when she realises who it is.

“Raven?”

Raven blinks at her, her brows creasing before her eyes widen. “Snow? What are you doing here?”

“The queen sent me.” Octavia gapes at her. “You just robbed me?”

Raven’s lips split into a wide, mischievous smile. “I guess I just did,” She tosses the coin purse back to her and Octavia fumbles to catch it. “I need to work on my escape.”

“You’re not fast enough,” Octavia agrees, absent mindedly. “How long have you been in the city? Why are you stealing?”

“A few days ago, just as the riots began. Some bastard got me in an alleyway on my first nigh, took everything I had.” Raven pushes her hair back, shifting a little so that she can lean against the wall. Her voice drops, becoming bitter and resentful. “I had a job lined up, but the guy decided he didn’t want me the second he saw my leg.”

“Fuck, Reyes,” Octavia shakes her head, glancing up and down at the girl. She looks disheveled and hungry, and Octavia places a hand on her shoulder, squeezing. “Let’s get you something to eat. Here,” She counts out some coins. “Get somewhere to stay as well.”

Raven’s expression closes up, “I won’t take charity.”

“You were just about to steal from me.”

“That’s different! I can’t take your money, Snow.”

“Lady Clarke gives me more than I could ever spend anyway.” Octavia argues, stubbornly. “Take it, I’ll talk to her about getting you a place in a forge, unless you want to keep stealing until the Gold
Cloaks catch you and throw you in the Black Cells?"

Raven glares up at her, furious and annoyed, until finally she acquiesces. “Fine. But I’ll return it.”

“You’d better.” As they set off back down to Aegon’s Square, Octavia can’t help but steal a glance at the girl, and think of how good it is to see a familiar face.

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Never before has she found it so difficult to put ink to parchment. Sat at the writing desk in her quarters in the Red Keep, she looks out of the window at the city spread out before her. The red tiled roofs and sandy walls are as familiar to her as the roses of Highgarden, but the city she once knew feels far away. Kings Landing will soon have a new king, from an utterly different House, and when Clarke casts glances at Finn from beneath her eyelashes, she can’t decide just how much the new king knew of his predecessor’s demise. Wells’s silence sits like a stone in her stomach, he answers none of her letters, and she doesn’t dare to write anything too damning to her mother, lest her letters are intercepted before they arrive at the Eyrie. Instead, her letter to her mother sits beside her, sealed and ready to be handed to a messenger. It tells her mother that she understands her concerns, and believes them to be well founded, but that she thinks her time is better spent in the capital for the time being. It will infuriate Lady Tyrell, she is sure; as a woman of Riverrun, much further north than Highgarden, her mother is less adept at playing the court politics of the south.

Now, the letter that she promised Lexa- long overdue by now- sits before her. In smudged ink and scored out lines, she has tried to explain what keeps her in Kings Landing, but just as with her mother’s letter, she doesn’t dare pen the whole truth. Instead, what comes out is a sprawling, confusing letter, made up of half truths and vague lies, all of which Clarke is sure will lead Lexa to the inevitable conclusion that she lied about her father, and her intentions to return. The thought sends a spear through her heart, because a part of her aches so very fiercely to make her way back to the north, and allow her kingdom to fall into ruin without her. It is only the thought of her father and all he did as Hand of the King to keep the south safe and secure which ties her to this land, and such a deep, innate feeling cannot be explained by a few lines on a piece of parchment.

Her eyes track the sun’s movement across the sky, and she pulls in a deep breath, before retrieving a new sheaf of parchment, and beginning anew. It is simpler to tell Lexa that she has gone to the Eyrie to grieve with her mother, and surely kinder for them both. When next she is able to return to the north and explain herself, she will, but for now it is easier to send the queen a lie.

She burns her original letter in the fire, and watches until the flames have licked through every last word.

Chapter End Notes

bit of a set up chapter here, getting some pieces into position for the rest of the story to play out, but I hope you still liked it! let me know what you thought down below or over on tumblr (@onemilliongoldstars) I love chatting with you guys and your comments truly make my day <3

apologies for the delay in getting out these chapters, in summary I got a new job, then ANOTHER new job which is requiring me to move, all over the christmas period, so everything is a little hectic! remember to click next for a Lexa-centric interlude!
Interlude: In the North

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude: In the North

Spring settles around the north, a cooler, milder version of its sister to the south. The snows melt away and they are instead left with overcast skies and rainfall which proves too much for the rivers and streams that run through her land. What were once babbling brooks turn into fast flowing rivers which eat away at farm land and wash away precariously placed homes. Her days are taken up with petitions from farmers for help compensating their loss and crops and livestock, and she almost wishes for the return of the heavy winter snows, if only to stop people from travelling so readily to the castle.

Some time after noon, Lexa gestures to Titus to allow no more petitioners into the throne room, and stands, stretching her legs gratefully. The day is grey outside, rain pattering lightly against the ground, but she is desperate to do anything but sit in her throne and listen to another complaint. As she slips through the door at the back of her dais, she gives Ser Lincoln a nod. The Queensguard falls into step behind her, a few paces away, and soon Lexa has forgotten about his presence once again. Outside, the rain falls against the covered walkway that runs the perimeter of the courtyard, pattering down against the slate, but it isn’t enough to discourage Anya from training in the yard with Aden.

Lexa doesn’t hesitate before she steps out into the courtyard, despite her attendants running after her with offers of a cloak. Instead, she allows the rain to soak into her jerkin and into her braids, her boots squelching through the mud as she walks towards the behourd where Anya is striking Aden again and again with her sword. She leans against the fencing to watch, her eyes following his movements, and though the young prince tries hard, he is no match for Anya’s strength and speed and soon slips over his own feet, landing in the mud with a thump.

“You’re getting better!” Anya calls over the rain, smiling despite her charge’s infuriated expression. She holds out a hand to help Aden up. “Keep your feet steady.”

“And your eyes up!” Lexa adds, loudly enough to draw their attention. She smiles her greeting, watching as Aden pushes his soaked hair away from his eyes.

“I beat her earlier,” He insists, taking a long draw from the canteen a page boy offers to him, and Lexa hums sceptically.

“You had better do it again before the night draws in, or I suspect you’ll both drown in this rain.”

“I can do it,” Aden’s chin juts stubbornly and he falls back into a defensive stance, his fingers tightening around his sword.

“You can try,” Anya is as relaxed and easy as Lexa ever sees her, rain in her eyes.

“Send him to me when you’re done,” Lexa instructs, and then adds, her eyes travelling over her brother’s mud soaked form, “Although perhaps after a bath.”

“Yes, your majesty.” Anya nods, and Lexa turns away before the sound of clashing steel can draw her back in again.
Inside, she has her own bath drawn to soak away the rain and hours sat on the throne, which leaves her feeling stiff and uncomfortable. Her crown is put aside and her hair braided simply back, dripping water down her back. Her handmaidens help her dry off, and slide into comfortable hose and a soft woollen tunic, so that she can settle by the fire. As the sky darkens outside, they fetch her a rich bowl of stew and hunks of fresh bread, accompanied by weak, warmed wine which steams from the goblet and settles in her stomach. In the warmth and light of her room, she flicks through the letters left out for her.

One bears the gold triangles and hands of the Iron Bank of Bravos and Lexa rolls her eyes at the sight of it. Reluctantly, she cracks the seal open and her eyes dart over the words written there. They say nothing more than she expected, and it takes all of her effort not to just throw the letter into the fire. Instead, she puts it aside and moves onto the next letter, her heart thumping when she sees the green rose sealing the parchment together. For a moment, her breath catches in her throat and she cannot force herself to crack the seal, instead running her fingers over the ridges and dips, committing it to memory.

It seems an age since she last saw Clarke, though it has only been two weeks. For the most part she can forget the southern lady even came to Winterfell, pushing her aside in her mind. Her days are filled with the problems of running a kingdom: letters and complaints, lower lords scuffling for position and supplies stores mysteriously drained. But at night, when her head rests upon her pillows and the candles are blown out, she is unable to keep Lady Clarke from her thoughts. News of Lord Jacob’s death, swiftly followed by riots in Kings Landing and the death of the King have reached Winterfell, but not by Clarke’s pen. At first Titus had given her word of Lady Clarke with the rest of his whispers from the southern capital, but she had told him to disregard any such news. It had felt like a deceit, hearing word of Clarke’s grieving, despite how much she craves to know how the girl is. The news of Lord Jacob had sent an intense pang of heart ache through Lexa, and she had spent most of her night drafting letters to Clarke to express her sympathy and sadness, before finally burning them all in the fire, unwilling to intrude on a time of such grief. But now, she holds Clarke’s words in her hands, and it is almost too terrifying to read them.

Slowly, she cracks open the seal and finds neat, curled writing awaiting her. As she reads, her heart lightens: Clarke is in the Eyrie with her mother grieving, she does not know when she will be able to leave her mother and return to Winterfell. She misses the snows and the quiet of the castle, particularly she misses the godswood and it’s peaceful, introspective air, which she cannot find in Riverrun. The final words draw a breath from her, and she feels her fingers tighten around the edges of the parchment as she reads. *I miss you and Winterfell, and hope that you are keeping safe all that I have left there.*

A knock to her door makes her fumble the letter, and she knows that she still looks flushed and guilty when Aden walks inside, despite her attempt at a façade. His hair is wet and his skin red from a thorough scrubbing. Luckily, he falls on the plate of food she has had left out for him like a rabid hound, and she is saved the trouble is making up excuses. By the time Aden raises his head, she is looking over her letter from the Iron Bank again, her brows furrowed, and he asks.

“Who is that from?”

Wordlessly, she passes the letter over and watches as he reads it, taking a long sip of warmed wine. Aden’s eyes narrow, his lips pursing and she feels a sense of satisfaction that he understands the meaning behind the powdered, polite words. His gaze is troubled when he looks up.

“Why do they continue to offer you money you do not want?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Lexa places the goblet down carefully beside Clarke’s letter.
“Never before have I known the Iron Bank to be so forceful in offering a loan.”

“Northmen have never really dabbled with the Iron Bank,” Aden grunts, picking at the remnants of food left on his plate. “Even father didn’t ask for their money when he went to war against the south, why would we suddenly change our ways now?”

“The Iron Bank has a tight grip on the south, father always taught me that.” Lexa muses, “Especially in the last few decades. The councils of the Iron Bank have changed in recent years, maybe their new members have become hungry for more than money.”

“How could they truly influence politics in Westeros?” Aden frowns at her, “They may have money, but a king can be commanded by no one.”

Lexa levels him a gaze, searching, as she counters, “You really think that? A ruler is at the mercy of all of their people. It takes very little to topple a king, or a queen: public discontent, a political blunder, defaulting on debts.”

“Do the Iron Bank have an army?” Aden demands, still unconvinced. “Do they have ships to sail to Westeros and horses for their cavalry?”

“They have the money to employ mercenaries,” Lexa tells him, “And a close connection with assassins in Bravos, so many say. Do not underestimate them just because they do not rule a country or wear a crown.”

“Why would they be worried about us?” The young prince shakes his head, frowning. “We owe them no debts.”

“No,” Lexa reaches for her goblet again, her eyes fixed to the fire. “Perhaps they think I am an easier target than my father. The most important thing for the Iron Bank is to find someone likely to gain interest, so that they can make a profit. It’s why father told me to never do dealings with them. I will write back to them to insist that the north does not need their assistance.”

“You don’t think it would be good to make ties to a powerful ally?” Aden looks at her curiously, and Lexa takes a moment to think on what he’s said, before shaking her head.

“There are better ways to make political alliances than become indebted to the Iron Bank. In a few years, when we are more secure and you are older, we shall start to think on what alliances would be best for us.”

Aden nods his acceptance, and they sit in silence for a few minutes, Aden picking at the remains of his supper as Faith pads her way closer to Lexa. The direwolf looks at her morosely, settling her head heavily into Lexa’s lap, and Lexa runs a hand over her ears, scratching.

“How is Lady Clarke?” Aden’s attempts to sound offhand and casual are poor, and Lexa raises her eyes to fix him with a raised eyebrow, until he becomes flustered and defends himself. “I heard about her father.”

“She is staying in the Eyrie with her mother for the time being,” Lexa says, at last, her eyes falling to the fire. “They are grieving.”

“Did she say when she would return?”

“When she is good and ready,” Lexa shakes her head, “Despite what Titus says, I trust that she will. There is no need to rush her.”
“It will be good to have her back,” Aden says, thoughtfully, and Lexa pulls in a breath, hoping that she doesn’t sound too hopeful when she answers.

“Yes, it will.”

Chapter End Notes

So now we've seen what's happening up in Winterfell! We will be getting Lexa back, don't you worry, but Clarke has to do a little bit on her own first! I miss Lexa just as much as I'm sure you guys do though :( Let me know what you thought below, do you think Clarke is making the right choice? Even if you don't, do you get where she's coming from? I can't wait to talk to you down below or over on tumblr (@onemilliongoldstars)

thank you so much for reading!
wow that was a hot second wasn't it? I'm so sorry for the wait, moving and starting a new job turned out to be much more stressful and time consuming than I thought. I hope you guys can forgive me and enjoy the new chapter <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Book Two: Chapter 4**

As the coronation approaches, Kings Landing swells like a pig fattened for the slaughter. Nobles seem to spill from the cracks in the stone; those who arrived in time for King Thelonious’s funeral have stayed and more arrive every day, much to the utter horror of the servants and handmaidens stretched too thin looking after them, and desperately trying to find them places to stay. Clarke is glad that she had already secured such a luxurious room in the Maidenvault, if she had arrived now she may have faced the horror of having to find a room in town as many of the lower nobles are now having to do. It had been difficult enough to find a room for Raven on such short notice, and it had taken a heavy purse to be sure that the inn keep wouldn’t sell the room off to any visiting nobles.

Despite securing her room and board, Clarke has not yet been able to see Raven. It is far more difficult to slip away in the Red Keep, where she can always feel the eyes of one noble or another upon her and her attention is demanded at almost every hour of the day. The noble women crowd around her to hear stories of the north, and gossip frivolously, and she knows that if she has to spend another hour pretending to embroider as she listens to women around her discuss the merits of Arbour wine and Essos wine, she will scream. It is even more frustrating to see Octavia returning from her few nights off with her purse newly filled and a hangover she won’t admit to; by all accounts Raven has made fast friends with some regulars of the local tavern who are almost as skilled at dice as she is. Clarke’s stomach burns with jealousy just to think of it.

A grey morning gives her a moment of peace. The mist has rolled in from the sea, cooling the air and blocking out the sun, and she steps from her rooms with her cloak wrapped tightly around her shoulders. A guard she does not know is stationed outside of her room, and she shakes him away when he falls into step behind her, dismissing him and telling him to inform Octavia that she is in the gardens. The paths are blissfully empty; nowadays it is hard to find them empty of unmarried ladies parading themselves before the eligible lords of the kingdom. The peace and the cold are achingly familiar, and though she never thought she would long for the loneliness of Winterfell again, she can’t deny that it is a blessing to be truly alone, if only for an hour or so. Thoughts of her letter to Lexa plague her, though she tries to forget it. She has written a hundred more letters, since she penned the first, recounting her claims and explaining herself, but each time the stories seem to spiral out of her control and look like a wild falsehood concocted only to keep her away from Winterfell.

Mist hangs about her, turning to delicate water droplets that cling to her hair and fingertips. The city and the castle become muffled and far away, so she is startled when she rounds a corner to see a figure appearing from the mists. For a moment, fear grips her heart, and she wishes she had retrieved her dagger from Lord Pike, but then the figure comes closer and she is able to make out familiar floppy hair and a boyish smile.
“Lady Clarke,” Finn seems just as surprised to see her, his feet hesitating for a moment, though she sees his face light up with a smile.

“Young Majesty,” Clarke gives a slight curtsey.

“What are you doing out here?” His brows crease, and he fumbles, “I only meant- I thought I was alone.”

“I wanted some peace, your majesty.” She gives him a slight smile, and falls into step beside him. “I expect you wanted the same.”

Finn gives her a rueful smile, “As ever, you are too clever for your own good.”

“Just as clever as I need to be, your majesty,” She teases in return, and he laughs, the sound caught and muffled by the mist.

“Please, we don’t need such formalities,” His cheeks colour a little, “I should think we were past that a long time ago.” Clarke gives a polite smile, and a nod, and Finn continues, “I’ve never seen Kings Landing quite like this before, but then I didn’t spend nearly enough time here as a child.”

“How could you know you would need to,” Clarke placates him.

“Still, sometimes I wish I had been here regularly, as you were,” His eyes flicker to her and she pushes a strand of hair behind her ear, thoughtful.

“I don’t think you’re suffering for it, you’re a hero, everyone adores you.”

“They say they adore me because I’m the new king.” Finn corrects her, and her eyes flicker up to him, surprised, to find a wry smile upon his face. He continues, raising his eyebrows, “I’m sure you know the ins and outs of court politics far better than I. Even deciding who should come to the coronation is a task that takes days.”

“Are you looking forward to the coronation?”

“I am,” He doesn’t quite seem sure of himself, but Clarke doesn’t bring it upon herself to point it out.

“It should be a grand event, I hope the castle’s coppers can afford it,” She jokes, and it pulls another laugh from Finn.

“I should expect so, Lord Pike has everything under control.” The words send a thrill of ice through her veins, but she is saved from answering when Finn asks. “I hope you will save me a dance at the ball afterwards?”

Somethings tugs in her heart at the memory the words stir, but she pushes it away, fixing the new king with a dazzling smile. “How could I refuse the king?”

He laughs again, and they turn a corner onto a path where the roses climb up the trellises and form a beautiful, heavily scented tunnel. It is dim inside, and the mist clings to the petals in water droplets, gleaming. In this refuge, where they are afforded the illusion of privacy, she asks, quietly.

“Are you looking forward to being king?”

For a moment Finn is silent at her side, and when she looks up at him, she finds his throat bobbing as he swallows. Finally, he says, his voice soft. “No one has asked me that yet.”

Clarke feels a swell of sympathy; looking at him now she is reminded of the easy going, kind boy
who would spend so many summers in Highgarden. It is to this boy that she says, “You can do it, Finn. You have a good heart, listen to it.”

The smile he gives her is tentative, but perhaps the most genuine thing she has seen since she stepped into Kings Landing.

“Thank you, Clarke. I am glad you’re here.” He hesitates, nervous for a moment, “Perhaps, after the coronation, you would like to dine together?”

“That would be wonderful.” She reassures him, and accepts the arm he offers out to her, trying not to think of the letters now turned to ash in her fireplace.

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The Lannister soldiers posted dutifully on either side of the door to the chambers of the Hand of the King eye her with understandable surprise as she approaches. They shift in their embellished armour, lions snarling on their chests, but their hands do not fall to the hilts of their swords and that is their first mistake. Clarke offers them a soft smile, her dress flowing about her legs, the artfully designed straps leaving her back on display, and her hair piled into curls behind her head to show off the curve of her neck. There are pink roses braided into it, and without a guard she is sure that she looks about as threatening as a daisy in a summer meadow.

“Good afternoon, sers.” She addresses them, though she is sure neither are more than a simple household knight. “Seven blessings to you, is your master in?”

“Good afternoon, my lady.” The first knight, the younger one, flushes as he speaks to her. “He is-”

“But he is occupied at the moment,” The second soldier, older and more grisly than the younger, interrupts him. “You’ll have to come back another time, my lady.”

“I’m afraid this is the only time I have to spare,” She keeps her voice light and lilting, “And I only mean to collect something from Lord Pike, it will take but a moment.”

“Regardless, he’s not to be disturbed.” The second soldier tells her, flatly.

The first soldier wavers, however, “Lord Pike will be done soon, my lady, if you’d like to wait.”

“Thank you.” She tells him, smiling, “But I cannot wait. This will only take a moment, I’m sure your lord can spare it.” She steps forwards, as if to knock on the door, but the second soldier raises an arm to stop her, just as the door swings open of its own accord.

From behind it stumbles a serving girl, giggling, with her hair and clothes all set askew. She freezes the moment she sees them, her wide eyes flickering from the soldiers to Clarke, and in the moment of silence that follows Lord Pike appears at the door behind her, his gold and red doublet hanging open. He gives them all a lazy, arrogant smile and nods his head in Clarke’s direction.

“Off you go,” He tells the serving girl, who scurries away gratefully. His eyes land on Clarke and there is a second too long of silence before he asks. “Lady Clarke, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

She is only able to conjure up a thin smile in response. “I was hoping for a moment of your time, Lord Pike.”

“Of course,” Stepping aside, he holds his arm out wide to allow her in, and she feels the hairs on the back of her neck prickle as she puts her back to him. Inside, the chamber is orderly and neat. It is strange to see it like this, as for most of her life it had been her father’s chamber. She remembers it
with rugs across the floor and golden tapestries along the walls, books and parchments on every surface and a comfortable chair before the fire for reading. Now, the room is dark and bare, and stinks of sex and sweat.

“May I offer you a drink?” Pike’s voice comes from behind her, and she turns to see him lingering beside a wine decanter and two goblets.

“No, thank you.”

“Very well,” He leisurely pours himself a drink. “I trust you are enjoying your time in Kings Landing?”

“Almost as much as you,” She speaks without thinking, and silently curses her slip of the tongue when he turns slowly to fix her with a curious expression.

“Indeed,” He says at last, taking his goblet into his hands. “Your mother doesn’t want you to be with her?”

“My place is here,” Clarke says, with as much finality as she can muster, and Pike nods his agreement.

“What can I help you with, Lady Clarke?” He at least has the decency to fasten his doublet as he sits into the chair behind the desk.

“I was hoping to retrieve something of mine that you have.”

“Ah,” He gives her a slight, knowing smile. “Of course,” Carefully, he takes a key from around his neck, threading it from the chain and sliding it into a lock in one of his desk drawers. There is a heavy click, and then the drawer slides open. With a flourish, he produces her dagger, laying it on the desk between them as he locks the drawer again. “I made sure it was safe my lady, stored it with the rest of my most precious possessions.”

“Thank you,” She barely manages to give him an innocent, pretty smile. “I appreciate that.”

“An interesting weapon.” He observes, picking up the dagger to turn it this way and that. “Northern in design, very interesting indeed.” His eyes dart up to meet hers, his expression hard. “You had it made in Winterfell?”

“It was a gift.”

“A gift?” His brows lift in surprise. “I am sure you caught many a young northern lord’s eye while you were there.”

She offers him a thin smile. “I couldn’t say.”

“You are too modest, Lady Clarke.” His eyes flicker over her again, more assessing than before. “Your mother would have been distraught if you had returned engaged to a northern man.”

“She would have,” Clarke agrees, lightly, her gaze fixed to the dagger on the desk between them. “But fortunately I did not.”

“A girl of your age and station, you must be looking for a husband.” His lips purse, thoughtfully. “I shall make enquiries at court for you. With the king and your father gone and your mother in the Vale, it will be difficult to find someone suitable to help you make a good match.”
“Thank you, my lord.” She bobs a small curtsey, reaching out to take the dagger into her hands. “I'd be much obliged, I'm sure.”

The coronation of the new king is a sickeningly lavish affair. She can barely begin to imagine how much gold Lord Pike must have conjured to pay for the hoards of servers, bedecked in brilliant gold and white silk, embroidered with the crest of the new king - a golden swan. New tapestries hang from the walls, in similar colours, and acrobats and fire breathers from the eastern lands wonder between the guests in the Great Hall, entertaining them. There is rumoured to be an elephant awaiting the king at the end of the night, though what Finn will do with such a beast Clarke cannot begin to imagine. The boy she knew was most comfortable on horseback, on his way to a hunt, but he doesn't seem as if he would want to be much further from the ground than that. People wind gracefully in and out of one another in the Great Hall, long skirts swinging, hair bedecked in jewels to show their status. Everyone attempts to seem graceful and contained, but at the same time they hope to never be out of the eyeline of the new king. Clarke can't rightly judge them, her own gown is made from fine silk in blue and gold, draped prettily along the curves of her body, and jewels hang from her neck and wrists and waist. Only her hair is free of the sparkles, her handmaiden instead pulling the heavy curls back to show the arch of her chin and neck, and letting it spill down her back. The artful, carefully arranged nonchalance is set off with golden roses, cut and brought from Highgarden that morning especially, and braided into her curls.

With delicate fingers, she plucks a goblet from the passing tray of a servant, and surveys the crowd with interest. Benches and tables are laid out for a feast which will soon be underway, but for now people are permitted to wander and talk freely. Only the most honoured guests have been allowed into the Great Hall, with all lower houses forced into the overflow in the gardens, but Clarke almost envies them: the Great Hall is stuffy and warm under the midday sun. The new king sits at the high table, Lord Pike Lannister at his side, and rumoured to be named the new Hand of the King. Finn still seems as boyish as ever, a dimple shining from his cheek as he speaks with those permitted to approach, his crown heavy upon his head. He had accepted the crown with all of the solemnity and diligence required of a sovereign in the Great Sept earlier that day, but now his façade has crumbled and he is the boy she remembers once again.

Somewhere, her uncle and cousins are making pretty small talk, twittering like little birds. She had been stood with them for the coronation, as the sun had filled the Sept with a warm glow, and Finn had walked to his place before the towering statue of the Father, and felt their gazes burning her skin. Despite her grandmother’s insistence that family was more important than individual ambition, her cousins have always envied her the security and power that her close relationship with the Baratheons had allowed her. Now, they whisper about her connections to Finn Swann and how she came to be in the capital, rather than mourning her father in the Eyrie. Her grandmother had retired after the coronation ceremony, her face rather white, and Clarke had only been able to endure so much more of her family without her grandmother as a buffer.

Now, she lingers to one side, smiling at the ladies of the court she has come to know over the last few weeks, and watching from the corner of her eyes as Lord Pike places a hand on Finn’s shoulder and murmurs advice into his ear. A presence at her side startles her, and she turns to find Octavia, her face hard and her lips drawn into a firm line of disapproval.

“Octavia,” Her breath escapes her, relief flushing through her body, until she realises that the soldier’s fingers linger on the sword at her hip. “What’s wrong?”

“There is a man watching you,” Octavia warns her, lowly, and Clarke almost smiles.
“I expect a few men are watching me,” She answers, as lightly as she can, and only laughs when Octavia glowers.

“He has been following you,” She says, and her eyes narrow, catching sight of something over Clarke’s shoulder. “There.”

Instinctively, Clarke cranes her neck to follow Octavia’s gaze, and her heart beats a little slower when she realises who exactly Octavia has caught sight of. “Thank you, Octavia, but there’s no need to fear. That is Lord Marcus of House Arryn,” A small smile lingers on her lips as she turns to greet the approaching figure. “I highly suspect he speaks for my mother.”

Lord Marcus is a tall, dark haired man, with a wan smile and kind, old eyes. His house crest, a falcon and a crescent moon on a blue field, are stitched delicately into his doublet, and there is something in his face that reminds her of a wise bird, watching from afar. His castle in the high mountains of the Vale is easily protected and fortified, historically keeping House Arryn from the conflicts of Westeros. Lord Arryn has been a friend of her mother’s for as long as she can remember- which is no doubt why she now seeks refuge with him- a familiar face of her childhood, and now she offers him a smile and her hand to take.

“My lord,” She bows her head in respect when he takes her hand, his fingers squeezing welcomingly. When she looks up again, she finds that his eyes are soft and shadowed. “How good it is to see you again.”

“Lady Clarke, you are as charming as ever,” He tells her, with a slight smile. His expression shifts and drops, and she feels her stomach lurch in pain when he says. “May I say how sorry I was to hear of your father’s passing. I’m sorry I couldn’t be here in time to attend his funeral.”

“It’s a long way to come,” Carefully, she takes her hand from his and falls into step with him. “How have you been?”

“Well enough,” He watches her from the corner of his eye, clearly trying to judge his next words. “Your mother sends her regards.”

“I’m sure she does,” It is hard to bite away the wry smile that lingers at the corners of her lips. “How is she?”

“As well as can be expected,” His expression pinches with concern, “She worries for you Clarke.”

“She has made that very clear in her letters.” Clarke offers a smile to a passing noble, and they are quiet for a few moments until the space around them clears once again and they are afforded some semblance of privacy.

“She loved your father very much,” A shadow of a smile passes across his face, “I think she would feel better to have you with her in this time, and really,” He glances about the room, “Who do you have here to support you?”

Her spine straightens at his words, frustration flushing through her. In a way, she knows that he will never see her as anything but the little girl who visited the Eyrie and marveled at the moon door. “My lord,” She speaks slowly, biting down on her temper. “While I appreciate your concern, I assure you I am doing fine here. My mother doesn’t need me.”

He eyes her thoughtfully, shaking his head at last. “I can see I’m not going to persuade you to return with me, as your mother had hoped. Here,” He takes her hand again and her eyes widen when she realises that within his grasp is a slip of paper, big enough to be wound around a raven’s leg, but
instead being pressed against her palm. “She wanted you to have this.” His eyes flicker away, glancing at the room for a moment, “Don’t read it here.”

“I won’t,” Her voice shakes, just a little, and she presses the parchment into a ball within her fist.

“I should greet the other nobles,” He says, at last, and gives her a brief, courteous bow, “I will be here for another few days after the coronation, my lady, if you change your mind.”

Nodding, she watches him go for a second before making her way back to where Octavia stands, her back to the wall, watching the room intently. The soldier’s eyes dart up and down her form, narrowing.

“Are you alright?” She asks, brusquely, when Clarke is close enough, and Clarke nods.

“Here,” She gives Octavia the shawl that had been draped across her arms, and hopes that the soldier feels the slip of paper being pushed against her fingers. “Take this to my room, I won’t be needing it.”

Octavia’s eyes narrow further, but she only nods, turning on her heel to march away. Clarke drains her goblet, not caring that the wine will surely go to her head at any moment, and gestures to a servant for another goblet. Before the server can arrive, however, a goblet is offered out to her, and she raises her eyes to find a stranger. His hair is as white as the snows in Winterfell, his skin tanned from the sun and kindly wrinkled. Despite this, his age has not been unkind to him, and he stands tall and proud in garb that she recognises as Bravosi.

“You seemed thirsty, my lady.” He gives her a smile that reminds her so greatly of her father that she almost feels her stomach fall away.

“I- yes, thank you, my lord.”

“I am no lord,” He laughs softly, and his slight accent tilts and trips over the words. “My name is Dante Wallace, I am an envoy of the Iron Bank of Bravos.”

“I see,” Realisation passes across her face before she can school it, and she continues more lightly. “You have come to see how your money is being spent.”

Dante Wallace gives a low laugh, “And to offer our congratulations to the new king. Our relationship with the Westeros crown has always been a good one.”

“And a very lucrative one.” Clarke adds, and smiles when Dante ducks his head in acknowledgment.

“You are very quick, Lady Clarke.”

“You know who I am,” Her eyes widen a little.

Dante Wallace gives a wan smile. “The Iron Bank makes it our business to know everyone of importance in the known world.” He eyes her with interest, “You have recently returned from the north.”

“I have.”

“The new queen there is a very important person indeed, and very impressive by all accounts.”

Clarke takes a slow sip of her wine, hoping that the goblet conceals the flush of joy that talking about Lexa brings to her cheeks. “She is,” She agrees, at last.
“How did you find your time in the north?”

“How did you find your time in the north?”

“Interesting, and cold.” She gives him a small smile, which he returns.

“Yes, it is rather different to the weather in Bravos too. I am not made for the cold, I’m afraid.” He grimaces delicately, and the expression draws a laugh from Clarke.

“I thought so too, when I arrived. By the time I left though I-” Her eyes dart away, linger on the wine in her goblet. “I’d grown used to it.”

“I hope they received you well, despite the tensions between north and south.” She finds his gaze kind and calm when she looks up again. “It was brave of you to go.”

“They treated me very well,” She insists, “And really, it wasn’t as brave as you would think.”

“It is good to know that the queen is not a cruel woman, or a vindictive one.” Dante Wallace muses, and she nods.

“Not at all, she’s very kind and fair.”

His brows crease, just slightly, and he pauses for a moment before he answers. “I see. Well, thank you Lady Clarke, it was a pleasure speaking with you.”

As he gives a short, curt nod and turns on his heel, she is left with a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach, as if she had just said something she shouldn’t have.

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The hubbub of the coronation night is the perfect opportunity to slip away from the castle. With servants too busy fawning over rich, drunken lords, and guards passing their own flasks from person to person, Clarke manages to pull a dark cloak around herself and escape through one of the lower gates, Octavia fast on her heels. The streets are similarly filled with jubilation, despite the late hour, and Clarke has to duck her head and sidestep those tripping over their own feet after a few too many flagons of mead. Everything feels very far away, a pit of dread and fear sitting heavily in her stomach. It is only Octavia’s hand at her elbow that keeps her moving forwards, and by the time they get to the tavern where she had installed Raven, she feels almost sick.

The innkeeper is nowhere to be seen, but the tavern is filled to bursting with rowdy customers. They sit at tables and benches, cheering and singing and drinking. The smell of mead and smoke sits heavily in the air, and from the centre of the room comes the jeering of men around a dice table. It is to here that Octavia leads her, tugging her by the hand.

“Reyes! Reyes!” She shouts over the din, but there is no response, and so they keep pushing through the crowd until a familiar head of dark hair appears, counting up coins with two men and crowing about her winnings.

Raven laughs at something the curly haired man says, but Octavia’s grip on her shoulder makes her turn, her brows pulled with anger until she spots them and her expression clears.

“Octavia,” Her eyes flicker to Clarke and widen. “Hold on.” She turns back to the two men, scooping up the rest of her share of the coins. “I’ll leave you boys to it.”

“What!” One of them cries, swaying a little where he stands. “Don’t go Reyes!”

“Sorry, got visitors. See you tomorrow.” She doesn’t stay long enough to listen to the rest of his
complaints, elbowing her way through the crowds back to them. “What were you thinking, bringing her here?” She hisses at Octavia, pulling them both up the rickety stairs and down a narrow corridor which slopes.

“She said she had to get out,” Clarke hears Octavia spit back, angrily. “Where else was I supposed to take her?”

“If she’s spotted here-” Raven retorts, fumbling with a key as they come to a stop. With rough tugs, she unlocks the door and pushes it open, ushering them both furtively inside.

It’s a small, well ordered room, clean if a little bare, and it reminds Clarke of the few taverns she was forced to stay in on the journey to Winterfell. Octavia directs her to the bed and she sits heavily, glancing up at Raven. The girl’s anger has morphed to concern now, and she slowly crouches before Clarke, placing her hands on her knees.

“My lady? Clarke? What happened?”

Slowly, her fingers still shaking, Clarke extracts the small roll of parchment Lord Marcus had given her and presses it into Raven’s fumbling hands. She watches, as if from far away as the girl reads it, her lips parting as horror washes across her face.

“Are you sure this is true?” She sounds graver than she ever has before.

“Lord Kane gave it to me, he wouldn’t lie, and it’s in my mother’s hand.” A shiver runs through her body.

“Gods,” Raven breathes out, sinking onto the bed next to her. Her expression is a picture of shock and fury, and Octavia snatches the parchment from her hands, her eyes widening.

“What? What does it say?” She peers over the parchment, squinting to read the words there.

“Lord Pike poisoned my father… and if he did that I would hazard a guess that he had the king killed somehow as well.” Clarke pushes herself from the bed, unable to keep still.

“Clarke,” Octavia’s eyes follow her, the parchment limp between her fingers. “That’s a serious accusation.”

“Indeed,” She hesitates by the fire, it’s warmth barely penetrating the ice that has worked its way into her veins. “My mother wouldn’t risk writing it down unless she knew that it was true.”

“Lannister,” Octavia muses furiously, her brows pulling together. “I knew he was trouble from the moment I saw him. You can’t trust a Lannister.”

“If he’s managed to do this with no one suspecting him, there have to be other people involved.” Raven seems pale, but determined. “If we can get to them, we can find out the truth.”

“I can’t ask you to risk yourselves in this,” Clarke’s eyes flicker between them both, “If he’s willing to kill two of the most powerful men in the land, he won’t hesitate in killing any of us.”

“Tough shit,” Raven paces unsteadily towards the fire, and kneels beside it to lure it back into life. “You involved us the moment you told us.”

“It’ll be dangerous,” She protests, her voice shaking, “I won’t always be able to protect you.”

“We don’t need you to protect us,” Octavia argues, “We’ve been looking after ourselves for a long
“Even so!” Clarke’s wild eyes dart between them, her voice dropping. “This is lunacy, you have to know that. More than likely we’ll all be killed.”

“Then why are you staying?” Raven demands, heaving herself back to her feet. “Go back to your mother!”

“I can’t do that! I can’t leave this city- this *kingdom* - to the mercy of a murderer.”

“Then if you’re staying, we’re staying.” Octavia tells her, simply.

“This has to stay between us,” Raven instructs them, plucking the parchment from between Octavia’s fingers. “The less people know the better.” With a flick of her fingers, the parchment is sent fluttering into the fire, catching in moments, and together they watch it burn.

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Grand Maester Orrin has been the maester in Kings Landing for as long as Clarke can remember. He is like an old oak tree, gnarled and splintering, with white hair so long that it comes to his waist, and vague eyes which never quite meet her gaze. He was a particular favourite of the Baratheon family, having brought Wells into the world after a seemingly endless stream of miscarriages and stillbirths. As the finest healer in the south, Clarke remembers him setting her broken arm when she fell from a horse as a child, and ordering her away from Wells’ chamber door when he had a fever.

His chambers smell of mint and chamomile, incense burning from the candles on the desk, and plants hanging from every free surface. Maester Orrin looks at her with a slight, wavering smile and heaves himself from his seat behind the desk as his boy lets her in. She feels as if she can hear his bones creaking.

“Grand Maester.” She nods her head his way. “Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon Lady Clarke.” He offers his gnarled hand for her to clasp. “What can I do for you today? Is there something that ails you?”

“No, Grand Maester,” She takes the seat he offers out to her as he sinks back down again. “I only wanted to see you and ask you a few things.”

“Of course,” He beckons to his boy, “Wine, boy.”

Clarke sits back as the boy hurries around, pouring them both wine into goblets. “My father,” She begins, and both the maester’s and the boy’s eyes flicker to her, equally wide with surprise. Maester Orrin schools his expression first.

“Lord Tyrell’s death was a terrible tragedy, my lady.” He says, gravely.

“It was,” Her voice hitches, unexpectedly, and for one awful moment she thinks she might cry.

“I’m sorry you didn’t have a chance to say goodbye,” There is a moment of silence between them as his boy settles in the corner to sort through some herbs. “Lord Tyrell was a fine man, a good man. Hard to find in this city.”

“He was,” She cradles her goblet, thinking of the right words to say. “Do you know what killed him in the end?”
Maester Orrin sighs heavily, “Your father didn’t sleep well towards the end of his life. He was always in his study, he complained of headaches so I gave him something to help him sleep.”

“You gave him something before he died?” Her eyes narrow in curiosity. “Could he have… taken too much?”

“No, my lady, you misunderstand me.” He gives her a slight, condescending smile. “Your father took a small dose almost every night, I had my boy run a small vial to him, so I know he didn’t take too much.”

“It was that bad?” Her eyes widen and she feels her stomach sink. “He was always… so well, so healthy. I never knew him to be ill in his life.”

“Sometimes the lifestyle of the city can catch up with men. Your father complained of stomach pains towards the end, I expect the rich food and the wine may have been too much—”

“Grand Maester,” She cuts through him, her patience wearing thin. “My father was the Lord of the Reach, he was used to a rich lifestyle.”

The Maester’s expression stutters, falling for a moment before he returns to his usual vaguely comforting façade. “It’s very distressing my lady, I understand. I’m sorry I can’t tell you more.”

“And he didn’t complain of any other ailments?” Desperation begins to bleed into her voice, “He didn’t seem to be acting… strangely?”

“There is no use dwelling on what we cannot change,” He smiles and pushes himself from his seat again. “The details of your father’s death will not make his passing any easier, my lady.”

“I know, I only wanted to ask—”

“Times like this can be upsetting for the fairer sex,” He begins rummaging in his cabinet, “You are so delicate and gentle.” He stands straight again, with a glass vial in his hand. “Here, my lady, this should help to calm some of the distress you feel.”

“Thank you,” The words come out fractured and false as she takes the offered vial.

“Of course, my dear.” He smiles kindly, and offers her a hand to stand, his boy rushing to open the door. “May I advise you not to think of this too much, it will only continue to upset you.”

“Thank you,” She repeats, her heart still thundering in her chest and she barely realises she has been escorted from the room until the door shuts behind her.

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The sunlight is warm and soft, streaming in through the balcony and into the king’s solar, where Clarke sits at a small table. Venison and carrots sit on the plate before her, delicately seasoned, with a rich, sweet sauce, and she watches from beneath her lashes as the man across the table from her eats through his own plate with the enthusiasm she remembers from childhood. Finn’s crown is nowhere to be seen now, only his fine clothes and the room around them give any clue as to his new position in life.

Finn’s eyes dart up and he catches her watching, swallowing before giving a sheepish smile. “Sorry, I never had the manners my father tried to drill into me.”

“That’s alright,” Clarke can’t help but smile back, Finn is so earnest and eager to please that it’s hard
to dislike him. “You must miss your parents now more than ever.”

Finn chews thoughtfully for a moment, “Not really,” He admits at last, “They died so long ago I’m used to them not being around.” His gaze meets hers again and his expression softens. “It’s good to have you here Clarke, I could almost pretend things are normal.”

Clarke pushes her venison back and forth across her plate, “Yes,” She says, fondly, “It’s as if we were back in Highgarden again, before any of this happened.” A twinge of regret shoots through her, her thoughts returning as they almost always do to the soft, gentle girl who had kissed her in the Godswood, but Finn’s voice brings her back to reality again.

“We had fun,” He laughs, his cheeks dimpling with his smile.

She grins back, momentarily nostalgic, and leans back in her chair, cradling her wine. “Do you remember when we tied my cousin to a donkey to see how far it would go?”

“Yes!” Finn’s whole expression brightens, and he continues eagerly. “He rode all the way to Oldtown before somebody finally untied him! Your father never trusted me again.”

“Nonsense,” Clarke scoffs, “My father always knew that I was the ringleader, I could never fool him.”

“Those were the best summers,” Finn’s smile gentles, “If only we could be so carefree again.”

“We didn’t know how lucky we were,” She agrees, quietly.

“It must be strange for you to be back in this place,” Finn gestures to the room, “I only ever met with the king on hunts, never here.”

“You are the king now,” She reminds him, with a wry smile, and continues when he colours, “It is strange… but I am glad that you are here, ruling.”

“You are?” Finn eyes her from over his goblet, “You don’t wish Wells were here in my stead?”

Her breath hitches for a moment at the sound of Wells’s name, but a now familiar bubble of resentment settles in the bottom of her stomach. “Clearly Wells was not made for the pressures of ruling, maybe it’s best he’s not here.” Her words come out a little shorter than intended and at the sight of Finn’s alarmed expression she continues, more gently. “Besides, you’re doing wonderfully so far.”

“I have help but,” He rubs at his forehead, “It’s harder than I thought it would be.”

Clarke meets his eyes, and gives a comforting smile, reaching over to touch softly at his hand upon the table. “If you ever need to unburden yourself, I’d be happy to listen.”

“Thank you,” He sounds relieved at the offer, “It would be nice to talk to someone… neutral.”

“Of course,” Her stomach flutters with anticipation as he settles back into his chair. “What concerns all you, my lord?”

“The peasant’s revolt,” Finn cradles his goblet within his hand, “I’ve had reports that it was stirred up by a few outspoken men, speaking in taverns and such. It sounds serious, they could form an organisation if they wanted to and they’re clearly not opposed to violence. I’ve tried to speak to Lord Pike about it, but all he wants to discuss is war with the north-”
“What?” Clarke’s eyes widen, her voice catching over her words. “War?”

“Oh.” Finn’s brows wrinkle with displeasure, “Yes, well… Pike is convinced that they are mobilising their troops, though I have no other reports of it. He thinks we should strike now, while the weather is fair and we have the advantage.”

“I-I don’t think the north are mobilising against us.” She manages at last, and at Finn’s perplexed expression continues, more certainly. “I was just there, there were no signs of it, and the queen is not someone to go looking for war.”

“I suppose you have just returned.” Finn regards her with interest, “Did you speak much with the queen?”

“A fair amount.” She hopes he cannot tell that her heart is racing beneath her corset. “And I found her a reasonable, compassionate woman. She let me return here to see my father, after all.”

“She did.” He acknowledges.

“Lord Pike must be getting incorrect information, because I am certain they are not planning a war.” Clarke gives him a pretty smile. “You wouldn’t want to plunge the revolting peasants into an unnecessary war, would you your majesty?”

Finn’s brows furrow and he nods, “I hadn’t thought of it that way, Clarke. Thank you.”

She lets out a soft, relieved breath and raises her goblet a little. “If you truly wanted to appease the peasants your majesty, you should be sure that you are seen in the masses.”

His brows furrow, creasing with confusion, and she continues, smiling sweetly. “They love you dearly, if you were to show yourself in the city more often you would be adored.”

Finn’s eyes widen and he nods slowly, “I see, thank you Clarke.”

She just smiles, and sips her wine. Privately, she wonders whether he really does know how much the love of the people could save him, if his life was ever truly in danger, and vows to herself that they will not lose another king.

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Chapter End Notes

thank you so so much for reading, especially if you're still here after all this time. This chapter was a lot of set up for things to come, things are really going to start hitting the fan in the next chapter! What do you think will happen? Is the Grand Maester good or bad? Did you like the appearance of Kane? let me know down below or over on tumblr (@onemilliongoldstars)
Book Two: Chapter 5

The tunic that she wears is almost unbearably itchy, and Raven has to press her hands together behind her back as she waits for the Grand Maester to rise from behind his desk and hobble around to peer at her through the low light. The clothes are not her own, instead stolen for her by Octavia for this endeavour, but she tries to seem as natural in them as possible when the Grand Maester’s eyes run over her. Even stepping foot into the castle was enough to send a bristle of warning down Raven’s spine, but Lady Clarke needs her dearly in this and after all Clarke has done for her Raven cannot refuse.

“You must be here to replace my damned boy,” The Grand Maester says at last, and the words startle her so much that for a moment she is unable to find her words. The old man continues, not seeming to notice her silence. “About time, that oaf disappeared days ago.”

“Disappeared, Grand Maester?” Raven manages, at last and the man grumbles his agreement, settling into an armchair across the room.

“No good rascal, always getting into scrapes, out whoring and drinking until all hours,” He complains, scowling up at her. “But what am I to do with you? I need a boy, not a girl.”

“I’m a fast leaner Grand Maester,” She protests, fiercely, “I’m young and strong, I can fetch and carry with the best of them.”

His eyes crease and he observes her again, this time more closely. “Hmm,” He agrees at last, motioning to her with his cane. “Get to sorting those herbs girl and we’ll see if you can stay.”

“Yes sir,” She darts to the herb box he had gestured to, taking the time to linger over the names carefully labelling each compartment. They work quietly together, and while the smell of incense irritates her nose and the light in the room is almost too dim to work by, Raven is glad for something to keep her hands busy and working. The Grand Maester is mostly quiet, he asks for herbal tea and sweetmeats, and deigns to share some with her, but otherwise they are silent. When Raven shows him the sorted herbs, he regards her with pursed lips and sets her to a more delicate task of cleaning and sorting his medical tools. He stands to watch her this time, leaning on his cane, and she tries to make sure that her hands don’t shake under his gaze.

“Did you become interested in medicine after your leg was injured?” It’s the first words either of them have spoken in over an hour and Raven’s fingers fumble so sharply that the scalpel she holds slices straight into her thumb. She hisses a curse, and goes to stick the digit into her mouth, but gnarled fingers catch hers before she can and the Grand Maester tuts, leading her back to his desk. Carefully, he cleans the wound with a substance that makes her grimace, and begins to bandage it.

“Well?” The Grand Maester asks, as he works. “I asked you a question girl.”

“Oh,” Raven swallows, pulling her eyes away from her bleeding thumb. “Yes, Grand Maester.”

“What’s wrong with it?” The Grand Maester inquires, and Raven swallows back her automatic retort.
"Born with it, m’lord."

The Grand Maester finishes with her thumb and peers down at her leg with interest. “Does it give you much pain?”

“Some.” She answers, tightly and the Grand Maester’s eyes are clearer than before when they meet hers again.

“Take ginger or feverfew to help with the pain,” He tells her, “I know you won’t trust me enough to take it from me, but you should be able to find that at the market.”

Raven’s eyes widen in response and she stutters, “I trust you, m’lord.”

“There’s no use in lying,” He tells her plainly. “I’ve never seen a Maester’s apprentice with the hands of a blacksmith before.” She stares at him, her mouth hanging agape, and when he smiles the skin around his eyes wrinkles. “Tell Lady Clarke that I am truly baffled by what killed her father, and I’m conducting investigations of my own.”

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In the room above the tavern that Raven has called her home for the past few weeks, Clarke sits upon the bed, leaning back on the headboard as she picks at the meats and cheeses on the platter before them. Here, the door is locked and the noise of the tavern downstairs is just dim enough to be comforting. A fire warms the room and the servant’s garb that Octavia stole for her is comfortable. Clarke could almost pretend that things are more simple than they are, but as Raven takes a long drink of her mead and opens her mouth to continue speaking, she remembers far too abruptly why they are here.

“He says that he has no idea what happened to your father, but he’s trying to find out too.”

“And he didn’t have you executed the moment he realised you were a fraud?” Octavia’s eyes dart to Clarke, “Maester Titus would have killed you on the spot.”

Raven quirks a grin at her words, but shakes her head. “He let me go and told me to report all back to you.”

“Could it be a double falsehood?” Octavia muses, around a chicken leg. “To trick us?”

“But then why tell me about the runner disappearing?” Raven counters, pursing her lips. “We didn’t know about that.”

“And Grand Maester Orrin has been here for as long as I remember, he is loyal to the Baratheons.” Clarke adds, quietly, and they glance at her.

“Do you think they know that we know?” Raven leans forward from her place in the chair by the fire, stretching out her back and her leg. The scent of her ginger tea fills the room, strong and heady.

She considers for a moment before answering, her fingers going to the pocket of her dress where an offending strip of parchment sits, burning a hole. “I don’t know,” She admits, at last, “When I speak with Pike, he seems to think I am as helpless as a lamb but… this came under my door today.”

She pulls the note from her pocket and smooths it out on the bed covers. Octavia leans over from her place beside her, her eyes narrowing as she reads it aloud for Raven’s benefit.

“Courtyard, dusk?” Her eyes widen, swivelling up to look at Clarke with alarm. “You think this is
“Pike’s doing?”

“Who else?” Clarke shakes her head, “If the king wanted to see me, he would just ask for me. I think Pike is trying to scare me. I didn’t go, of course.”

“You should have told me about this earlier,” Octavia snaps, angrily. “How can I keep you safe when you don’t tell me these things?”

The words are so fierce that Clarke is left blinking and amazed at her words. Finally, gathering herself, she replies softly. “I know, I’m sorry. I will next time.”

“We have to move more quickly,” Raven insists, her brows narrowed, “It isn’t long before they work out what you know.”

“I need you to try and find the runner,” Clarke takes the parchment in her hands and lifts herself from the bed, pacing across the room to crumple it into her hands and throw it in the fire. Together, she and Raven watch it burn and Clarke continues, seriously. “If he’s still in the city, we have to know about it. He’s our only lead.”

Raven opens her mouth to respond, but they are interrupted by a tremendous banging on the door. They all jump, turning to stare, and Clarke’s hand goes to the dagger hidden in her skirts. She hears a shrill rush as Octavia draws her sword, and the banging only becomes louder.

“Raven!” A voice cries, as the girl takes the carving knife for the meat between her hands. “Come on, please!”

The voice is enough to make Raven hesitate, her grip on her weapon loosening, and she walks stiffly to the door, pressing herself against it to call through.

“Who is it?”

“Jasper!” The voice answers, more shrilly, and Raven’s shoulders fall, throwing the knife to one side as she unbolts the door and swings it open to allow two figures to all but fall inside. One rushes the shut the door behind them as the other staggers across the room, as if to put as much distance between the exit and himself as possible.

“Jasper, what-” Raven sounds exasperated and annoyed, turning to glare at the skinny men trembling by the fire, but the other man, a little shorter and darker haired, shushes her. Moments later it is clear why, as another set of footsteps comes pounding down the corridor, fists banging heartily on the doors until they open, and Jasper’s face pales at the sound. His eyes dart around desperately, settling on the window, and Clarke hurries to his side before he can do anything rash.

“Quickly, under the bed,” She hisses to them both, and they are miraculously obedient, hurrying to follow her instructions.

“Clarke,” Octavia protests, but Clarke waves her away, pushing her too beneath the bed. The rattling of their door returns moments later, accompanied by angry shouting, and she shoots Raven a warning look to stay quiet, hiding her dagger once more between her skirts as she pulls the door open, one hand resting upon it so that only a slither of the room is visible, covered mostly by her body.

A wiry man stands on the other side, wearing a navy cloak and a grubby doublet, an axe in his hands, and he seems taken aback when she offers him a pretty smile, his grip on the axe slackening.
“Can I help you?” She asks, as innocently as possible, cocking her hip against the doorframe. His eyes are drawn down her body and she watches him from beneath her eyelashes.

“’Ave you seen two men?” He asks, at last, his eyes flickering to the room behind her.

“Not in the last hour or so.” She smiles coyly, “Have you lost someone?”

“Someones.” He grumbles, still trying to peer past her. “Heard anyone come past here, miss?”

“There was some terrible shouting earlier,” She agrees, amicably, “Someone banged on my door, but I didn’t see fit to open it.” Her eyes linger on him and she smiles again, “I’m glad I thought to open it to you.” The words surprise him, drawing his gaze back to her, and he grins. “I think they went upstairs.” Clarke adds, helpfully, and the man nods, turning away as she shuts the door again and slides the bolt across.

Octavia’s head appears from beneath the bed, glaring at her, and Clarke watches as she hauls herself out, brushing at her uniform.

“That was dangerous,” The guard growls and Clarke rolls her eyes.

“You’re too conspicuous in that.” She gestures, and the two men causing all of the trouble push themselves up to lean against the bed.

“Thank you,” Says the darker haired one, his voice coloured with relief. “Really.”

“That was some witchcraft, enchanting him like that.” The second observes, his eyes narrowing a little. “Ain’t never seen any of Axel’s men distracted before, and they’ve seen plenty of pretty girls.”

“You’re welcome.” Clarke arches an eyebrow, crossing her arms, and Raven glares at them both.

“What are you two doing here? What’s all that?”

“Axel may be thinking we cheated at dice.” The second man admits, and the first casts him a scathing glance.

“Because you did Jasper.” His eyes find Octavia and Clarke again, and he gives a weak, but good-natured smile. “Sorry, I’m Monty, this knucklehead is Jasper.”

“Octavia,” The guard introduces herself gruffly, with a glower and Clarke nods in their direction.

“Clarke.”

“I’m sorry we disturbed you.” He sounds sincere, his voice a little more rounded and proper than his friend’s Flea Bottom accent. “Thanks again for taking us in Raven.”

“Stop bloody cheating,” Raven grumbles, “You’ve already been chased from half of the taverns in town, if folks figure you out you’ll be strung up from the rafters.”

“Tell him that,” Monty jerks a thumb at his friend and Jasper sits heavily on the bed, huffing with annoyance.

“Axel needs to back off, it’s his fault half of the city is struggling for bread. Some of us have to cheat.”

“You’re not struggling for bread,” Raven shoots back, harshly, but it seems to slide from Jasper like water from a duck’s back.
“I could be.”

“What did he do?” Clarke asks, curious and Jasper rolls his eyes, as if just the thought of it irritates him.

“He helped start those riots that wrecked most of Flea Bottom.”

“He did?” Clarke’s eyes widen, and she tries to keep her intrigue from her voice as she continues, “How so?”

“Just turned around one day and started shouting about unfair taxes and the price of food.” Monty shrugs, “He’s a leader around here, people look up to him.”

“They’re scared of him.” Jasper puts in, fiercely.

“Anyway, when he started suggesting rioting like all of those others people listened.” Monty settles on the bed next to his friend, more carefully. “Not that Axel ever really had something to riot about, he keeps half of the whores in town in business.”

“Has he said anything about the riots since?” Clarke leans against the high back of Raven’s chair, “Nothing’s really changed.”

“Of course not, none of them have!” Jasper raises his eyes to the ceiling. “So what was the point of it all? They don’t even care if it really changes, they just wanted a chance to plunder when the Gold Cloaks weren’t watching.”

“Do you know other people who started the riots?” Raven asks, and Monty’s eyes narrow even as Jasper continues, barely hesitating.

“All the big guys in the city, everyone with a bit of swing. It didn’t do no good.”

“Surely the Gold Cloaks did something?” Clarke wonders aloud. “They’re the city guard, they’re sworn to keep the peace. Thugs encouraging people to riot should have been something to concern them.”

Jasper snorts loudly. “As if the Gold Cloaks have ever helped the city, they’ve been crooked for years.”

Monty makes a small noise of protest, and Jasper rolls his eyes fiercely.

“They’re not all like that,” Monty puts in, quietly, “Some of them are good men.”

“Just because Miller got you out-” Monty shoots him a glare and Jasper’s mouth snaps shut over his words. He continues sullenly, after a moment of silence. “Most of them are shit.”

“You’re only saying that because they catch you.” Monty answers, with faux lightness to his voice, and Jasper wrinkles his nose in annoyance.

“You know one of the Gold Cloaks?” Octavia asks, finally, and Monty gives an awkward, stilted nod.

“Captain Miller, he’s Captain of the Dragon Gate and the West Barracks.” Monty pulls in a slow breath, unable to meet any of their gazes. “He’s a good man.”

Clarke swallows, there is something to Monty’s manner which makes it clear why he is so intent on protecting Captain Miller’s reputation, and she feels a flurry of sympathy for him. “I’m sure he is,”
She says, quietly, and Monty gives her a small, slight smile.

“Captain Miller is fine enough,” Jasper agrees, at last, but continues, “But that doesn’t mean that half of the City Watch aren’t paid off by the Lannisters. It’s only got worse since Lord Pike came here.”

“You think they were paid to let the riots go on longer than they should have?” Octavia demands, and Jasper nods stubbornly.

“There was no way it should have been that bad, where did Axel and those guys even get those longswords from anyway? I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“Do you trust Captain Miller?” Clarke asks Monty, quietly, and the boy thinks on it for a moment, before nodding.

“With my life.” He vows.

“Can you ask him to help us?”

Monty eyes her for a moment, suspicion clear in his gaze, but eventually he gives a nod. “I’ll ask him about that night.”

“Do you think you can ask around, see how all of those guys are doing now?” Clarke looks at them both, her eyes travelling across them. “See if they have a little more coin to spend at the dice tables now?”

Jasper just shrugs, but Monty’s eyes only narrow further. “Why?” He asks, at last and Clarke arches an eyebrow their way.

“I just saved your skin, for one.”

Monty grimaces, and Jasper half shrugs, leaning back against the bed. “Sure, we can ask around for a pretty girl. Maybe afterwards we can get a drink- ow!” He startles upright when Octavia aims a sharp kick to his shin with the toe of her large boot.

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Waiting has never been Clarke’s greatest skill. Unfortunately, there is little to do but wait and hope that Monty, Jasper or Raven will find something of value, and so she is left to spend her days of leisure within the confines of the castle. After the note that was slipped beneath her door she is always wary for some further form of retaliation by Pike and his men, but nothing out of the ordinary occurs and so she is left to try to fill her days. Lady Fern and Lady Mira remain in the capital, and she often joins them for their late morning walks around the gardens. This morning, Lady Fern’s handmaiden accompanies them to look after the lady’s little boy, who has as much energy as a pup, running about between the hedges and bellowing, despite his mother’s constant attempts to quiet him. It is only her handmaiden who is able to calm the boy, and as they had watched her lead him by the hand around the statues in the garden, Lady Fern had laughed tiredly.

“I don’t know what I would do without Margo, the day she decides she wants to marry shall be the death of me.”

The words had plucked at the strings of heartache in Clarke’s chest, and she is left thinking of Reya as she excuses herself earlier than usual and makes her way back to her chambers. Pushing open the door, she is surprised to find the shutters thrown wide open and the bed covers striped back, the whole room filled with light and refreshing morning air. A girl stands near the bed, changing the linens, and she startled up at the sight of Clarke returning. She is young, perhaps eighteen summers,
and light haired, with rosy cheeks.

“Oh,” She rushes to bob a curtsy, linens still clasped in her hands. “M’lady, I’m sorry I didn’t expect you back so soon.”

“Don’t worry,” Clarke’s eyes sweep the room, but she finds nothing amiss, and wanders to the open window as the girl keeps working. Something tickles at the corner of her mind, and she turns back to watch the girl with open curiosity. “You are?”

“Harper, m’lady.” The girl doesn’t pause, securing the new linens neatly to the bed, with frightening efficiency.

“Harper,” Clarke rolls the name around in her mouth, wondering at it. “How long have you worked in the castle?”

“My whole life, m’lady.” Harper gives her a tentative smile as she begins straightening the luxurious bed fittings.

“I’m sure it’s far busier now, with everyone remaining after the coronation.” Clarke returns her smile, hoping to put her at ease.

“It is,” Harper answers, ruefully, “It’s good to be busy but the new help they’ve hired…” She tuts, clicking her tongue against her teeth. “Trying to teach them is like carryin’ water to the sea.”

The words pull a laugh from Clarke, and Harper’s smile widens. There is silence for a moment as Harper fixes the last of the trimmings on the bed, and then gathers the dirty linens from the floor. AT the door, she hesitates and Clarke’s eyes are drawn back to her, expectant.

“I’m sorry for the impertinence but… can I ask you whether you’ve heard from Prince Wells?”

Clarke’s brows narrow and her voice is tighter when she responds. “What do you care of Prince Wells?”

“Nothing, only-” Harper shifts uncomfortably, chewing on her lip. “I knew the prince growing up, he was friendly until… it wasn’t proper any more. I worry about him.”

The affection in Harper’s eyes is genuine, and Clarke’s softens when she sees it. “If I hear anything of him, I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you,” The relief in her voice is palpable, and she glances down at the linens in her arms before saying, cautious again. “And if you ever need help slipping away from the castle… I can find you better clothes than this.”

Clarke’s eyes widen, her gaze flickering down to see that Harper is holding the servant’s clothes she had abandoned under her bed in hopes of smuggling it back to Octavia.

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Octavia’s jaw is clenched so tightly that she fears it may break at any moment. The soldier’s mess hall in Kings Landing is strangely similar to that of Winterfell- mess halls around the world all serve the same purpose she supposes- but far more ornate, with arches, high ceilings and weapons decorating the walls. A hearty fire burns at one end of the hall, but the warm weather means that people aren’t huddled around it as they would be in Winterfell, instead soldiers sit around at benches, eating and drinking and playing dice. Several soldiers, however, are gathered around the woman currently fawning for their attention.
Lady Clarke is about as relaxed as Octavia is tense. She sits as if she is made of water, soft and flowing, her shoulders and arms bared by her daring dress, and her hair falling in gentle golden curls that the soldiers cannot seem to take their eyes off. Octavia shifts, angry and uncomfortable, and tries to stop her hands from drifting to the sword at her belt. She wonders whether the queen would care a jot that Octavia protested furiously to this plan, if it ends up killing Clarke. She suspects not, and the thought of returning home to Indra’s wrath makes her swallow audibly against her dry throat.

“I see you brought a guest Snow,” The voice at her side startles her, and she turns to see a small man beside her, a green as fresh snow, his cheeks flushed from the heat outside. He wears the uniform of the Gold Cloaks and seems to be sweating. Despite her distaste for most of the men acting a soldiers in Kings Landing, she has had to find a few allies, and Anthony Yoke is one of them.

“She insisted that she wanted to see the mess hall.” Octavia sighs, watching as Lady Clarke laughs at something the man beside her has said and gestures to the walls. “Says she gets bored.”

“Bored, what a luxury,” Yoke sounds annoyed, but his eyes don’t stray from Clarke and when he steps closer, Octavia reluctantly follows, until she can hear all that is said in this little circle of admirers.

“And that?” Clarke gestures to the crossbow on the wall, “What does that do?”

The man beside her, a hulking Lannister man hiding under the cover of a gold cloak, and one that Octavia had pointed out to her earlier, smiles indulgently. “A crossbow, my lady. It can shoot a man fifty yards away and kill him dead.”

Clarke pulls in a delicate, surprised breath and places a hand over her mouth, as if she can’t imagine such violence. If she weren’t so worried, the display would make Octavia laugh. “How terrifying! Did you have to use those during the revolt?”

“Not quite,” The Lannister man passes her a goblet of wine, which she accepts gracefully. “The fighting was much bloodier then, a lot of close combat.”

“Were any of you hurt?” Clarke looks about her group with wide eyes, and a few of the men step forward t show them her battle wounds. “The common folk must have been ferocious to be a match for fierce fighters like you.”

“And armed to the hilt.” One of the men puts in, eagerly, and Clarke’s eyes widen in faux surprise. “Really? Even against city guards?”

“Even against us.” The Lannister man agrees, grimly. “Fought like pigs an all.”

“Axes, swords, daggers, bows, they had it all m’lady.” A Gold Cloak tells her, earnestly.

“Surely the common people shouldn’t be armed like that?” Clarke’s brows crumple, confused, “To such an extent that they could defeat trained and brave warriors such as yourselves.”

“Aye, it was a strange fight,” Another man muses, “Normally revolts die down the moment they see the guard, but they fought hard as nails before suddenly- nothing.”

Clarke opens her mouth to speak, but they are disturbed by voice rising in joy and surprise behind them as someone steps into the room. The soldiers around them twist to peer at the newcomer, and several faces light up in recognition as people push themselves up and go to greet him. From where she stands, all Octavia can see is a shock of dark hair and a Lannister uniform, but the other soldiers evidently recognise him because they shout out their welcomes and clap him on the back and
shoulders.

“Finally finished babysitting all that gold, Blake?”

At those words, Octavia’s breath catches in her throat. Her eyes move, but the rest of her body is frozen, and she can only strain to see through the crowds welcoming him to catch a sight of the newcomer. A part of her doesn’t dare hope—surely it is a common name even down here in the south—but the rest of her feels as if someone has lit a flame in her stomach and she is struggling not to be engulfed by it.

The man laughs, shrugging them off with good humour. “If I never go back to the Twins again, it’ll be too soon.” He answers and the group around Clarke wains away to welcome him in, so that Octavia can see him more clearly. Her brother has grown up, into a tall, strong man, with dark hair so rumpled she is sure it’s been months since it has seen shears, and a healthy beard across his chin and neck. His eyes are just as they always were, light and mischievous.

Bellamy sees Clarke first, his brows pulling together as he offers her a curious bow, but his eyes swing around the group and land on Octavia. For a moment she fears that he will not know her, his lips part and his eyes run over her body, and then his eyes widen.

“Octavia? Is—is that you?”

She can barely speak, her throat is so tight with emotions, and so she only nods, two short, sharp jerks of her head. From the corner of her eye, she sees Clarke rise gracefully from her place on the bench and move towards her, as if she could do anything if Bellamy meant her harm.

There is only silence as everyone looks between them, and Bellamy is the first to move, breaking across the circle in three long strides before throwing his arms around her. The action takes her breath away again, and she isn’t sure how to feel, lifting her arms to awkwardly return his embrace, patting at his back. She feels him shiver beneath her and when something wet falls against her neck, she realises with a jerk of surprise that he is crying.

As if from a distance, she hears Clarke say. “Give them some space, please.” There is a shuffling, as the curious soldiers do as she bids, and when Bellamy finally leans away from her, Clarke offers him a handkerchief with a small smile, before settling on a nearby bench. She is close enough to hear them, but she angles her body away as if she isn’t listening, and Octavia appreciates the effort.

Bellamy looks vaguely absurd, a grown man patting at his cheeks with such a delicate handkerchief, and Octavia stares at him, drinking him in. When he speaks, it’s as if all of the memories she had long forgotten resurface, like the sun cresting a hill; she always knew they were there, but everything is much clearer now.

“You’ve grown up,” Bellamy says at last, his hands still grasping her forearms as if he can’t stand not to touch her.

“So have you.” Her voice is hoarse and croaking, but they both grin at the vain attempt at humour.

“You got away,” His hands squeeze her arms, his voice breaking. “How did you get away, O?”

The name brings a rush of emotions back, and she feels like a child again. “I—After the Greyjoys sold you in Lannisport they took me to the Starks.”

“I know,” Bellamy’s eyes darken, furiously. “I found one of the sailors drinking at a tavern a few years ago, I beat it out of him. He told me those bastard Greyjoys slavers gave you to the Stark daughter as a gift.” He spits out the word, and Octavia shrugs off his grip on her arms, her eyes
“No,” She snaps, “Well, I mean that is true but you’ve got it twisted!”

“The Wolf Queen has had you captive all of these years!”

“No!” Her agitation is drawing attention to them and she huffs, pulling Bellamy a step closer to the wall and lowering her voice. “She didn’t hold me captive, she *let me go*. When she was just a little girl, when I first arrived, the first thing she did was free me.”

Octavia will never forget that day, so small she barely knew her own name, trembling in the Great Hall in Winterfell, her feet bare, her hair unwashed, her hands tied before her. The little Stark lady, sombre even then, with grave eyes that stared out at the proud slavers with unbridled hatred, taking a dagger from her belt and marching towards her. Gentling when she saw Octavia flinch away, murmuring soft reassurances as she carefully cut the bindings and threw them to the ground.

“No only is slavery an offence against life and justice,” She had told the Greyjoy men coldly, “But against the crown. Take them away.”

“She gave me a home and an education, warm clothes and a bed,” Octavia tells him now, her voice hitching with emotion. It isn’t often that she thinks of those times, but with Bellamy before her it’s impossible not to remember their parents and the small cottage they lived in on the Flint Cliffs before the Greyjoy slavers came. “I was always free to go, but why would I?”

“So why are you here?” Bellamy seems unconvinced by her account.

Octavia’s eyes flicker to Lady Clarke’s turned back and she hesitates. “The Queen sent me here with Lady Clarke, to protect her.”

Bellamy’s expression hardens. “You’re no slave, but you’re still doing her bidding.”

“I could have refused,” Octavia retorts. “And you? You’re a Lannister now?”

“I am,” He straightens, and she sees the way his hand falls proudly to the hilt of his sword. “Lord Pike’s man.”

Her lips thin, and his brows twitch, sensing her anger. “How did you become Lord Pike’s man?”

“I worked in the stables at Casterly Rock for some time, they gave me a chance to be a soldier and I went from there. Now I’m here.” He gestures around, his eyes meeting hers with reluctant approval. “It seems we’ve both done well for ourselves.”

“It seems so.” The sight of the red and gold lion on his chest, and the words *Lord Pike’s man* leave a bad taste at the back of her mouth and she glances to where Clarke is patiently waiting. “I should go, don’t want to keep her waiting.”

“You’ll come back?” Bellamy suddenly softens, catching her hand with his and pulling her to a stop before she can go. She nods her agreement, and he smiles, releasing her. “It’s good to see you again little sister.”

The words draw a smile from her. “And you, big brother.”

When Clarke falls into step beside her, and they make their way back to the main section of the castle, the look that she gives her tell Octavia that she heard everything that passed between she and her brother.
“I’m sorry,” She says, when they arrive at her chambers, and she sounds more gentle than Octavia has ever heard her before. “I didn’t know… about your past.” When Octavia merely shrugs, unable to find the words, Clarke continues, kindly. “That was your brother?”

“Yes,” She glances up and down the empty corridor. “And he may be able to help us. He’s Lord Pike’s man.”

Clarke’s eyes widen and all of the kindness drains from them.

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The letter from Lexa comes on a fine, bright morning, waiting for Clarke in her rooms when she returns from breakfasting with the king. Finn is easier to read day by day, and though her heart stings a little when she thinks of the boy he used to be, she cannot help but smile prettily at him. Every moment that they spend together, he opens up more and more, and she can tell that he is coming to rely on her and trust her. If Lord Pike is truly trying to persuade him that the north is a threat, Clarke knows she must stay close by and show Finn otherwise. Stepping into her rooms, she shrugs her shawl from around her shoulders and leaves it strewn across the back of a high-backed chair. The fire burns low in the grate, and the site of a folded piece of parchment upon her desk catches her attention. She doesn’t rush to it, assuming it is a note from one of the ladies of the court, inviting her to some humdrum activity she will hardly be able to stand. She calls for tea and Octavia, and meanders around the room, straightening things up here and there, leaving a vase of dying flowers close to the door to be changed, before eventually dragging her feet to her writing desk.

The sight of the dark direwolf seal draws her breath from her lungs, leaving her flushed and wide eyed, and she almost rips the parchment in her attempt to open it more quickly. Her heart is thudding so hard in her ears that she doesn’t hear the knock on the door as she reads, and when the door is pushed open behind her, she turns so violently, hiding the letter behind her back, that the maid startles.

“Sorry m’lady, I brought your tea.” The maid stares at her in surprise, and Clarke tries to soften her features, but can’t manage to say anything. Instead, she gestures to the table near the fire and stays frozen to the spot, watching the curious maid leave. Slowly, her heart still racing, she relaxes, and crosses the room to lock the door. Her eyes fall back to the letter, and she lowers herself shakily into one of the chairs by the fire to read what Lexa says.

The queen writes that she is sorry to hear of her father’s death and the death of the king. Though many people have expressed similar sentiments something about Lexa’s words – what more can I say to heal the ache that is surely in your heart now? I would not even presume to be able to find the words- brings tears to her eyes. She goes on to say that she is sure her mother is glad of her presence, and at this Clarke’s gut twists guiltily and she has to pull her gaze away for a moment to regain her composure.

Lexa writes that Winterfell misses her, that Aden sends his best wishes and he is dutifully training his puppy, though- and here Clarke can almost see the wry twist of her lips- he still insists on feeding it by hand and the little beast is sure to be the fattest dog in all of the north soon. The final words bring another ache to Clarke’s heart and tears spill silently over her cheeks. I cherish everything you left here in the north, and look forward to having you back in Winterfell whenever you feel able.

Her guilt and misery rises like a wave within her breast and for a moment she feels strangled by it, her breathing hitching as more tears spill from her eyes. Her fingers run over the parchment tenderly, as if it were the softest silk in the world, and for a moment she considers throwing it into the fire, in case anyone should try to read it. She can’t quite bring herself to do it, however, and instead she folds the letter carefully and tucks it beneath her mattress.
With a shabby, plain cloak, and a quiet afternoon, Clarke is able to easily slip away into the rooms reserved for the Grand Maester and his servants. The room for his runner sits on the floor below his own, so that he is available at all hours of the night to take potions to and from the Grand Maester’s chambers. There are no guards here, and the door hangs slightly ajar, so that when Clarke slips her way inside there is no resistance. Deep in the heart of the castle, the room only has one window, letting in a slant of light, and by that she can see a rumpled cot and chest thrust up against one wall, a desk against the other. Carefully, listening out for any approaching footsteps, she picks her way around the room, searching for anything that could tell her about the runner.

For the most part, the room is empty, though there are several empty wine bottles below the bed, and a chamber pot that looks as if it’s been used more for vomiting than pissing. She wrinkles her nose at that and slides it back beneath the bed. The chest is empty but for a few plain, nondescript clothes, and the desk holds nothing but empty sheets of parchment, almost untouched. The ink well is dry and full, and the whole room smells musty and unclean. She lets out a soft noise of displeasure at the utter lack of clues to be found, but the sound of voices from the corridor startles her from her reverie. Hurriedly, she darts from the room and starts down the corridor, only to hear another set of footsteps approaching her. For a moment she is caught, utterly motionless, as she tries to think of an excuse to be there, but then a hand grabs her wrist and tugs so sharply that she is pulled behind a tapestry and through a door before she can think. As she gains her balance again, she finds herself pressed into a small space, against a wall, a candle the only light. She squints, her vision adjusting so slowly that she fears for a moment she will remain blind entirely, until finally Tris’s face peers out from the darkness, startling her.

Tris puts her finger to her lips, hushing her, and Clarke does as she says, waiting as they listen to the footsteps and then the voices pass them by, utterly undetected. When all is quiet and they are alone, Tris lets out a sigh of relief, and grins at her in the dim light.

“Lady Clarke, you seemed like you needed rescuing.”

The words pull a delighted laugh from her and she shakes her head in amazement. “I-I did, thank you.” She puts her hands to the walls, pressing against the rough stone curiously. “Where are we?”

“There are tunnels all around the castle.” Tris answers, as if it should be obvious, “Come on, I’ll show you out.”

Wordlessly, Clarke follows her, and as she does memories return to her, of adventuring through these tunnels with Wells when they were children. “Do you use these to escape your Septa?” She asks Lady Tris, grinning, as the girl leads her down the narrow tunnel and around a bend. “That’s what the prince and I used to do.”

“Yes,” Tris turns to give her a sheepish smile, and they turn another corner, coming upon a door. “She’s just so boring.” Carefully, Tris pushes open the door and fights her way through a thick bush, Clarke following her and grimacing when the branches snag at her clothes and hair. When the door shuts behind her, and the bush retreats from snatching at them, it is barely visible and Clarke laughs in quiet amazement.

“I’d completely forgotten about those tunnels,” She admits, stretching and taking in their surroundings. “Are we in the Godswood?” They are surrounded by tall elm and alder trees, light and airy, and beneath them the grass is green and fresh, dotted with wildflowers. Somewhere, closer towards the centre, Clarke knows there is a great Heart Tree, covered in smokeberry vines. She remembers it from when she and Wells were children, but hasn’t been able to step into the
Godswood since returning to the Red Keep. Something about the place feels too personal and private.

Tris nods, leading her back along the walls. “I tell the Septa I come in here to pray and then use the tunnels to go all around the castle.” She sounds excitable, as if she has been dying to tell someone this secret for a long time. Here, they are utterly alone, perhaps the only two people in the city to care about the Godswood. Clarke wonders how long it will be until Pike insists it is dug up completely. “You can get all the way to the kitchens, and the great hall, and even the king’s bed chambers!”

“Oh,” Clarke’s eyes widen and she stifles a laugh. “Well, I don’t think you should go there any more Tris, it might not be safe.” When Tris’s face falls, she places a hand on her shoulder and says, a little more softly. “But thank you for helping me.” They walk in silence for a few moments, before Clarke asks, more seriously. “Do you feel safe here?”

From the corner of her eye, she sees Tris cast her a strange glance. “I suppose so,” She says, at last, wary and unsure.

“If that ever changes, you can trust me, do you understand?” She hopes the girl can understand the gravity of what she’s saying, without frightening her. “Me, or Octavia Snow, or the Red Cabin in the city. You’ll be safe with us, or there.”

“Alright,” Tris presses her lips together in a look that is intensely reminiscent of Anya Mormont, and Clarke tries not to smile. “Thank you, Lady Clarke.”

“I’m only repaying my debt,” Clarke smiles down at her, and Tris offers a genuine smile in return.

“Shall we go and see if the kitchens have any lemon cakes?”

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When Lord Finn comes to her chambers, so excited he can barely stand it, and tells her of his idea to help the smallfolk, she feels something close to pride swell in her chest. She takes his arm, happy to allow him to escort her down to the courtyard where the wagons are waiting, filled at his command with the spare food from the kitchens. Together, they clamber into a litter and are carried out of the castle and into the streets of the city, accompanied by a huge retinue of guards. The people of Kings Landing haven’t yet seen much of their king, and so the litter bearing his golden insignia draws much attention. At Aegon’s Square, the litter is settled onto the ground and Clarke takes Finn’s hand when he helps her down. The guards are already setting down the tables carried from the castle and beginning to organise the food upon it, and Clarke turns to the king, taking his arm and saying.

“Let’s talk to people.”

“What?” Finn’s eyes widen, but he follows her without resistance, just as he did when they were younger.

They find two raggedy little girls hovering close by, watching with hungry eyes as the food is redistributed. The girls have baskets of flowers on their arms, and they recoil when Clarke and Finn approach, until Clarke crouches down so that she’s closer to their height.

“Hello,” She speaks as gently as she can, “Are you hungry?”

The girls glance at each other, clearly suspicious of the strange woman asking them questions, but eventually the older and braver of the two nods, her tangled hair falling in front of her eyes.

“In a moment there will be food on those tables for you to eat,” Clarke pats at Finn’s arm. “From the king.”
The girls’ eyes widen, but Clarke pulls herself up from the floor and guides Finn away before they can become flustered or afraid. Finn’s astonishment has transformed into joy, and together they make their way around the square, welcoming people to take food if they need it, and encouraging them to spread the word. The eyes of the small folk follow them with amazement, and people bob curtseys and murmur nervous thanks.

“This is incredible,” Finn murmurs to her, and Clarke gives him a radiant smile, nodding her agreement.

When their walk around the square is done, they stand to the side of the tables, occasionally passing out parcels of food, and she has the pleasure of watching Finn relax, until he is the picture of a youthful, generous king. Word of this will travel, and soon the people of the city will be singing his praises.

“Pardon me,” The voice is so startling familiar that she turns to see who is lingering nearby. Raven, a hood pulled up to cover her face, looks out at her sign a grave expression. She eyes her meaningfully, and says. “Some food, m’lady?”

“Of course.” The moment she overcomes her shock, she takes a parcel of food and moves towards her, handing it over and leaning close enough to hear Raven mutter.

“We found the runner.”

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I’m so glad to see that people are still interested in this story! What do you think of Octavia’s backstory? Do you like that Tris is back in the story again? Let me know below or over on tumblr (@onemilliongoldstars)
Hang onto your hats!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Book Two: Chapter 6

Kings Landing doesn’t become much quieter at night. In Highgarden, night would lead the hush of activity and a sweet, warm darkness that would fill the air. Winterfell’s night was different, cool and crisp and broken only by the howling of wolves and the hooting of owls. In Kings Landing, dusk leads to the end of the work day, the downing of tools and the lifting of goblets and flagons as people rush to the many taverns of the city. In whoreshouses the clinking of coins fills the air as people delay the return to their own homes, and vendors selling meat and bread peddle their wares to inebriated citizens. Under the cover of this noise and activity, Clarke is able to slip unnoticed through the streets, Octavia and Raven by her side.

Her new handmaiden Harper hadn’t asked questions when she’d requested some plain, dark clothes, and had helped her dress before slipping from the room. Her cloak has a wide brimmed hood which shadows her face, and her hair is pulled back into a sensible braid, running thick and heavy down her back. There is no way to tell that she is one of the most powerful women in Westeros. The dagger Lexa gave her hangs heavy at her side, hidden within her skirts. Their path leads them down darkened alleyways and cobbled streets, until they emerge before a tavern with rotting walls, and a sign which squeaks as it blows in the wind. The moonlight is dim here, slanting between the tall, rickety buildings of Flea Bottom to emerge in strange beams of light which sends leering shadows.

Together, they slip into the busy tavern. They make it a few steps towards the stairs to the upper floor before a hand reaches out and catches Octavia’s arm, pulling her to a stop. The girl’s hand goes to the sword, but to Clarke’s relief she doesn’t draw it.

“No one upstairs without paying,” The innkeeper growls from a grisly, scowling face, and Raven drops a few coins smoothly into his hand before saying, with easy seduction.

“We’re expected upstairs.”

The innkeeper’s eyes travel over them suspiciously, and Clarke is sure to offer him a pretty smile when his gaze finds her. Eventually, he grunts his approval, and lets Octavia go, bustling away into the crowd with loud shouts to two men beginning to brawl. The distraction allows them upstairs, where the sounds and the smells are more of a brothel than an inn.

Raven leads them down the hallway, until they round a corner and come to a rickety wooden door. Clarke gets to her knees before it, extracting a pin and a lock from her skirts, and carefully begins to pick quietly at the lock. She wonders whether the squire who taught her how to pick locks, and kissed her so soundly in the stables that she lost her breath, ever imagined she would be using the skills she taught her for such a purpose. Beneath her fingers, the lock clicks, and swings upon at the lightest of pushes. Inside the room is dark, but the slant of light let in through the door illuminates the bed, and they can see the whites of two eyes staring out at them. The woman in the bed is trembling, the blanket pulled up to cover her bare chest, and she opens her mouth to shout when Octavia draws
her sword and Clarke presses a finger to her lips.

The woman’s mouth snaps shut again, and she watches them with fearful eyes as they pass through the room towards her. Raven gestures her from the bed, as Octavia gathers her clothes and presses them into her hands, urging her into her dress and cloak. While they work, Clarke slips her hand into her dress again and extracts a small vial, sealed with wax and stolen from the Measter’s chambers. Unpicking the wax, she presses the liquid into a rag and holds it over the mouth and nose of the boy in the bed.

Under her hands, she feels the boy stiffen and cough, and then his eyes shot open and he is left staring up at her as he struggles for breath. Octavia joins her, her firm grip keeping the boy still as he stares up into Clarke’s eyes, wheezing and gasping, a choking sound emerging muffled behind the cloth. It takes several moments, but his eyes eventually roll back in his head and he falls still and silent.

From the other side of the room, a stuttered exclamation draws their attention, and Clarke extracts the damp cloth from the boy’s mouth as the woman, still half naked, staggers back a step, her horrified gaze taking them all in.

“He isn’t dead,” Clarke tells her, as she struggles to find her voice. “We just need to talk to him.” She gestures down to the boy, and their gazes all follow the slow rise and fall of his chest for a moment.

The woman appears slightly relieved, rushing to pull her arms into her dress, and Raven stops her before she can leave, taking a handful of gold coins from the purse Clarke had given her earlier in the night.

“For your troubles,” She tells her, lightly, and then adds, “And your silence.”

The woman’s eyes widen when she sees how many coins are in Raven’s hands, and she takes them without a word, nodding their way before turning on her heel to dart out of the door.

“She won’t give us any trouble,” Raven assures them both, with satisfaction, and with the door locked behind them they stir the fire in the grate and drag out the single chair from near the fire. The boy’s limp body is sticky with sweat and surprisingly heavy, and it takes all three of them to carry him to the chair and tie him securely in place. Then all that is left to do is to wait for him to wake.

When his eyes finally flicker open, he wakes with a strangled sound, muffled into his gag. Their eyes are drawn to him in unison, and Clarke watches as his gaze spirals around the room, his eyes wide with panic as he takes in the three people watching him. Clarke pushes herself away from the wall, approaching with carefully measured steps, and crouches before him.

“We have some questions for you.” She tells him, coldly. “If you cooperate and tell us what we want to know, we can make it worth your while. If you don’t…” Her voice drops, her fury like ice beneath it. “We will hunt you to the ends of this earth and kill you slowly and painfully.” The boy’s eyes are filled with horror and fear, and she sees his throat bob as he nods. “Good.”

With her dagger, she slices through the gag he wears, and watches without compassion as he coughs and wheezes.

“What did you give me?” He asks, at last, still spluttering and Raven laughs mirthlessly from behind her.

“You tell us, you’re the Grand Measter’s apprentice.”

His eyes dart to her, narrowed with anger, and Clarke speaks before he can, cutting through the
words resting on the tip of his tongue.

“You have some information that we need.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” He spits, stubbornly and Clarke quirks her head at him, curious.

“I’m sure you do. What did you give my father and the king?”

“Nothing.” The boy’s lips press together. “Only what the old man sent me with.”

“That’s a lie, and we both know it.” Her voice is falsely pleasant. Behind her, she hears Octavia draw her dagger from the sheath strapped to her leg and watches the boy’s expression stutter at the sight of it. “What’s your name?”

He eyes her, uncertain and suspicious, but finally answers. “Glenn Stane.”

“Glenn,” She offers him a friendly smile, “How much did Pike Lannister give you, hm?”

“Nothing,” Glenn glares at her, “I didn’t do nothing.”

“Our sources tell us otherwise,” She flips her dagger in her hands, playing idly with the sharpened blade, and watches as he stares at her, his breath coming more quickly. “You think Lannister deserves your loyalty? He won’t care if you die over this Glenn, he’ll probably be glad.”

“No,” Glenn flinches back in the chair when her blade comes a little too close to him. “You’re wrong.”

“So you did work for Lannister?” Clarke eyes him over the blade, and sees the panic flicker through his expression.

“So what if I did?” He tries to shrug off her questioning. “The Lannisters are good for it, they pay their debts.”

“Oh, you mean this blood money?” Raven holds out the heavy bag of coins they had found in the trunk at the bottom of his bed, and it’s the first time the boy really struggles against his bonds.

“Give that back, that’s not yours!”

Clarke lets out a cold laugh, “Oh believe me, if you don’t tell me what I want to know, you’ll have no use for that. No whore will fuck a corpse who can’t pay.”

“You’re full of shit,” He growls, and the moment his words leave his lips, her dagger goes to his throat, plucking another strangled yelp from him.

“You think?” She presses a bit closer, so that the blade pulls a thin trickle of blood from his neck, and then lets the weapon skim down his naked body, to where a patch of wiry hair covers his flaccid, wrinkled manhood. “I have no desire to touch your dirty little cock,” She hisses, darkly, “But I’ll make an exception to cut it off.”

The boy whimpers, flinching violently away from her, and she watches him, cold and emotionless, to see what he will do.

“Lord Pike…” Glenn says at last, his voice trembling. “He’ll kill me if I speak.”

“He won’t know until it’s too late.”
The boy's eyes take her in, assessing her honesty. "How do I know you won't just kill me?"

"You don't." She admits, flexing her blade, "But do you want to take that chance?"

He swallow heavily, finally nodding. "Fine. Lord Pike... gave me money to give Lord Tyrell something else."

Though she already suspected it, to hear the words said aloud sends a flush of fury through Clarke’s body. "What did you give him?"

Glenn’s eyes are fearful, but when she brings her dagger closer to his prick, he cries out and flinches away. "Tears of Lys! I gave him Tears of Lys!"

"Tears of Lys?" Her dagger falls away in her surprise, and she watches as he gasps for breath. "You're sure?" When he nods fiercely, she glances back at Raven and Octavia. "Where would Pike get Tears of Lys from?"

"I don’t know," Glenn tells her, earnestly, "Please, I don’t know anything else."

Her eyes travel over his body, disgust curling at her lips. "I believe you." She says at last, and then breaches the small distance between them in less than a moment, pressing her dagger against his neck once again, so close that she feels him catch his breath beneath her. "You killed my father, and I am only keeping you alive because I need you, do you understand?" He nods his head minutely, tears leaking from his eyes. "You live by my grace, don't forget it."

"I know, I know my lady." His voice quivers and breaks and she pushes away from him, sheathing her dagger.

"Here," She tosses the bag of coins onto the bed, "We don't want your money. But when we come for you, you'd better be easy to find." She gazes down at him, "If you even think of running or squealing, I promise I will hunt you to the ends of the world, cut off your cock and make you eat it before I gut you."

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The castle is never truly silent, but at this time of night, when the moon is high in the sky and sends slants of white light down through the murder holes in the walls, it is as close as it ever comes to quiet. They slip their way through the deserted corridors, dipping away from approaching footsteps and slipping into the shadows to avoid the torchlight of nearby guards. Raven left them in Kingslanding to make her way back to her own bed, but Clarke can't even think of sleeping in this moment. Her blood is still roaring in her ears, her mouth pressed into a hard, thin line as she thinks on what the runner said. Her own father, poisoned by something as malicious and secretive as Tears of Lys, a flavourless, odourless, colourless potion meant to twist the insides into a slow, painful death. It’s a raw, graceless way to die.

"Lady Clarke!" The voice from behind them startles her from her reverie, and she and Octavia turn at the same time, their hands going to their weapons. The approaching figure is familiar however, and when Lady Fern’s handmaiden Margo comes into sight, red haired and plump, she relaxes. "My lady!"

"Margo," Clarke sheathes her dagger again, pausing to watch the girl approach down the dark corridor. In the light of the moon, she can see the worried twist of her expression. "What’s wrong?"

"Thank the gods I found you!" The girl pants, coming to a halt beside them. "It’s Lady Fern, something has happened, you must come!"
“Lady Fern?” Clarke’s eyes widen, “Is she well?”

“No, please, please help us,” The girl’s voice trembles over her tears and Clarke and Octavia make to follow her when she leads them back the way she came. The girl hesitates, looking back at them, and then says, uncertainly. “Ser Snow… I think it best if you stay behind.”

“What?” Octavia stares at her, astonished. “Why?”

“Lady Fern… she was attacked by a guard,” Fresh tears spill over her full, freckled cheeks. “Seeing you would just scare her.”

“Attacked by a guard?” Clarke echoes, horrified. “A Lannister guard?”

The girl nods miserably, but Octavia shakes her head. “I won’t leave Lady Clarke.”

Please, I need Lady Clarke’s help and I can’t trust anyone else!” Margo’s voice rises, hysterically, and Clarke glances back at Octavia.

“Lady Fern knows Octavia, she knows she won’t hurt her.”

“You have to come, my lady,” Margo takes her arm, tugging her harshly towards her, and Clarke staggers closer.

“Not without me,” Octavia darts closer to separate them, and it is only that fumble that stops the dagger Margo presses into Clarke’s stomach from sinking far enough into her to kill her. Clarke shouts out as Octavia throws her backwards, the dagger still buried part way into her stomach, and she lands on the floor with a terrible jolt. Pain blossoms like a red flower from her midsection and she feels bile rise in her throat, gasping for breaths. Before her, Octavia strikes with a flurry of blows against the young handmaiden, but Margo rolls out of the way with unthinkable skill. She pulls another dagger from her skirts, and is able to fend off Octavia’s mighty blows. In the small corridor, the sound of metal hitting stone rings out, and when Clarke puts a hand to the wound in her stomach, she feels sticky wetness.

Groping along the ground, she finds her own discarded dagger, and pulls herself upwards with a pained grunt, trying to ignore the weakness that sends her head spinning. She raises her dagger just in time to block Margo’s attack, shoving the girl backwards with all her might towards where Octavia waits. Octavia manages to inflict a nasty cut into the girl’s arm before she spins out of the way. Moments later, Octavia is fighting for her life, as the skillful assassin manages to back her into the corner where Clarke is leaning, her dagger still brandished. Octavia takes a defensive stance in front of her, her injuries weeping, and Margo gazes at them both, her expression one of cold, calculated annoyance.

“Move,” She tells Octavia, still in that sweet, country girl voice, “This isn’t meant to take your life.”

Octavia opens her mouth to growl something in return, when suddenly Margo is gargling and gasping for breath, her dagger falling from her hand as the tip of the sword embedded in her back protrudes through her chest. The sword retracts and she crumples to the floor in a lifeless pile, her orange hair falling in tight curls about her face. The figure behind her is hulking and tall and so familiar that Clarke slumps, weak with relief, against Octavia’s shoulders.

“Who are you?” Octavia is still baring her teeth, her sword drawn, battered and covered in blood.

“Octavia,” Clarke squeezes her shoulders to draw her attention. “Stop, that’s Roan. He’s a friend.”

“Move,” Roan steps from the shadows, close enough that they can see his long hair tied at the nape
of his neck, and his weathered travel clothes, and growls at Octavia. “Lady Clarke, you’re hurt.”

“I- yes.” As the adrenaline drains from her body, Clarke stutters over her words, looking down to where the dagger is still sticking from her body. “Gods.” Her eyes fall on Margo’s body, and her breath catches in her throat.

“We have to get you somewhere safe.” Roan is insisting, reach out to help steady her, but Clarke pushes past him to stagger closer to Margo’s body.

“Anyone could be coming,” Octavia agrees, but Clarke ignores them, pulling Margo’s body over with a grunt of exertion.

“Look,” She demands, gesturing down, and when Octavia gasps sharply behind her, she knows the soldier has seen what she sees. Where Margo’s body once lay, there is now the body of a lean young woman. She is older than Margo was, by many years, and her hair is short and cropped, her skin dark. Clarke draws her hands away as if burnt, unable to comprehend what she sees.

“But… what happened to Margo?” Octavia stares, wide eyed, and Clarke just shakes her head, her eyes darting about them fearfully.

“There was no Margo. Or if there was, she is long dead.”

“But…” Octavia gapes, “But she was just there, I saw her, I fought her!”

Slowly, Clarke’s pain sluggish brain begins to work again, dredging up a memory long forgotten. “Lady Myra’s handmaiden… she told us about some assassins from Bravos who could change their faces.” She looks back down at the assassin’s body, swallowing against her dry throat. “Margo was a Faceless Man.”

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Roan scoops her into his arms and carries her to her bedchamber when standing makes her knees shake. Octavia sends a serving boy running for the Grand Measter, and Roan peers at her wound while they wait. The dagger had slipped and fallen away when he’d hauled her into his arms, and now they press cloth to it to stem the bleeding and Clarke tries not to take short, sharp breaths, despite the pain.

“This doesn’t look too bad,” Roan’s scowling expression meets hers’, “You’re lucky.”

“Who are you to say?” Octavia frets at her bedside, her own wounds still bleeding, unattended to.

“Roan fought in the war,” Clarke swallows against her dry mouth, trying not to think about how much blood she’s losing. “He’s been a loyal knight for House Tyrell for as long as I can remember.”

“So I’ve seen injuries like this before,” Roan adds, still glowering at them. “Where’s that damn Measter?”

“He’s coming, Roan,” Clarke reaches out, grasping his arm. “What are you doing here?”

“Your mother sent me to bring you back to the Eyrie.” Roan spits, angrily, “And now I can see why.”

Clarke lets out a groan that is nothing to do with her injury. “Of course she did.”

“You’re not safe here!” Roan rounds on her, fury dripping from his bones. “Not while the Lannisters
still have the run of the place.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” She snaps in return, wincing when the pain travels up her abdomen. “I can’t!”

“I’d carry you from this caste right now if you weren’t hurt,” Roan retorts, “You’re clearly not safe, someone just tried to kill you for gods sake!”

“The city needs me,” Clarke protests, and then softens when she sees Roan’s angry expression. “You saw that assassin, she was a Faceless Man, Roan. The most feared assassins in the world!”

“This isn’t convincing me to let you stay here,” Roan grinds out, his face stiff with fury.

“They must have been ordered by Lord Pike,” Clarke’s expression drifts thoughtfully to Octavia as the soldier bandages up the cut on her arm. She looks up, her brows furrowed, and asks. “But how could Lord Pike get the Faceless Men? They’re from Bravos.”

Clarke looks down at her own wound, where it is weeping into the fabric of her dress, and presses the cloth more firmly to it, stuttering over a breath as she tries to fight past the pain clouding her brain to think more clearly.

“There,” Roan leans against the wall, “Even the guard knows that Pike couldn’t have access to the Faceless Men. From what I’ve heard their fees are more than even a Lannister could afford.”

“He’s… he’s the Master of Coin,” Clarke thinks aloud. It is as if the memories resurface one at a time, one triggering the next. “Finn said he has a close relationship with the Iron Bank, and I met a representative at the coronation, Dante Wallace. There must be some connection there, they must all be working together.”

“But why would the Iron Bank care about the workings of Westeros? They’ve always stayed out of our politics.” Roan shakes his head, lips pursed in thought.

“I don’t know…” Their conversation is cut short by a sharp knocking on the door, and Clarke sits back in the bed, giving the Grand Measter a weak smile when he enters. Grand Measter Orrin gets immediately to work, tutting over her like a concerned grandfather. He gives her milk of the poppy, which she takes gratefully, and she is barely awake when a castle guard appears at the door and informs them all, gravely. “The assassin’s body is gone, there’s nothing but blood.”

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She’s incredibly fortunate that the wound to her stomach is shallow. Grand Measter Orrin works over her for most of the night, and when she wakes it is early morning and she feels groggy and disoriented. The Grand Measter is sleeping lightly at her bedside, and wakes moments after she does. He asks her about her pain, ensures that she is lucid, and tells her that he had sent her guards to bed when they started to fall asleep on their feet. She nods, but the words seem to come from far away, and when he pats her hand and says, with a vaguely fatherly tone, that she should get some more sleep, she takes him at his word.

It seems like she only blinks, when a harsh knock to the door wakes her again, and she jars into consciousness, peering around the room in confusion. She alone, but for the knocking on her door, but she doesn’t get a chance to call her visitor inside before the door swings open and she is faced with the sight of Lord Pike. Fear lances through her, cutting through her lingering grogginess, and
she works to push herself further up in her bed as he approaches. His face is twisted with sympathy, and it makes her stomach curdle to see it.

“Lady Clarke,” He pauses at the end of the bed, and from here he seems to tower above her. “I am so glad to see you well.”

She swallows against her dry throat, hating the way her voice scrapes and cracks over her words. “Thank you.”

“How terrible for this to happen here in the castle, where you should be safe.” He shakes his head gravely. “Rest assured, more guards will be assigned to you.”

“The guards I have protected me perfectly well last night.” She retorts, her lips pressing into a thin line at his words, even as fear sparks in her stomach.

“With respect, you wouldn’t be lying in bed injured now if that was the case.” Lord Pike looks at her with a curled lip. “I must admit though, it was fortunate that Ser Roan was here to help you. Sent by your mother I expect?”

“Ser Roan is on his way elsewhere,” She tells him, darkly, “He just stopped in the capital to give me his regards.”

“I expect your mother would like you to return to her,” He edges a little closer around the bed and her fingers curl in the blankets. It’s difficult to appear unaffected by him when reclining on feathered pillows. “It certainly seems like the city isn’t safe at the moment…” His eyes linger on her, “Deaths and assassination attempts abound. It could happen again at any moment.” Her breath catches in her throat, her heart gripped with ice at the coldness in his voice.

The door barrels open behind them, drawing their attention away, and Finn strides into the room, almost tripping over his own feet in his haste. His eyes find Pike, furrowing in confusion, before landing on Clarke in the bed. His expression twists with despair, and he approaches quickly, throwing himself to his knees before her and reaching out to grasp at her hands earnestly.

“Clarke! I came as soon as I heard!”

Lord Pike’s eyes dart between them and he quietly excuses himself, the door shutting with a click in his wake. Clarke’s tears her eyes away from the closed door when Finn speaks. The king seems to barely have noticed the departure of his Hand.

“Oh Clarke, I’ll never forgive myself for letting this happen to you.”

“Hush,” She turns her attention to soothing him, running her hands over his comfortingly. “There’s nothing you could have done.”

“How could you have come to such harm here? The castle is so well protected!” He stares at her, anguished, and she tentatively tries to speak.

“That’s a good question.”

“I should have protected you!” He speaks over her, his manners utterly forgotten in his desolation. “You should never want to see me again! I have failed you!”

“Finn.” She speaks with the gentle firmness of a mother, drawing his eyes to hers. “This is not your fault,” She squeezes his hands softly, drawing him back to himself. “Don’t blame yourself.”
“Oh Clarke,” His voice has quietened a little. “To think what I would have done… if anything had happened to you.”

“There’s no use dwelling on that,” She gives him a weak smile, “I am here and shall be well again soon enough.”

“Even so,” Finn shakes his head, his eyes fixed to hers. “This has shown me all that you mean to me… truly.”

“You’re dear to me too,” She assures him, running a thumb over his hand. “You really think I would leave you alone so easily?”

The teasing draws a fractured smile from him. “I promise I’ll always keep you safe from now on, I’ll protect you Clarke.”

“You already do.”

“Not as well as I could,” His fingers tighten around hers, his eyes wide and earnest. “Marry me, Clarke.”

The words are like a hand around her throat, choking a gasp from her, and she has to fight not to pull her hands from his. Still, she cannot hide her wide eyes and the shock on her face. “What?”

“Marry me,” Finn insists, his eyes growing warmer as he speaks. “Ever since we were children I’ve loved you Clarke, and I know you feel for me too.”

“Finn…” She struggles to find the right words, struggles for breath, struggles for everything, and he gives her a soft, sympathetic smile.

“It’s alright, you don’t have to say anything now. You’re not well, I’ll give you some time to think on it. But Clarke,” He hesitates, lifting her hands to his mouth to kiss tenderly. “If you were mine I would cherish you, and I know you would make Westeros a wonderful queen.”

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“My lady, my lady,” The words rouse her slowly from sleep, hissed to her as she wakes, and her expression crumples with displeasure, rolling away when the wound to her side makes itself known, and she is woken with a gasp of pain, eyes flying open. “My lady,” The voice says again, insistently, and she turns to find an unfamiliar face close by, peering down at her. Immediately, she reaches for the dagger under her pillow, fumbling to draw it out as the stranger staggers a step away, eyes widening in alarm. “No!” The girl gasps, fumbling in her pocket for something. “No wait, I’ve been sent to find you.”

“By who?” Clarke hisses, still brandishing the dagger before her. The girl looks like a servant, she is dressed in plain clothes, with a cloth tied over her auburn hair.

“Prince Wells!” The girl retorts, and pulls a ring from her pocket, holding it out as if to defend herself. “Here, take it.”

Clarke eyes her for a moment, but the curiosity is too much to fight, so she reaches out to take the ring from her. Eyeing it carefully, she feels her breath catch in her throat when she sees the familiar stag signet upon it, and remembers the sight of this ring on Wells’ finger every day since he was gifted in for his thirteenth name day. The hand holding the dagger slackens a little, relaxing as she stares down at the ring in astonishment. Her gaze goes back to the serving girl, eyes wide.
“How did you get this?” Clarke demands, her fingers tightening over it. “Where is Wells?”

The girl holds her hands out, as if to quieten her. “Please,” She casts a glance back at the door, “I don’t have long.”

“Then speak quickly.”

“Prince Wells is in the Citadel,” When she sees Clarke open her mouth to protest, she continues fiercely, “But he’s not with the Measters, not really. He’s being held there by Lannisters.” At the words, she glances around fearfully, and Clarke stares at her, mouth agape.

“But… how did he get there? He joined the Measters, everyone knows that!”

“Lord Pike blackmailed him.” The girl is almost breathless.

“With what?”

“Prince Wells has a son, a baby born from a night of passion in Flea Bottom.” The girl’s words are like a punch to the gut. “Lord Pike found out and told the prince that he had to denounce his claim to the throne and join the measters, or he would have the girl and the baby killed. He has the a guard on the house day and night.”

“Gods,” Clarke falls back into the pillows, her mouth agape. She thinks of the increasingly upset letters Wells wrote to her, of his devotion to the Seven and how bedding a girl out of wedlock must have tortured him. And to think of that mishap threatening the life of an innocent girl and a baby… she can only imagine his anguish. “It all makes sense. How do you know all of this?”

“I worked at the Citadel, the prince told me everything when I was cleaning out his chamber pots.” Her eyes dart down to the signet ring. “He said I could keep that, for my time.”

“No,” Clarke’s fingers curl over it, “I’ll give you double its worth in gold you can actually spend.” She looks at the girl, brows furrowing. “And I’ll pay you that again if you agree to do something for me.”

The girl’s eyes brighten and Clarke feels a thread of hope.

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“You want me to do what?” Roan stares at her from the end of the bed, his arms crossed over his chest and his expression twisted with disbelief. From her place leaning against the wall, Octavia seems just as unimpressed, unable to stop herself from casting glances at the serving girl still lingering in the corner of the room.

“I need you to go with Fox,” Clarke indicates the serving girl with a small nod of her head. “And find a way to free Prince Wells.”

“If this is all true, which I’m still suspect about,” He looks back at Fox with a suspicious sneer. “Why not tell the king and have him arrest Pike and send an army, or even ask your mother?”

“That’s too obvious, Pike has spies everywhere,” Clarke shakes her head, “We have to keep this under wraps.”

“You really think that I can do anything against a hoard of Lannister soldiers?” He scoffs, and Clarke feels her frustration bubble closer to the surface.
“You’re a good fighter and one of the few people I trust Roan, I need you to do this.”

His face sets stubbornly and he shakes his head, “Your mother sent me to fetch you and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” She retorts, “Please Roan, don’t you see?” Her voice hitches with desperation. “If this is true, it explains so much. Pike is worse than we thought, he’s been setting this up for a long time, and he has the Iron Bank behind him, though only the gods know why. He may not be on the throne, but he has someone he can manipulate there now.”

“He’s trying to kill you Clarke, he knows you’re a threat,” Roan stares at her. “If he’s really got enough money for Faceless Men there’s no way he’ll let you live.”

“Exactly! He won’t stop just because I go back to Highgarden, or the Eyrie. I’ll just be putting mother and Lord Marcus in danger!”

“But you’ll have people to protect you there!” Roan’s voice is raising angrily, and she sees Fox stiffen in the corner. She’s known Roan since she was young, and she knows that his bark is worse than his bite, so she steels herself and continues.

“I have people to protect me here. Please Roan, this is bigger than either of us now.”

“What good can you do here?” Roan shakes his head, “At least in the Eyrie your mother would stop worrying.”

“I can’t go to the Eyrie,” Her gaze flickers to Octavia, something curling in her gut as she continues, “The king has asked me to marry him.”

“What?” Octavia takes a step forward, her eyes widening and her mouth dropping open. “You can’t marry him! You l-” She cuts herself off, and Clarke has a horrible feeling that she knows more than she should.

“The marriage proposal of a king isn’t easily spurned, and besides, Finn loves me and I… care for him.”

Ser Roan scoffs loudly, and when Clarke’s eyes dart to him, glaring, he says. “I remember how the boy used to trail along after you when you were both younger. He was nothing more than idle sport to you, Lady Clarke.”

She bristles under his words, her chin tilting out stubbornly. “I was always fond of him, and now that I’m older I can see his qualities more clearly. Besides,” She continues over Roan’s protests. “I can do far more for Westeros as his queen than as the Lady of Highgarden.”

“This is a mistake,” Octavia’s anger is burning low in her voice, and when their gazes meet Clarke feels a fountain of guilt emerge in her breast, so powerful that it spurns her rage.

“What do you know of these affairs?” She snaps, and then turns her furious gaze back to Ser Roan. “People of my standing marry for advantage, not love. My mother will understand, I will marry the king, and you will go to the Citadel with Fox and find Prince Wells.”

Roan’s lip curls in annoyance, but he offers her a low, sarcastic bow. “As my future queen commands.”

The words send heat running through her veins and she tries to ignore Octavia’s eyes upon her, burning brightly with anger.
Words escape her now in a way they never have before. She was raised in the courts of the south, where women chirped like pretty birds, and though governesses tried to train the habit out of her, never once was it said that Clarke of House Tyrell found herself with nothing to say. Ever quick tongued and sharp of wit, she was the bane of every person to ever try to teach her dainty southern manners, and yet the words she inherited from her grandmother, which grew through her body, curling up her spine like roses and blossoming from her lips unbidden, had always been her greatest weapon. More so than a bow, or a dagger, or even the poison she had left in Winterfell, her words were always at her side. They helped her to win over the darkest of minds and the cruellest of hearts. They soothed and hurt in equal measure, and never was she without them, but now, staring down at the parchment rolled out before her, she can think of nothing worth marring its unblemished surface.

The ink drips from her quill, splattering across the parchment like a raindrop, and it startles her from her reverie. Carefully, she sets the quill back into the ink pot, and gazes down at her hands. The ring is not yet on her finger, but when she meets the king for supper it soon will be. The thought stirs so much within her that she can barely untangle her own feelings. Relief, at being a step closer to defeating Lord Pike. Guilt, that she is marrying a man who she knows loves her with his whole heart, when she cannot give him even part of hers. Grief, as deep as a well and as wide as a valley, gaping through her like a wound, in the place where her heart should be. The pain of it gnaws at her, festering in her wound like a reminder of the wrong she is committing. Her body recoils even at the thought of tying herself to Finn forever, not through any fault of his, but because it longs so deeply for another.

Clarke wonders if she will ever forget the silvery moonlight and the warm light of the candle, the touch of Lexa’s fingers to her waist and the tentative hope in her eyes. If she closes her eyes, she can imagine it as if it were real again, but she doesn’t allow herself the luxury. She does not deserve it now, when Lexa is waiting for her so patiently and kindly in Winterfell. Lexa, who thinks her so overcome with grief that she cannot bear to leave her mother’s side, when in reality her mother is so far from her mind. Lexa, who gave her leave to go despite the turmoil it surely caused in her court. Lexa, who trusts her as only a northerner could.

She deserves to hear the truth from Clarke’s own hand, but there are no words to explain all that has happened. When she tries to think of them they sound like wild excuses and tales made up only to soothe Clarke’s own guilt, which in a way they are. The words fly away, like doves searching for a better home, and so instead all Clarke can do is take a shaking breath, put her quill to the parchment and write her truth. Three words, so small and fierce and dangerous, that the moment she has penned them she stands, her skirt swaying around her ankles. She walks to the fire and holds her terrible truth between her fingers, staring at it until she knows she will never forget it.

A knock comes to the door, and Octavia calls.

“My lady, the king is ready to receive you.”

Clarke’s gaze falls back to the parchment, her fingers running over the letters, before she lets it fall from between her hands and flutter into the fire.
*** This was a nerve wracking chapter for me to post! I know some of you were saying how much you didn't want anything to happen between Clarke and Finn, but for now, Clarke is doing what she has to to protect herself and Lexa. I hope you trust me enough to know I'll look after our girls <3

Thank you so much for reading and commenting, please let me know what you thought of this chapter and what you think will happen next either down below or over on Tumblr (@onemilliongoldstars)
Interlude: Betrayal

The candles are glowing, casting away the storm darkened skies outside, as Lexa lounges upon her throne in the quiet hall, and watches as Aden tries to train the pesky puppy Clarke had gifted him. The pup is spoiled and loved more than any dog Lexa has ever met, she knows that Aden adores her and takes full advantage of his love with every hair on her tiny, wriggling body. She is used to playing and sleeping in his bed and eating from his fingers, and so has none of the discipline of the working dogs who parented her. Instead she stares at Aden with wide, eager eyes, her little tail wiggling so hard it makes her entire body shake, and watching as he holds the cured meat too high for her to jump and reach it. Her floppy ears bounce as she lets out a little bark, and Aden shushes her. At Lexa’s side, Honour- who has been watching the puppy with disdain- doesn’t flinch, but Patience, who is dozing at her feet, and Faith, whose head lies in her lap, open their eyes and glare at the puppy with annoyance.

“Rose!” Aden tries to be stern, pointing his finger at the pup. “Quiet! Now sit, sit Rose!” The puppy just stares at him, her head cocked inquisitively, and jumps up, ready to play and run.

Lexa can’t help but laugh when Aden groans.

“No, foolish mutt,” But he bellies his words by bending and scratching at the puppy’s head.

“She is spoiled,” Lexa observes, still grinning. “She knows you’ll give her the treat anyway, so why bother obeying?”

“She’s loved ,” Aden corrects, and straightens up again, “C’mon Rose, I know you can do this. Sit girl!”

The puppy continues to stare at him, her tail still wagging as if this is the most fun she’s ever had, and Aden groans again. Carefully, he bends to pat at her rear, but instead of sitting, the puppy just spins to nip at his fingers, and then becomes distracted by her own tail. Above her, Lexa thinks that she hears Honour sigh.

“You were just like her when you were young,” She laughs, and stands, stretching as the rain begins to patter against the windows. “Never could sit still long enough to learn anything.”

“She’ll get there, won’t you Rose?” Aden gives in, just as Lexa said he would, and feeds the puppy the meat, and the moment the pup is done devouring her prize, she rewards him by jumping in his arms and showering his face with kisses.

“You should send her to the dog boys for a few weeks, they’d soon straighten her out.”
Aden stares at her, appalled by the suggestion, and grasps the puppy tighter in his arms. “I would never abandon her like that.”

Lexa laughs again, shaking out the stiffness in her limbs as a knock comes to the broad doors, and a servant steps inside.

“Your highness, your majesty,” The servant bows deeply, “Maester Titus is looking for you, your majesty.”

Lexa presses back a groan and gives Aden a wry smile. “The work of a queen never ceases.” Walking past them, the wolves at her heels, she gives the puppy’s ears a ruffle. “She’ll get there, don’t worry.”

Maester Titus waits for her in her solar, and Lexa is in a good enough mood to give him a smile when she enters.

“Maester Titus,” She settles behind her desk and looks up at him, “What can I do for you today?”

“I have received a raven from Kings Landing, your majesty,” Maester Titus is looking at her in a way that she doesn’t fully recognise, a note of caution in his voice and her brows crease, the hairs on her neck rising as he sets the note down in front of her. “I know you asked not to hear any news of Lady Clarke Tyrell, but this is most important.”

It is as if her heart stops at the name, and she reaches out with trembling fingers, hoping that Titus doesn’t see. Carefully, she unrolls the message and her eyes flicker over the words cramped into the small space. Everything is suddenly very quiet, the fire’s crackles die away to nothingness, and she can hear her own heartbeat dully in the back of her head. Everything feels very fine and hot, as if one touch or the wrong word could bring everything tumbling down, and when she looks back up at Titus, her face is stiff.

The words come as if from nowhere, and they feel as if they are not her own. “The King is to be married. We are invited to attend as honoured guests.”

“You will go, your majesty?” Titus’s eyes widen with horror, “It could be a trap.”

“Or it could be a diplomatic invitation to strengthen the ties between our two lands.” Lexa settles the parchment back onto her desk, staring down at it. “We will go, to meet this new king and show him that northerners are afraid of nothing. Make the arrangements, Titus.”

“Yes, your majesty.” He watches as she walks past him, still staring even as she pauses in the doorway.

“Pack up the rest of Lady Clarke’s things. She’ll need them now.”

Anya finds her in the yard, beating a soaked dummy with a blunted wooden sword beneath the downfall of rain. The world around them is dark, the sky heavy with black clouds, and through the rain Lexa can barely see Anya until she approaches close enough to be heard over the weather.

“Your majesty! Your majesty!” When Lexa continues to ignore her, Anya shouts instead. “Lexa!” The name is enough to jar Lexa back to reality, and she swings, her anger bearing her around to strike at Anya. Like the trained knight that she is, Anya draws her sword in moments to meet Lexa’s, and swings in time to meet her next strike.

The rage that sits in Lexa’s heart is so fierce, it feels like a fire burning hotly in the cold northern air. She half expects to start spitting fire at any moment, so fresh and furious is that rage, and all she can
do is swing her sword at Anya over and over again. The sound of metal meeting wood cracks through the yard like thunder, louder even than the rain, and when Anya seems to realise that she isn’t going to back down, she begins swinging her own sword. Lexa is forced to duck and dodge her dangerous strikes, but it only makes her redouble her own efforts. So clouded is her mind, however, that all she can think to do is hit and strike. All of her training flies from her head, and as she bears down with every muscle in her body upon Anya, the knight is able to land a few hits on her stomach and arms with the flat of her sword.

Anya is speaking, Lexa can see her lips moving, but nothing reaches her over the rain and the buzzing in her ears. Her cousin throws her sword to one side and catches Lexa’s blunted practice weapon with her hands, forcing her backwards until she stumbles and falls into the mud. Anya falls with her, and being stronger and bigger, is able to pin her down, her voice finally reaching her.

“Lexa! What in the gods are you doing?”

“Get off me.” Lexa gnashes like a furious dog, wriggling beneath her, and Anya stays firm.

“Tell me what’s happened!”

“I said get off!” Lexa’s neck snaps forward and she headbutts Anya so hard that her cousin falls to one side, cursing and clutching her head. Lexa springs to her feet, her own head still reeling from the contact and marches away, leaving Anya on the muddy ground. Thunder cracks behind her, splitting through the sky like the gods can feel her fury.

Guards scatter as she walks, straightening at their posts, and servants refuse to meet her gaze. Only Honour walks at her side, dripping from his time stood watching her in the rain. In the distance, she can hear the rest of the wolves begin to howl, a mournful cry up to the skies, and for the first time in her life, she wishes they were gone. In her solar, her handmaiden runs to have a bath drawn for her, and she is still standing in the middle of the room, shivering with anger and hurt and hate, unwilling to admit how much of the dampness on her face is the rain and how much is furious tears, when the tentative knock comes to her door.

She says nothing, but the door swings inwards anyway, and she turns to unleash the fullness of her fury upon Anya, before deflating when she sees Maester Titus’s grave face.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, your majesty,” Even Titus can sense her mood and has the good sense to stay away from her. “The maids found something in Lady Clarke’s room that I think you’ll want to see.”

He holds something out, something so small it fits into the palm of his hand, and despite herself Lexa steps forward to look more closely. It is a vial, stoppered with wax and filled with a dark liquid and she takes it into her hand.

“Is that…”

“Poison.” Titus confirms with a nod of his head, and Lexa closes her hand around it, until her fingers have made a fist.

“Get out.” He does as she says without hesitating, and the moment the door closes behind him, she takes the vial and slips it into her pocket.

Her eyes fall on the parchment still sat upon the desk, and with a grief stricken cry, she puts her hands upon her desk and sweeps everything off it with one fell swoop.

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ahhh I hope this didn't break too many hearts! Next chapter will be this weekend and it's the big one you've all been waiting for....
Book Three; Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

here we go, the one everyone has been waiting for...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Book Three: Chapter One

“There should be more lace.”

“Any more lace and she’ll look as if she stepped out of a Dornish whore house.”

“She’s to be the queen, a queen can wear as much lace as she chooses!”

“As much lace as you choose, you mean.”

“Lady Clarke, what do you think?”

Clarke blinks at the sound of her name, her gazer rising from where it has been fixed to the fire flickering merrily in the grate. She stands in the middle of her solar, draped in fabrics so heavy that her arms and neck are beginning to ache under their weight. Around her, seamstresses and dressmakers fuss and argue, and the door is constantly swinging as maids and errand boys are sent running for one thing or another. Octavia leans against the wall, watching them all with disdain and disinterest, and the eyes of the room are upon her, clearly waiting for her decision.

She feels as if she is speaking to them from far away when she bestows a kind smile and says. “Whatever you think is best.”

The seamstresses turn to one another and begin arguing again, and Clarke cannot bring herself to listen to them. Instead, she slowly begins unravelling the fabrics from her arms and about her body, and when they turn to look at her with surprise, she says.

“I think that’s enough for today.”

They shuffle and grumble, but abide by her wishes, and Harper is on hand to help her into her robe. Settling into a chair by the fire, Clarke picks at the tray of sweetmeats and cheeses brought for her hours ago, and watches, enjoying the quiet, as Harper heats her tea again over the fireplace.

“I’m sure your gown will be beautiful,” Octavia says, lowly, from her place against the wall, and Clarke can’t bear to meet her gaze. “Whatever you think is best.”

Harper, oblivious to the tension between them, says airily, “Yes my lady, it looks wonderful. You’ll be the most beautiful bride the city has ever seen.”

“Thank you Harper,” Clarke manages to give her a smile, her gaze growing curious as Harper passes her the tea and starts setting the room back to order.

“The wedding will be so wonderful,” Harper sighs a little dreamily as she folds and hangs the dresses strewn across the bed. “It’ll be nice to have something to celebrate again, after everything
“That’s happened.”

“You were friends with Prince Wells weren’t you?”

The question surprises Harper so much that she pauses halfway through picking up a dress, turning to look at Clarke, her eyes wide and her mouth a little agape. “I- When we were young, my lady.” Her eyes flicker uncertainly to Octavia, and Clarke hurries to reassure her.

“Octavia will say nothing, you have my word.” She pauses, considering her words. “Did you and the prince ever… share a kiss?”

The words pull a gasp from Harper, and she shakes her head so furiously that Clarke fears her eyes will fall out of her head. “No! No, never! We were always proper!”

“Do you know if the prince ever… visited someone else?” When Harper’s eyes become suspicious, she adds. “Please Harper, this is important.”

Harper is quiet for a few moments, her eyes fixed on folding linens and brushing out dresses, and Clarke is almost ready to give up when the girl finally speaks again. “I used to help him sneak away to Flea Bottom.”

“Flea Bottom?” Clarke exchanges a surprised glance with Octavia, “Do you know who he visited?”

“No.” Clarke deflates at the word, her shoulder slumping, and Harper takes pity on her, because she sighs and gathers the linens into her arms. “I can ask around for you,” She says, reluctantly, “See if I can find out who it was.”

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Her heart feels as if it is lodged in her throat when the day finally comes. After weeks of waiting, weeks torn between fear and elation, between wishing and dreading, she finally finds herself stood in the Great Hall, waiting for the queen in the north to appear. The whole palace has been aflutter since word of her imminent arrival came, and she has been more inundated than ever with questions about the north and her time in Winterfell. Even Finn had asked her, a little anxiously, how she had found the ferocious wolf queen. The thought of seeing Lexa again, with her betrothal hanging heavily around her, is so painful that she had spent the weeks declining invitations and keeping to herself, if only to avoid talking about her. But now she stands in the Great Hall, awaiting her arrival, and there is nowhere to run to.

Every noble in the area stands in the hall, so that it is so squished it appears small. The place is polished to shining, and so is every noble in the place, bedecked in some of their finest attire to meet the northern queen who is so mysterious and strange. Clarke runs her hand over her own light blue dress, her waist and shoulders embellished by golden clasps and jewels. Her back and arms are bared to the world, and though she has worn far more revealing things in her time in the warm south, she suddenly wishes for a shawl to protect herself with. She can’t imagine what Lexa will think when she sees her like this.

“I’ve heard she rides a wolf the size of a horse.” Lady Mira mutters from beside her, and Clarke tries not to roll her eyes.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” One of Clarke’s cousins scoffs, gaze flickering to Clarke. “That isn’t true.”

Clarke can’t find the words to agree with her, so great is the ocean of feeling rising in her gut. She can barely return the smile Finn gives her from his place in the Iron Throne, the blades that the great chair is made from rising up behind him and dwarfing him.
There are shouts from outside, and the sound of drums and horses and a shiver runs through Clarke. She feels like an arrow, notched in a bowstring and pulled taut ready to be released, quivering on the edge of running. The doors to the Great Hall open with a fanfare, and if she were to spare him a glance, Clarke would see Finn straighten in his seat, but she does not. She has eyes for no one but the figure stood in the doorway, the daylight a halo around her darkened form.

Lexa is like something otherworldly as she enters the Great Hall, wearing a dress of dark velvet, pinching at her waist and forming a set of strong shoulders. The skirt brushes above her ankles and is cut up the leg, revealing a set of dark hose beneath, as if the queen is ready to jump into battle at any moment. Her broadsword sits at her hip, and silver embroidery covers her shoulders, stitched into the dancing pattern of snarling wolves. From her shoulders a long, dark cape flows, brushing the floor behind her and trimmed with white fur. Upon her head, standing tall from between her curls, is the regal crown Clarke had rarely seen her don in her time in the north. At her feet, her seven direwolves prowl, their teeth bared and their heavy paws thumping against the ground, and people gasp and recoil at the sight of them, but Clarke steps forward despite herself.

Somewhere behind her, Clarke knows Anya Mormont and Ser Lincoln stand, but how can she see them when those green eyes are staring out and claiming a victim with every gaze they meet. All she can think is Lexa Lexa Lexa. As she walks, people bow and curtsey, shying away as the wolves lope at their mistress’s feet. Lexa regards these strangers with hard eyes and tight lips, she walks with the regal gait of one who knows that their worth is far above those around them, like a goddess descending from the heavens to walk among man.

Clarke falls into a curtsey when her cousin tugs at her hand, but even then she can’t bear to pull her eyes away from Lexa’s approaching figure, drinking her in like a wanderer parched for water. Lexa’s eyes do not meet hers as she gets closer, and it is this which forces her gaze to the ground. Worse than having Lexa ignore her, is knowing the resentment that would be in her eyes should they meet. The hall is silent but for the tap of the queen’s boots as she walks, and the panting of the direwolves, and Clarke fears that should she open her mouth, a scream will erupt from her.

Clarke is disturbed from her reverie by a loud, panting mouth and a wet tongue licking at her cheek. The ladies around her recoil away, sinking back and crying out in disgust and alarm and knights draw their swords to ready for battle, but Clarke immediately recognises Faith’s white pelt.

“Hello, my friend,” she murmurs, lifting her head and petting the great, slobbering beast to try to appease her. A shadow falls over her and her eyes flicker upwards to see Lexa pausing beside her. Her eyes are dark and clouded, like Clarke has never seen them before and her voice chokes in her throat. “Your majesty.”

Lexa offers her a curt nod and clicks her tongue. Faith whines but reluctantly moves from Clarke’s side to trot along after Lexa with the rest of her pack as Lexa continues down the aisle towards the queen. The interaction leaves her feeling breathless and aching, as if awaking from some terrible fever.

“Your majesty,” Finn takes the steps from his dais two at a time, so eager is he to meet the northern queen. He offers her a bowed head, and she returns the gesture. “Thank you for travelling so far. We are honoured to welcome you to Kings Landing.”

“It is good to be here, your majesty,” Lexa gives him a polite smile, which Finn returns threefold. Watching them interact is so strange, like two parts of her life that she thought completely separate are coming together, and Clarke watches them with wide eyes.

“It is an excellent opportunity to breed good relations between our two lands.” Finn nods, and she is sure that the line was drummed into him by a member of his small council. He gestures to the side,
and she watches as Lady Tris hurries forwards, clearly giddy with her joy at seeing her queen again. The little lady bows deeply to her queen, and at this Clarke sees Lexa’s smile brighten into one of genuine happiness and relief.

“Lady Tris, it is good to see you well.”

“I’m glad to see you again, your majesty.” Tris is sincere and effusive, and when she steps back again, she places herself next to her sister, who puts a hand on her shoulder and squeezes.

Finn raises his voice. “Tonight there will be a ball to welcome the queen and her attendants to the south!”

Though she knew already, the words cause the ball of pain that seems to live in Clarke’s stomach to throb darkly, and she can’t bear to look at Lexa and remember the last time they had attended a ball together.

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“Your majesty,” Anya watches as Lexa slowly strips off her long cloak. The rooms they have been provided with are luxurious and stately, the solar is filled with golden tapestries and two wide windows look out onto the sprawling city of Kings Landing, with its orange roofs and sandy walls. Lexa waits as her handmaidens take the crown from her head, and then goes to stand at these windows, resting her hands upon the sill to look out at the world below her.

“Your majesty,” Anya tries again, and at last Lexa looks back at her, and tilts her chin, waiting for Anya to speak. At the sight of her dark gaze, Anya falters. “We will have guards posted on the corridors and at the door at all times of the day and night.” She informs her, succinctly and Lexa nods, glancing back at the window.

“That seems safe.” She agrees, after a moment of silence and Anya bows her head in agreement. She has learnt to read Lexa’s moods in the last few weeks, as they shift like sand beneath her feet, and this mood is dark and dangerous.

“Is there anything else you would like for us to do?”

“Assign a Queensguard to Lady Tris, and have her moved closer to you or I if that can be arranged,” Lexa instructs, “Have guards on the horses in the stable, and have a taster for the meals eaten by myself, Lady Tris, or any of my attendants.”

“Do you think we are at risk?” Anya’s brows knit together, concerned, and Lexa purses her lips, her gaze once again settling on the roofs of the city.

“I think we would be best to leave this place as soon as possible,” She answers, at last, and Anya nods.

Silence settles between them for a moment, before Anya finally works up the courage to speak again. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Lexa’s spine stiffens, her hands forming fists on the windowsill and she looks back with anger in her eyes. “About what?”

Anya’s gaze travels over her, dissatisfied with what she finds. “I taught you better than this,” She snaps at last, her lips tight with fury. “Harbouring your anger like this will get you killed Lexa. It makes you sloppy and hasty—”
“I have no anger.” Lexa darts back, as quickly as a viper, and Anya snorts inelegantly.

“Don’t lie to me, cousin.”

“I am your queen.” Lexa takes a step forward, her jaw clenched and Anya shakes her head.

“You are behaving like a child Lexa. You have to let go of this anger before it puts us all in danger.”

“My anger is my own,” Lexa mutters, resentful, “How could it put us in danger?”

A beat, and then Anya speaks quietly. “Wars have been fought over less beautiful women.”

A knock on the door interrupts them, and they both step away from each other, unaware of how close they had become when speaking. Lexa turns back to the window, calling for entry, and Anya takes her place at the door as Lady Tris steps into the room. The sight of her gleeful face, still soft with youth, is enough to put them both at ease again, and Lexa turns to greet her with a broad smile.

“Tris, how wonderful to see you.”

“It is,” Anya steps closer and wraps an arm around her sister’s shoulders, pulling her in until Tris squirms from her grip, laughing. “What have they been feeding you, you’ve grown like a bean sprout.”

“Must be all the sun,” Tris laughs as Anya pokes at her ribs and hips. Liberty trots to Tris’s side, always favouring the young Mormont, and jumps at her, putting his big paws on her shoulders and licking at her face as she laughs and rubs his ears, finally pushing him away.

“You’ve not been training though,” Lexa allows herself one of her first true smiles in a long time, and peers at the girl’s arms. “Look at you, I bet you could hardly lift a sword.”

“My Septa says that girls shouldn’t use weapons,” Tris wrinkles her nose and by the tone of her voice it’s clear that she thinks her Septa is wrong. “She made me sew and crochet,” Tris’s wide, horrified eyes swivel to her sister and she demands. “Do you know how to crochet?”

Anya shakes her head, unable to stop her grin.

“Exactly! I told my Septa I didn’t need to learn to crochet to be Lady Mormont, and she said I would have to find a man to look after Bear Island for me!” Tris’s expression is twisted with annoyance. “Can you believe that?”

“Unfortunately I can,” Lexa laughs quietly, putting her hand on her young cousin’s shoulder to draw her attention. “Have you been treated well Tris? Have you been safe?”

“I have,” Tris nods, becoming more serious under the gaze of her queen. “They’ve treated me well, even though they haven’t let me ride outside the castle walls or train as much as I’d like.”

“And have you been safe?” Anya asks, a little more insistently, and Tris nods.

“Lady Clarke told me that if I ever didn’t feel safe I could go to her.”

The mention of the name leaves Lexa reeling, and she stares at Tris, open mouthed, until Anya presses for her.

“Lady Clarke told you that?”

Tris nods, “Lady Clarke is nice, she’s been a good friend to me.” Her eyes go from Lexa to Anya,
and she asks, a little more soberly. “Will you leave me here when you go again?”

“No,” Lexa assures her, quickly, and puts her hand on her shoulder again, looking into her eyes as she promises. “You’re coming home with us Tris.”

Octavia meets her brother in an alleyway close to Aegon’s Square. The sun is starting to set, painting the city with long shadows and as labourers stream from their workshops, the taverns are beginning to become rowdy. In the crowded streets, Octavia is able to blend in easily. She wears a drab, dark coloured cloak, the hood pulled up to shade her eyes, and though her hand rests on the hilt of her longsword, it is concealed beneath the heavy material. When Bellamy appears, he is significantly more conspicuous in his red and gold Lannister uniform, and she rolls her eyes, pushing herself away from the shadowed wall she’d been leaning on and meeting his gaze.

“Octavia,” His smile is wide, and it falters when she doesn’t return it with one of her own. Instead, she pulls her cloak from around her shoulders and tugs it over his, hoping to cover the worst of his gawdy uniform. “What?” He looks down at the cloak in surprise, his brows creasing together.

“You’re far too obvious in that,” She grunts her irritation, tugging on his arm to draw him into step beside her, and they carefully sidestep the puddles of piss and piles of shit from the chamber pots emptied above.

“No one cares about a Lannister officer walking through the street,” He argues, but keeps the cloak on all the same, tugging it up to cover his face as they walk. “I’m glad you asked to see me again.”

“I need to talk to you.” Her voice is stilted and cold, but Bellamy powers onwards.

“I could show you my favourite parts of Kings Landing.”

“No,” She shakes her head, sighing when his eyes turn on her, hurt and confused, “We need to stay off the beaten track.”

“Fine,” His answer is tight, “So I’m guessing you didn’t ask to see me because you missed your only family in the world?”

“Bellamy-” She tries to argue with him, but he talks over her.

“You must be pleased that the northern queen has come to the city,” His eyes cut to her, and his voice is dripping with spite when he continues, “Perhaps she’ll order you to go home with her.”

Her own anger rises in her chest, and she lets out a long breath before she can speak calmly, “That’s not what this is about, Bellamy.”

“That’s not what this is about?” He pauses in a doorway, pulling her closer, “Because obviously you don’t care about seeing me for me.”

“I do!” Her emotions get the better of her, and she almost shouts, “Of course I do, you’re my brother!”

“Exactly!” Bellamy snaps in return. “I’m your brother Octavia, and you don’t seem to care. I thought you were dead, I thought-” He cuts himself off, turning away from her, and she wishes that she could reach out and touch him, but the action feels too intimate.

Instead she crosses her arms and says, as gently as she is able. “Bellamy. Bell, please.” It’s the use of
his childhood nickname that draws his attention back to hers and her breath hitches when she sees the anguish in his eyes. “I’m sorry, you are my brother. It’s just… it’s been so long, you have to understand… I barely remember our home.”

The words make him sag, and he reaches out to place a hand on her shoulder, speaking earnestly. “You were what drove me, O. Every day, I thought about finding you and killing the person that kept you captive.” When she opens her mouth to protest, he hurries to correct himself. “I know, she didn’t actually keep you captive. It’s just hard to let go of.”

“I know,” Slowly, Octavia lets out a long sigh, and when she meets his gaze again, she feels bare and vulnerable. “I promise when all of this is over, I’ll see more of you.”

Bellamy nods, and his hand falls from her shoulder. “So, why did you want to see me?”

Her stomach flips, and Octavia steels herself. “We need your help.”

“We?” Bellamy eyes her cautiously, “What do you need?”

“We need to get into Lord Pike’s rooms, you need to get us the key.”

Bellamy’s mouth falls open, and he takes a step away from her, so forceful is his horror. “What?” He hisses, his eyes darting around them to check if anyone heard. “Octavia, have you lost your mind?”

“Please Bellamy, I know it’s a lot to ask, but you’re the only one who can do this!”

“Why would I?” He snaps, angrily. “Why do you need to get in there?”

“Pike isn’t who you think he is,” She insists, “He’s dangerous, all he wants is power and he isn’t afraid to kill people to get there.”

“You’re crazy,” Bellamy is shaking his head even as she speaks, “How can you even say this Octavia? Is it what the queen has been telling you? Or the Tyrell lady? They’re lying!”

“They’re not! Pike sent an assassin after Lady Clarke!”

“How do you know it was him?” Bellamy demands, fiercely.

“Her mother claims Pike killed Lord Tyrell and the king!”

“The ravings of a woman mad with grief!” He shakes his head furiously, his cheeks reddening with rage. “This is absurd Octavia and you have to leave Lady Clarke’s service before she drags you down with her!”

“Prove it then!” She demands, her own anger bubbling closer to the surface. “Get us into Pike’s solar, and if we find nothing we’ll know you were right and we’ll stop going after Pike.”

“Octavia,” He stares at her, his eyes wide with despair, “What have you been dragged into?”

She ignores his question, pressing insistently, “Will you help us?”

There is a moment of silence as he stares at her, before finally he gives in. “Fine, yes. But once you find nothing you have to give up this crusade Octavia, and.” Here he grabs her wrist to hold her closer to him. “You will leave Lady Clarke’s service, and the queen’s.”

For a moment, she looks at him, her heart beating in her chest. She thinks about throwing him off,
about reaching for her sword, but then she remembers the changed face of the assassin lying in her own blood in the castle hallway, and she firms her resolve. “Fine,” She pulls herself from his grip. “But we will find something Bellamy, mark me.”

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As a northerner she has found the fancy trappings and ornaments of royalty a difficult adjustment. Growing up in a place where each winter season brought a struggle for food and shelter, there was never much call for the finer things in life, which she saw were so rife in her few visits south of Riverrun. Being without a mother for most of her life, there was never anyone to teach her the refined parts that a lady should play. Her tutors and nannies had tried to instil in her some sense of courtly manners, but her propriety and decorum came mostly from her father’s teachings of respect and kindness. Although her father had hired nannies and tutors to teach her, he had easily pulled her away from lessons in poetry and embroidery when it suited him and taught her to ride and fight and strategise. Looking back now, she wonders how long he had planned the northern secession, and at what point of her childhood he had decided to make a queen out of her.

Being queen has taught her that she must balance the line between woman and ruler finely, but she still struggles to understand the efforts of her handmaidens as they work about her like a flurry of well organised birds, pinning her hair and tightening the laces of her dress. She is glad that she insisted on bringing some of her own handmaidens; the thought of allowing some strange southern women, as well meaning as they may be, this close to her sends gooseflesh up her arms. As two of her handmaidens bustle away to organise her jewels, Clara gestures for her to sit and begins taming her unruly curls in earnest.

When a knock comes to the door, she nods her assent and watches as Octavia Snow is led inside. The girl looks much the same as she did when Lexa last saw her, weeks ago, if a little more tanned from her time in the sun. She still wears a uniform that bears the Stark crest, which brings a smile to Lexa’s lips, and her hair is pulled back into her usual thick braid. Octavia bows deeply the moment their eyes meet, and though she smiles when she straightens up, there is something strange to her eyes.

“Your majesty, it’s good to see you.” Octavia speaks as earnestly as she dares, and Lexa hums her agreement, while Clara tucks her curls away.

“And you, Snow. I trust you capital has treated you well?”

“As well as can be expected, your majesty,” Octavia gives a wry smile, her hands behind her back. Lexa quirks her lips at the words, “Do you like it here?”

Octavia’s expression twists and she seems conflicted for a moment before half shrugging. “It’s... fine enough, your majesty. A little hot and the people are... different.”

“I can imagine so,” Lexa looks her over. Though she knows in her heart that Octavia is not to be blamed in this, there’s a part of her that can’t help but link the soldier to Lady Clarke and all that has passed between them. Octavia had no reason to send a raven, should be commended for remaining with Clarke for so long on Lexa’s orders, and so Lexa softens her expression a little and says. “Thank you for your service with regard to Lady Clarke, Snow.”

“Of course your majesty,” That strange, guilty expression crosses Octavia’s face again and Lexa wonders whether Octavia too thinks she should in part be blamed for Lady Clarke’s actions.

“You’ve gone above and beyond for her, and for me.” Lexa pauses and Clara places her crown upon
her head, the weight settling about her. It always makes her hold herself taller, her shoulders squared and her spine straighter. Slowly, she stands and runs a hand down the skirt of her dark dress, fixing Octavia with her gaze. “You’re welcome to return to the north with us, and I will see to it that Ser Indra begins your training to become part of the Queensguard.”

Octavia’s lips part, her eyes widening with her surprise, and she is silent for a moment. “I- Thank you, your majesty, I appreciate that. I will… have to think about it.”

“What?” Lexa demands, her brows furrowing.

Octavia fidgets, clearly uncomfortable and guilty under her gaze. “I have commitments here your majesty, but I am grateful for the offer—”

“Do with it what you will.” She steps away from her chair, her fury making her cold as she stalks past the soldier. Octavia rushes to step out of her way, “But the place in the Queensguard will not be kept for you forever.”

Anya falls in step with her outside the door to her chambers, and she doesn’t ask what fuels the anger in Lexa’s steps as she strides down to the Great Hall. The castle is bedecked with flowers and jewels and tapestries the closer she gets to the Great Hall, and she can hear the sound of music and laughter and talking from the many people who are surely crowded into the hall for the ball. She has to stride through the courtyard to get to the Great Hall and all around her lesser lords, squires and pages leap up from where they are lounging and talking to offer her bows. Only Honour- his dark fur bristling- and Faith- starkly white in contrast- walk at her sides. The rest of the wolves are hunting beyond the walls, but Honour refuses to leave her side in a place as risky as this, and she suspects Faith lingers in hopes of seeing Lady Clarke again. Still, they are a striking pair to walk at her sides, and Lexa is glad they are there. Anya and Lincoln remain at her back as well, with several of her other Queensguards behind them, their hands resting on the pommels of their swords.

The door to the hall which she had emerged through earlier that day swings open at the sight of her, and she steps inside to far less fanfare. Still, people notice her and a hush falls over the crowded room as she steps inside, until even the band falls silent. The hall is covered in the same decorations that filled much of the rest of the castle, golden tapestries with black swans upon them, flowers- roses, she notices, and her stomach curdles- trailing up the columns, and chains of sapphires and gold hung from the candelabras so that they catch and sparkle in the light. The crowd parts for her as she walks, these southerners in their beautiful dresses and fanciful armour balking at the sight of her wolves. King Finn is revealed, in a gold and red brocade coat, his sigil stitched into his doublet, a cloak over his shoulder and the golden crown of Westeros upon his head. He smiles widely, welcoming her closer, and as she moves to greet him, her eyes catch sight of golden hair and a dress of blue silk that reveals tantalising strips of skin.

She snaps her gaze away before she can catch Clarke’s eyes, her cheeks flushing darkly. It pains her that Clarke can still have such a hold over her, even after everything that has happened. Just knowing that the Tyrell woman stands nearby- and is so beautiful- is enough to send Lexa’s thoughts spiralling, and she fights not to become distracted as she walks towards the king.

“Your majesty, how good to see you. You look very- beautiful.” King Finn stumbles over the word, and Lexa knows that she does not look beautiful in the way that he is used to. There is nothing of the soft southern beauty in her tonight, only beauty similar to that of an icicle, sharp enough to stab a man to death.

“Thank you, your majesty.” She offers him a vague smile and gestures to the room, “Everything looks wonderful.”
“Thank you,” King Finn smiles more genuinely this time, and Lexa gestures forward the serving girl waiting with one of her Queensguard, to take a goblet that she knows has been tested by one of her tasters. The king holds up his own goblet, and raises his voice to make a toast. “Lords and ladies,” The hall falls silent under his call, and the eyes of the south turn upon them both. At her side, Honour and Faith sit taller, as if they know how important this is. “We welcome our northern friends into our court today. Though we are now two lands, may we be as united as ever, and continue to build our relationship together!” He raises his goblet in a toast and everyone follows, calling out their agreement. Lexa takes the slightest sip from her goblet, urging her gaze not to find the one person in the room she doesn’t want to see. “Tonight, eat, drink and be merry! Music!” At the king’s shout, the minstrels start playing again, and the hall is once more pulled into merriment.

With many eyes now turning away from them, Lexa feels able to look back at the king and say, as warmly as she is able, “Thank you for your gracious welcome.”

“Of course,” The king, though polite, is not quite sure what to make of her. She can tell by the way he second guesses his words; it is as if he cannot decide whether to address her as a woman or a man. “I hope your stay here is comfortable, how are your chambers?”

“They are fine, thank you.” She watches him as she takes another sip of her spiced wine, watches the rosiness to his cheeks and the youthful sparkle in his eyes. “I’m glad to know that you intend to continue King Thelonious’s precedent of peace and friendship between us.”

“Yes,” He seems distracted, “Well it just seems to be the best way forward for us both.”

“I agree. We were once one nation, we can now be each other’s most valuable ally.”

He meets her eyes, and she thinks she sees a flicker of respect in them. “Well said.” He says, after a moment of consideration, and lifts his goblet to toast her again. They stand together in silence for a time, watching the dancers. There are circus folk among the crowds as well, acrobats and fire breathers, and Lexa watches them with veiled amusement. “May I-” The king hesitates, and it’s enough to draw her attention back. She follows his gaze and finds it fixed to Honour, who watches him with distrustful yellow eyes. “Your wolves they are… I’ve never seen anything like them before.”

“They accompany me everywhere,” She informs him, unsure what to make of his interest.

“How ever did you train such beasts?” King Finn sounds amazed, and she feels her lips twist with disdain.

“They are not trained pups, they are as wild as the day we met.”

“I have heard so much about that day,” Finn’s eyes meet hers again, and he is flushed with enthusiasm. “They say you are a ferocious fighter, your majesty.”

It takes her a moment to realise that he is paying her a real compliment rather than trying to undermine her, and she fumbles over her words. “I- I hear that you too are very skilled on the field.”

“I trained for it all of my life.” Finn sounds longing and mournful. “A man is not complete without a sword in his hand.”

Her lips quirk, it is incredible that this is where they find common ground. “I agree, my duties do not leave me nearly as much time to train as I would like.” Her abilities have not suffered for that, but it seems unwise to reveal that so blatantly to the king in the south.

“My sentiments exactly,” King Finn’s voice grows with his excitement. “Perhaps you would like to
“Train with me?” When her eyes widen at the request, he hurries to speak again. “All in fun, of course. And I would love to see the queen in the north fight.”

Lexa considers him; this request from any other king— even Thelonious— would have made her suspicious, but Finn is so very genuine in his enthusiasm that she struggles to doubt him. “I will consider it,” she allows, at last, and he beams. A man appears at their side at that moment, placing his hand familiarly on the king’s shoulder, and Lexa knows from the lions stitched into the brocade of his doublet that this is Lord Pike Lannister, the Hand of the King.

“Your majesty,” Lord Pike sounds regretful and hushed, “I’m sorry to disturb you.”

“Pike!” King Finn smiles his welcome, and Lexa feels the hairs along the back of her neck prickle when the Lannister fixes her with his gaze. She offers a polite smile when he bows his head, but barely hears Finn introduce him.

“Your majesty, I am honoured to meet you.” He fixes her with a honeyed smile, perfect for a southern man of court, and grimaces delicately. “I’m afraid I must pull you away, my king. There are many people who wish to speak with you.”

Finn’s face falls, and he nods his agreement. “Of course,” he meets Lexa’s eyes again, “Please, enjoy the ball.”

Lexa nods, and watches as the Lannister steers him away to a group of nobles with his hand on his shoulder, murmuring in his ear all the way.

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Around her, the ball swells, like the rise and fall of the tides. The music rolls from one crest to the next and the dancers sway to its rhythm, fancifully coloured dresses swirling around their ankles. Conversation and laughter fill the moments of quiet that the music leaves, and the two echo each other like lovers calling from room to room. In her hands her goblet of wine is almost empty and she feels lightheaded and warm, her stays too tight around her waist. Around her is gathered a gaggle of court women, all jostling to court her for her favour. Women who once scorned her offer platitudes and invitations, and men who once smiled and flirted with her glance away when she meets their eyes, too afraid to anger their king. At her side, Lady Fern is a friendly constant, and even Lady Myra offers some sort of reassurance, but though she is grateful for them, she wishes they would stop observing the northern queen with such interest and fascination.

“She isn’t at all what I expected.” Lady Fern leans around Clarke a little to look at Lexa. “She’s so beautiful, Lady Clarke you never mentioned her beauty.”

“She’s fairer than I expected,” Lady Myra admits, reluctantly, her sharp features drawn a little spitefully. “I thought northern women were supposed to be as plain as can be but she… she is not.”

“She certainly isn’t,” Lady Fern takes a sip of her wine, “And those wolves… I’ve never seen anything so magnificent.”

“Will you excuse me?” Clarke steps away, ignoring their startled expression, and drains the last few dregs of her goblet. She is emboldened by her drink and her friend’s words, enough that she feels she can cross the hall to where Lexa is standing with Lord Marcus. Seeing the two of them conversing jars her somewhat, and she hesitates, almost turning to flee, but Lord Marcus catches sight of her and offers her a smile, beckoning her closer.

It is almost hard to look at Lexa, so resplendent and beautiful, and yet she also feels as if she cannot
bear not to look at her. She is starved of the sight of the woman she once held in her arms, the woman she kissed and dreamed of calling her own, if only for a fleeting moment. And yet Lexa is like a woman made of stone, cold and offering her only the most cursory look before turning her attention back to Lord Marcus. There, her expression softens into a smile, her eyes shading with respect, and it hurts all the more to know that Lexa will not look at her like that again.

“Lady Clarke,” Lord Marcus, at least, is as friendly as he ever is. She knows that he disapproves of her staying here, and even more of her marriage to Finn, but he is courteous enough to not allow it to change his behaviour towards her, and she is grateful for it. “How do you find the evening? You look as beautiful as ever.”

The words are more genuine than the empty flatteries of the rest of the court and she offers him a warm smile in return, moving to stand at his side.

“You’re too kind Lord Marcus, as always.”

He only shakes his head ruefully, and turns his attention back to Lexa. “Lady Clarke’s mother, Lady Tyrell, and her late father were dear friends of mine. I knew Lady Clarke when she was no more than a babe.”

“How nice,” Lexa gives them both a polite smile, but the sight is enough to make Clarke shiver. Something warm and damp nudging at her hand is enough to draw her gaze downwards, and she feels a rush of affection when she finds Faith at her side. The wolf seems to know enough not to bark and leap at her, but by the way her tail is wagging and her tongue lolling from her mouth, she is excited to see her once again. The sight draws a soft laugh from Clarke, who happily strokes at the wolf’s ears and head.

“Of course,” Beside her, Lord Marcus is a little startled by the sight, but he does not cower from the wolves as so many of his contemporaries do. “You have met before, forgive me. It seems to like you.”

“She did,” Clarke answers, and here her eyes flicker to Lexa again, unable to stop herself, and she finds the queen’s expression drawn in turmoil, her eyes sad.

“The queen has just been telling me about the Wall,” Lord Marcus speaks before the air between them becomes too strained. “I am so fascinated by it, I would love to see it.”

“I would happily take you and host you should you want to,” Lexa’s expression eases again. “I have heard so many things about the Eyrie and the moon door.”

“Growing up in the Vale you learn to appreciate how we must sometimes build around the challenges nature sets us.” Lord Marcus agrees, “My uncle is the Lord Commander at the Wall, I have long owed him a visit.”

“I’m sure he would be pleased to have you there.”

“My lord,” A serving boy appears from the crowd, startling to a stop, the words falling from his mouth when he realises who his lord is speaking with. He offers a wide eyed bow to Lexa and Clarke, and only continues with amused prompting from his master. “Apologies my lord, your stallion will not settle in the stables.”

Displeasure crosses Lord Marcus’s face, “What have you been doing to the poor beast? Did you rub him down with warmed oils as I said?”
The serving boy hesitates, panic in his eyes. Clarke is sure that the horse will have been lucky to make it to the stables at all in the excitement of the last few days.

Lord Marcus clearly knows this too, because he makes an irritated noise and turns back to them both. “I apologise, your majesty, I’ll have to see to this. Clarke,” His voice softens, “I hope to speak with you later.”

They both bid him farewell and then they are left together, alone despite the surrounding party. There is silence, heavy and awful around them, and Clarke plucks a goblet of wine from a passing server to drink from. Lexa’s expression is pinched uncomfortably, and she is glancing around as if searching for a polite way to escape. It’s the thought of that which drives Clarke to speak.

“Lexa, I—”

“It’s good to see you again, Lady Clarke.” Lexa cuts her off so smoothly that for a moment she barely realises that the woman has turned and is walking away. She rushes to catch up with her.

“Your majesty,” She adjusts herself, conscious of the sudden distance between them. She has no right to call Lexa by her given name, that privilege given in a time of trust that feels like it was eons ago. “Please I think we should talk.”

“There’s nothing more to talk about,” The queen replies, shortly, her eyes burning with fury as she passes through the tall columns that line either side of the hall, into the darker, more sheltered spaces beneath the balconies. “I am here to congratulate you on your upcoming wedding.”

“There’s more to it than you think,” Clarke can feel herself becoming frustrated, “I didn’t mean to betray you.”

“How could you betray me?” A server steps forward, with one of Lexa’s Queensguard at her side, and they fall silent as Lexa takes the offered drink and gestures her dismissal. Lexa turns her attention back to her again, and Clarke feels her gaze like a hot poker. “We owe each other nothing.”

“You’re being absurd.” When Lexa turns to walk away, Clarke reaches out and grabs at her arm, yanking her back. “If you would just listen.”

Lexa shakes her grip away in seconds, and anger flashes across her expression, breaking her carefully constructed mask into thousands of pieces. Cold, furious rage settles in her eyes, and steals Clarke’s breath away as Lexa closes the gap between them. In the dim light, hidden away from the eyes of the revellers, they are hard to spot.

“I have no interest in listening to what you have to say,” She spits, and takes Clarke’s hand into her own, forcing her fingers open to accept something small and cold into her palm. “You left this in Winterfell, I thought you might want it back.”

Her fingers close around the cool glass and the wax stopper and she feels her stomach roll when she realises what she’s holding. “Lexa, you don’t—”

“If you wanted to kill me,” The northern queen says, darkly, “You had so many chances.”

Clarke opens her mouth to dispute her, but no words come out, only a horrible, choking sound that reminds her unerringly of Reya’s last moments.

Chapter End Notes
this chapter has been so long coming and i've read it so many times the words themselves have lost all meaning to me, but I hope you guys liked it! If you're still here after so long without them being together thank you so much and well done! let me know what you thought of their reunion down below or over on tumblr (@onemilliongolstars)!

(p.s. if you're watching the new season of got try to keep spoilers out of the comments for people who aren't caught up? thank you!)
Book Three: Chapter 2

The walls of the castle rise around them, towering to cut through the deep blue of the sky. Ivy curls up the walls, striking against the red brick, and Lexa casts her gaze over the angular towers and fortresses with reluctant admiration. The castle is built to withstand the longest siege and the most violent of weapons, and she knows that if King Thelonious had not agreed to a peace treaty, the northern army would have languished outside these walls for years before finally being defeated.

A sharp tug on the heavy pauldron around her shoulders jerks her back to reality, and she winces as Anya checks the straps fastening the plate armour to her body with harsh fingers. The squire who had dressed her earlier is a trusted son of one of her lords, but still Anya insists on checking the armour herself. In each rough tug, Lexa can feel her cousin’s fury, which she had expressed so eloquently in words Anya would not want Tris to hear when she had told her of her plan to train with the king. Never mind the opportunity to improve relations between the two kingdoms, Anya is sure that this is a trap to have her unceremoniously killed, and so half of her Queensguard are gathered to watch them, their swords at their hips. Lady Tris is with them, eagerly exploring the rack of weapons, and Liberty lingers close to her, while Honour, Valour and Spirit prowl the training grounds restlessly, startling the southern attendants. The latter wolf, with his black merle pelt almost as dark as Honour, is the direwolf she sees the least, more likely than his siblings to disappear into the woods for weeks on end and appear only when she is facing her biggest challenges. When he had appeared from the woods on the journey south, she had realised with a sinking heart what a struggle this trip would be. Even now, Spirit seems unhappy in the light of day, his fur prickling.

“This is lunacy, I hope you know that,” Anya mutters, low in her throat, as she checks a strap on Lexa’s chest plate, and Lexa resists the urge to snap at her.

“Your fears are unfounded when I have you all to protect me,” She points out, as calmly as she is able, and Anya snorts dryly.

“We are still outnumbered in this city.” Her eyes meet Lexa’s again, and they are dark with meaning when she cautions. “Do not let the north fall because of your wrath Lexa.”

The words spark a fury in her stomach and she yanks herself away from Anya’s fussing hands, fixing her with a glower as her squire scurries up to her side with her sword. “You know I would never.”

A ripple of excitement passes over the field, and when Lexa turns, she sees the king approaching, an excited smile upon his face. He is accompanied by several of his small council, which Measter Titus had informed her is filled to the brim with Lannister sympathisers. The few ladies who had wandered their way onto the field to watch them train whisper to one another gleefully when he sends them a dashing smile, and though the attendants try to flutter around him, he sends them away with a flick of his hand. He is already armoured in beautiful gilded southern armour, which Lexa is sure has never seen a day of fighting, and he gives her a cheerful smile as he approaches.

She meets him in the centre of the field, managing to smile in return, but the king does not seem to notice her reluctance.
“A beautiful day to spar, is it not?” He is practically glowing, and she can’t help but feel endeared to him in a strange, childish sort of way.

“It is indeed.”

“I hope you’re well rested, your majesty,” He jibes her playfully and she arches an eyebrow. “I intend on fighting as hard as any northerner today.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Lexa nods her approval, “Shall we begin?”

Their swords ring out through the clearing as they clash together, accompanied by the low comments exchanged between ladies, soldiers and servants. It is a slow, steady fight, the sort experienced between two rivals new to one another and feeling out the other’s style and weaknesses. Fighting Finn is a strangely familiar experience, and it takes several blows for Lexa to realise that she is remembering the many blows she exchanged with southern fighters during the war that was her father’s and became her own. There is something in his step, in the swing of his sword and the strength and timing of his blows that tells her that he was trained by knights instead of soldiers. Still, he is a good fighter, and clearly enjoying himself immensely, if the beam on his face and the flushed, happy exertion in his cheeks is anything to go by.

“You fight very well,” He puffs out between blows, and it takes her a moment to realise that he is talking to her. “I had heard stories- but they do you- no justice.”

“Thank you,” She answers, shortly, and in her surprise, he is able to twist his sword cleverly and send hers flying from her hands. Behind her, she hears her Queensguard leap forwards and the growl of her wolves, but Finn simply laughs and steps away, wiping at the sweat on his forehead.

“I need the rest,” He tells her, good naturedly, and ushers forward the attendant who carries goblets of weak, cold mead for them to drink. “Thank you for agreeing to spar with me, your majesty.”

“You enjoy it more than your other kingly duties?” She asks as they take a moment to rest under the beating southern sun.

“I confess I do.” He wrinkles his nose, and it draws a reluctant smile from her. “I’m fortunate to have patient advisors, I am not used to being king yet.” He falters, glancing at her uncertainly. “I shouldn’t say such things to you, I suppose.”

“No,” She shrugs lightly, though of course he shouldn’t. “I understand more than most how you feel. I too was made queen before I was ready.”

“How did you find your footing?” He is so earnest that she is taken aback. Truly, she realises, looking at his upturned face in the sunlight, he is nought but a boy at heart, who wants only to hunt and fight and go home to a good meal and a pretty wife. The final thought tugs at her heart and she swallows her mead.

“I surrounded myself with people I trusted, and listened to my instincts.” She says, at last.

He nods thoughtfully, his brows creasing. “I am lucky to be marrying someone whose heart and mind I trust so completely,” He smiles at his words and Lexa feels her blood turn to ice as he says, “And who is so beautiful.”

“Shall we?” Quickly, she discards the goblet of mead and pulls her sword from its scabbard with a trill of metal.

Their second fight is more brutal than the first, because each time Lexa looks at him she can only
imagine his hands on Clarke, his lips pressing to hers and whispering sweet nothings into her ears. What a fool she had been, she thinks with every swing of her sword, to think that Clarke’s pretty words were true, that her kind touches and smiling lips were only for Lexa. A woman like Clarke has learnt to make the best of every situation and what better situation than marrying a handsome, young heir to the throne of the south. Her sword comes down with an almighty crash and the prince is thrown to the ground so bodily that there is an exclamation of terror from those watching. It is only this that stops her sword from delivering the deathly blow, and she is frightened to see that her hands are shaking when she drops her weapon and holds them out to help the king back to his feet.

She barely hears him laugh and say, heartily, “We shall have a tourney in your honour, your majesty! Perhaps you and I could ride against each other? We are clearly so well matched.”

When Anya escorts her back to the castle, she looks into her cousin’s eyes and knows that Anya was right about everything. From now on, she vows to feel nothing for Lady Clarke of House Tyrell.

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Harper comes to her early that morning and as she helps her dress, she tells Clarke the location and names of the mother and son in hurried words under her breath and seems half terrified of the words that come out of her mouth. Clarke is immensely glad for the distraction; she’s been awake since sunrise thinking of the foolish sparring sure to be going on between Lexa and Finn in the yard. When Finn had told her of his plans to train with the northern queen, she had tried to persuade him not to attend, had even asked him to join her for breakfast with a hand lingering on his arm and a flutter of her eyelashes, but he had merely laughed her off and promised to find her when they were done. She had tossed and turned all night deciding whether to go and watch them, but she knows that if she were there she would not be able to stop herself from calling out— and perhaps for the wrong person.

Harper’s information gives her a much needed distraction, and she despatches Octavia to inform Raven and ask the blacksmith to watch the address that Harper gave them throughout the day. She is barely aware of Finn’s excited grin and chatter throughout their lunch together, and she walks the rest of the day in an agitated daze, agreeing to wedding plans and greeting the nobles filtering in from the four corners of the land to attend their nuptials.

Octavia returns to her when night has long since fallen, and Clarke slips into the plain clothes Harper had left for her, sweeping a drab cloak over her shoulders. They have long since perfected the art of slipping from the castle unseen using the hidden tunnels in the walls, and emerging into the dim streets of Flea Bottom is no longer the shock of relief that it once was. Octavia takes the lead, guiding her through the crowded streets with ease. It has been some time since Clarke last came to Flea Bottom, the slums where the poorest of Kings Landing live hand to mouth, but she has not quickly forgotten it. Here the smell of Kings Landing, that putrid stink of people living too closely together, is stronger than anywhere else, and it takes a few minutes for both women to be able to breathe it in. The castle walls rise in the distance, but from here they seem a world away.

There is little of the fine balls and wondrous feasts that fill the castle in these cramped, dark streets. Here, misery reigns supreme, death a master of all things, and they are forced to crowd against crumbling walls when fights break out between drunken men on the streets and women begin to scream at each other like alley cats. The dirt covers the cobble stones such that it licks at their boots and covers nearly an inch of Clarke’s hem, and she doesn’t stop to wonder about what they’re stepping in. Octavia leads the way through winding alleys until they are suddenly joined by a third figure. Raven falls into step next to them as naturally as breathing and tells them all that she had learnt in short, sharp words.

The small rooms that the mother and son live in are over the top of a carpenter’s shop, and the
carpenter happily takes the money the Lannister soldiers give him to not ask any questions about the young woman and babe inhabiting the one room upstairs. The woman barely leaves, and soldiers bring scant food and water to the door for her to take to her babe. Soldiers have been standing guard all day, but Raven says that they are bored and easily distracted. No one comes to look in on the woman, and they grouch loudly about the uselessness of their task.

They pause a street away from the carpenter’s shop, and Raven looks at Clarke sharply.

“Are you sure you want to do this? It’s no job for the future queen.”

The words pull a scowl onto her face and in the face of disapproval she only becomes more certain.

“I need to speak to her myself.” She tells her firmly, and Raven must sense her annoyance because she doesn’t press any further. “How are we going to get to her?”

“Jasper and Monty are going to create a distraction, they’re just waiting on my signal.” At Clarke’s nod, Raven turns out to the street and whistles sharply three times. There are a few moments of silence, and Clarke is beginning to feel a flicker of uncertainty when a sudden crash shatters through the night air. Everyone turns, and as they look down the street they hear a man shout furiously and a herd of no less than twenty pigs go trampling through the street. People throw themselves to one side as the animals rush to get away from their captor, and city guards lounging on street corners and enjoying the comforts of prostitutes curse and take off after the swine.

The sight draws a smile from Clarke, despite herself, and the three of them use the distraction to slip around the corner and up to the door beside the dark carpenter’s shop. There are no guards around, as everyone in Flea Bottom turns to watch the pigs cause havoc, and Clarke bangs heavily at the door, hoping that the girl is not asleep.

“I’ll stay here, listen for my signal in case the guards come back.” Raven instructs and Clarke feels a pang of fear for her.

“But what will you do if they return?”

“I’ll figure it out.” Raven eyes are drawn past her, and Clarke follows her gaze to find the door swinging open and a fearful, pale face looking out at her.

“What is it? What’s going on?” The girl blinks owlishly at them. “Who are you?”

“We’re here to help.” Clarke insists, and tries to push through the door past her, but the girl holds out an old, rusted dagger from behind the door and scowls at them.

“Get back,” She hisses, twisting to place the door more firmly between them. “I might not be able to see very well, but I can still kill you.”

“I’m sorry,” She lifts her hands, stepping away and her eyes widen when she realises that the girl’s eyes are slightly clouded. “I didn’t mean any offence. I just wanted to ask you about Prince Wells, I’m a friend.”

“I don’t know the prince,” She is quick to answer, but the twitch to her eyebrows gives her away and Clarke glances behind them anxiously.

“Please,” She fumbles in the pouch at her hip, “I promise we’re friends, here.” She holds out Wells’ ring, and the girl hesitates before slowly reaching out to run her fingers over it. For a moment she just holds out in her hands, turning it over between her fingers, before her voice hitches and she speaks.
“Where did you get this? Where is Wells?”

“We’ve heard he’s being held prisoner by the Lannisters in the Citadel, just like they’re holding you prisoner.” Clarke’s speaks quickly and fearfully. “Please, we’ve distracted them but who’s to know when they’ll come back.”

The girl draws in a shuddering breath and runs her fingers over the ring again before finally stepping back and allowing them inside. The door huts behind them and she leads them up a dark, rickety staircase until they come out into a room within the rafters of the building. It’s dim and draughty, but a small fire burns in the fireplace and there is space enough for a bed and a few chairs around a rickety wooden table. In the corner is a crib and Clarke gasps softly when she hears the baby begin to gurgle and fuss.

“You’ve woken him.” The girl says with disapproval, slipping around the furniture in the room to gather the baby up into her arms. Her voice softens impossibly as she murmurs to the squirming child wrapped in soft white cloth. The girl settles into one of the chairs around the table and Clarke takes it as their invitation to do the same, sitting opposite her. She can’t quite tear her eyes away from the baby and when he squirms she sees a glimpse of olive skin and dark hair.

“Is that…”

The girl fixes her cloudy eyes upon her and it is unnerving but Clarke maintains her composure. “The prince’s baby?” She finishes for her, “Yes, I know he’s his.”

“What’s his name?” Her voice shakes, but the girl answers anyway.

“Benam Baratheon,” She tucks the boy closer to her breast, protectively, and Clarke can’t help the small smile that glances over her lips. The mother has no time for sentimentality however, as she speaks shortly. “Who are you? How did you know about me and Benny?”

“My name is Lady Clarke of House Tyrell,” Clarke confesses, and sees the girl’s brows raise. “I was a good friend of Prince Wells and I asked the right questions of the right people.”

“I know you,” The girl admits, and some of the fury in her shoulders slackens and softens. “Wells would talk about you sometimes,” Her lips twist into a sardonic smile, “I always thought he might be in love with you.”

“Not in the way it seemed he was in love with you.” Clarke reassures her gently and the girl nods.

“My name is Ivy, so you know.”

“Ivy,” Clarke steels herself, “You know that it is the Lannisters who keep you here, don’t you?”

“Aye,” Ivy laughs, careful not to jostle the baby, and there is something sharp to her voice. “They don’t let me forget it.”

“We need to get you out of here, but not tonight.” Her gaze finds the baby again, “You have to be safe, you and the baby, and we need somewhere you can go.”

“We’re ready,” Ivy holds the baby closer to her chest, “Take him if you must, let me find my own way out. Benny has to be safe.”

“No!” She shakes her head emphatically. “I believe Wells loved you, I won’t leave you to the mercy of the Lannisters. We’ll find out another way of getting you out.” Her mind works quickly, thinking of the ways they could help the girl make her escape. “It may not be me who comes to you again,
Ivy, but whoever it is you can trust them as long as they tell you ‘the rose grows stronger’, do you understand?’

“I do,” As Ivy speaks three sharp whistles come from outside and Clarke feels her heart sink.

“We have to go,” She looks back at Octavia, a silent sentinel up until now, and the soldier nods her agreement. “I’m sorry Ivy, remember what we said.”

“I will,” Ivy follows them to the stairwell, watching as they slip away into the night, and Clarke allows herself one glance back, unable to stop staring at the tiny bundle held in Ivy’s arms.

The streets are still in disarray when they slip out through the night, and Raven grabs her by the arm to haul her in the right direction. Clarke can hear the loud footsteps of the soldiers returning and their laughter, and her heart tells her to run, but Raven keeps a tight hand on her arm and hisses.

“Don’t, you’ll draw their attention.”

The blood pounds in her ears, deafeningly loud, and it’s all she can do to follow Raven’s instructions and walk normally. Her breathing sounds ragged, and Raven’s grip on her is the only thing that keeps her from bolting when a soldier calls out.

“Hey, you!”

Raven’s fingertips are biting into her arm, sure to leave a bruise.

“Where did you just come from?”

“Now run!” Raven pushes her forward, and moments later they are flying over the slippery ground.

The cobblestones are still slick under foot and they scramble to keep their grip as they bolt down the alleyways, Clarke lifting her skirts in a fist to keep from stumbling over them. The sound of pursuit is loud behind them and when they turn a corner and find a street crowded with people shouting about pigs they duck and weave past drunken men and shouting women and fighting children. Clarke’s feet move beneath her, faster than she thought possible, and she forces herself not to glance back to see whether they are still being followed. She turns sharply down a small alleyway, not pausing long enough for the prowling thieves to catch her, and pushes her way into a crowded washer women’s hall. For a moment the brightness and heat startles her and stumbles, almost blind, past the women pounding linens in dirty, hot water. Shouting voices scold her and slapping hands push her through the hall until she emerges out of another door and into the dark night air again, running straight into a cloaked figure.

For one terrifying moment she thinks it is the Lannister soldiers and she has been caught, but the voice that chastises her is familiar in another way.

“Watch where you’re going!” The rough northern accent scrapes through the words, sending them lilting and staggering across the street, and Clarke blinks through the darkness to recognise the face of Lord Bolton.

He seems to realise who she is only moments later because he takes a hasty step back, unhanding her, and she feels her face flush at being caught running around Flea Bottom in the dead of night.

“Lord Bolton.” Desperately she scrounges for some excuse, but to her surprise, the northern lord only bows his head.

“Lady Clarke, excuse me.” He turns on his heel, disappearing into the night like some sort of alley
cat, and she watches him go in astonishment. Falling back against the wall of the washer women’s hall, she adjusts her hood so that it once again covers her face and pulls in a few deep breaths. The events of the night swirl through her mind, and she looks back to where Lord Bolton had disappeared so swiftly, but before she can make sense of it someone is touching her shoulder and drawing her around.

“Octavia!” Clarke lets out a sigh of relief, glancing anxiously behind her. “Raven?”

“She went another way,” When Clarke opens her mouth to protest, Octavia speaks over her. “She’s be fine, she properly knows these streets better than either of us by now.” Octavia looks her over and her eyes widen, “What’s wrong? You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I-” Clarke looks back at where she saw the northern lord moments before, and hesitates over her words. In the terror and darkness of the night, she barely knows what she saw, and as her heart begins the quieten she can’t help but second guess herself. “Nothing,” She says at last, shaking away the thought of Lord Bolton’s wide eyes. “Nothing at all.”

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The days pass by in a flurry of inane activity that Clarke cannot bring herself to focus on. How can she decide whether the third course of the wedding day feast should be duck or goose when Wells’ son is held prisoner by Lannister soldiers just outside of the castle walls and the thought of Lord Bolton’s face will not leave her mind? Her thoughts plague her and even Finn notices her distance, giving her anxious, curious glances which she barely manages to assuage with a gentle smile. They spend little time together now, as Finn is drawn further away by affairs of the land and Clarke is forced to welcome each new visitor who arrives for her wedding. There are breakfasts and lunches to be had with visiting nobles, walks around the gardens and embroidery circles to join, balls and feasts in the evening and Clarke goes to bed with aching feet and an aching soul. Lexa is everywhere and nowhere at once, and the poison sits under her mattress with Lexa’s letter wrapped around it.

The worst thing by far is the lunch Finn insists they have in his chambers with the northern queen. She cannot contest his arguments that they have yet to sit down and spend any time with Lexa, and when she goes to protest, he reminds her that she had once said how much she liked the northern woman. So, she is forced to sit in the king’s solar with the sun streaming in through the wide windows and bathing Lexa in soft, golden light. They eat soft eggs and fresh asparagus and tender guinea fowl, and Clarke cannot bear to look up from her plate as Finn and Lexa talk of war and tithes and taxes. She feels not of this earth, as if this is all some horrible nightmare happening from afar and she can barely eat a morsel upon her plate.

When Finn comments upon her lack of appetite, Clarke feels Lexa’s eyes settle upon her and has to bite her tongue to keep from speaking when Lexa says, politely.

“I hope nothing at this table offends you, my lady.”

The question is so gently phrased, and yet she has to swallow down her sharp response and fix them both with reassuring smiles when she answers. “Not at all, your majesty.”

“It’s probably wedding nerves,” Finn beams at her, proud to have such a soft, feminine wife. “You are being run ragged with preparations, aren’t you my love?”

The pet name sits around her neck like a yoke and Lexa’s eyes do not falter in their steady gaze.

“I am.” Clarke manages, finally, and turns back to her food as they lapse into silence.
Lexa’s ongoing presence in the castle weighs heavily on Clarke. There are times when she forgets the woman even exists, forgets anything outside of her worry for Wells and his son and Pike’s plots, but then she will see a Stark attendant or glimpse sight of one of the wolves and remembers all over again that Lexa is still in the castle. From time to time she sees a glimpse of white fur and realises that Faith is close by. The wolf has enough sense not to stick to her side, but still it is reassuring to feel her presence again.

She tells herself fiercely that her feelings for Lexa are of no importance any more, she is set to marry Finn and in the process undermine Pike who seems to have a firmer hold on the young king every day. Besides, the safety of those under her protection is the most important thing now and she can’t let Pike throw the country into another war just to gain power for himself.

Octavia’s brother has agreed to bring them Pike’s keys, but to get into his rooms they will have to be assured that he will not suddenly return to walk in on them. There is only one chance to find some sort of proof, and they cannot risk being interrupted. It is to this end that Clarke finds herself sitting in a secluded part of the gardens with Finn, in the warm evening sunlight, and suggesting, lightly.

“Perhaps you should go on a hunt, my lord.” When his curious eyes fall on her, she explains with a smile. “The wedding will be taxing on you too, this would be a good way to relax.”

“A hunt,” She can see that the idea is appealing to him, there is nothing Finn loves more than being on horseback and the strains of ruling have not allowed him that for some time.

“Take your privy council as well,” Clarke takes his hand and squeezes it gently, saying with a flutter of her eyelashes. “They work so hard.”

“An excellent idea, my love.” He lifts their clasped hands to his and presses a kiss to hers.

“Your majesty,” The hushed voice of one of Finn’s attendants, young boys who are all eternally irritating to Clarke, breaks through their moment together and Clarke fixes him with a cold gaze. The boy is not perturbed. “You have a meeting with the lords of Sunspear this evening.”

Finn’s expression crumples, and Clarke lets go of his hand with a sigh, offering him a smile when he looks her way.

“I’m sorry,” He says, and she shakes her head.

“The life of a king,” She gives him a sympathetic smile, and as he walks away she stands and steps out onto the garden paths. Octavia waits to one side, meeting her gaze when she approaches, and no words are needed between them for them to fall into step beside each other. The gardens are quiet, many of the ladies are engaged with sewing circles and afternoon naps at this time of the day, and so they walk in relative peace. As with every spare moment she has nowadays, Clarke’s mind fills with worries about Ivy and Benam and Wells, and she finds herself quite distracted as she wanders beneath the hot afternoon sun, so much so that when she turns a corner she walks straight into an approaching figure.

Lexa’s hands shoot out and catch her by the shoulders, but the moment their eyes meet she releases her as if she were made of ice. Clarke’s breath catches in her throat and she stares at the northern queen.

“Lady Clarke,” Lexa speaks first, regaining her composure, and Clarke tears her eyes away long enough to realise that Anya stands at her back. “My apologies.”

“No, no, it was my fault.” Her voice falters over her words. “I was just-”
“I’m going—”

They both indicate the path ahead of them and Clarke feels her stomach sink at the realisation that they will have to walk together. Lexa is similarly uncomfortable, if the pinching of her lips and the tightening of her jaw are anything to go by, and they fall into step together without a word. The silence settles around them, like a stiff basque constricting them; the air seems to become suddenly hotter and thinner and Clarke finds herself touching tentatively at her ribs. Long gone are the days that they could spend in endless, fascinated conversation, entranced with one another. Clarke feels bare before Lexa now that the northern queen has seen her for her true self, and she can’t stand to meet Lexa’s eyes. Always better at silences than her, Lexa walks quietly, and Clarke stews over her words; she can’t bear to make the usual inane small talk with Lexa as if she were nothing more than a visiting dignitary, and the feelings bubbling in her chest finally emerge in stumbling words.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t return to Winterfell.”

Lexa’s eyes widen slightly and Clarke hears her draw in breath sharply. “You were rather busy.”

Lexa finally answers, and there is a steely line of anger beneath her voice. The words cause her heart to ache, and Clarke swallows back the flash of fury that she feels. Perhaps it’s because her heart is finally beginning to feel too heavy for one girl to bear, perhaps it’s because she has fought too fiercely with her own guilt to allow Lexa to open the wound afresh. Regardless, her veneer of civility drops and she answers quickly.

“You can’t- there were things here that could not be left unattended.”

“I can see that.” Lexa’s response is so dark that she almost flinches. “How is your husband to be?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you must know I-” She bites her tongue over her words, suddenly aware of Anya and Octavia walking a few paces behind them. Whispers travel far in this city even when one thinks they’re alone and she is determined not to have everything crash down around her now. She pulls in a breath and in the silence Lexa too seems to be considering her words. “We do what we must.” She says, at last.

Lexa doesn’t respond and they walk in silence, Clarke’s anger bubbling in her chest. It’s as if finally speaking to Lexa has broken a dam to let everything out, and she can’t bite back her words any longer, finally saying in a low voice.

“You know I would never have poisoned you.”

Lexa breathes in sharply and Clarke catches sight of the pain that flickers over her face and feels an echo of it stutter through her own chest.

“I know,” Lexa admits softly. She meets her gaze and for a moment it is all Clarke can do not to think of those stolen moments in the Godswood in Winterfell. Lexa’s eyes seem older since then and she fears that that is her fault. “I hope, at least.”

They walk in silence for a while longer, a slight more comfortable than it had been before, until they come to another fork in the path. They pause, and Clarke gropes for something to say to prolong the moment before their separation. As Lexa opens her mouth to bid her farewell, Clarke rushes to say.

“Did you bring many northern lords with you on your journey?”

Lexa falters, her brows creasing curiously and Clarke feels unexpected heat rush to her cheeks. She hurries to explain herself, but lexa’s expression only becomes more intrigued.
“I saw Lord Bolton in the city… I didn’t realise the other lords had accompanied you. Why were they not presented when you first arrived?”

“You’re mistaken, Lady Clarke, Lord Bolton remains in the north.”

Clarke blinks, confusion rushing through her. “No I- I’m sure I saw him.”

“I assure you, Lord Bolton is not in the south.” Lexa’s lips harden into a firm line and Clarke shakes her head. “You’ve met him only once, you could easily be mistaken.”

“I am not.” Clarke begins hotly, but Lexa cuts through her so smoothly that she fumbles over her own words.

“We’re clearly not going to agree on this matter, so I’ll bid you farewell.” With a sharp nod of her head she turns on her heel and strides away, leaving Clarke spluttering in her wake.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the wait, the long easter weekend really threw me off! I'm so so so glad that you all liked the last chapter, it was a really big one for this story. thank you so much for your amazing comments, i'm trying to work my way through replies and i love hearing what you think! from here on out almost every chapter is going to be a big one!

what do you think of this chapter? what is lord bolton doing there? does lexa know he's there or not? let me know down below or over on tumblr @onemilliongoldstars

also like last time please try to keep any got spoilers out of the comments below, but if you wanna chat about the new episode come message me on tumblr!
Book Three: Chapter 3

Preparations for the king’s tourney send the castle into a complete frenzy. A tourney is no small thing to organise, and the people of the Red keep take to it with the keen energy and enthusiasm that Finn’s new reign seems to bring about in everyone. Clarke has barely a moment to give it any attention, utterly consumed with her worries for Ivy and Benam, trying to decide where to send the small family and whose care to entrust them to. Jasper and Monty are set to the task of finding Lord Bolton’s lodgings in the maze of the city and Octavia’s connection to her brother is too crucial to lose now, besides the soldier utterly refuses to leave her side. Raven had agreed to do it, but Clarke privately fears for her lack of training and besides there is still the issue of where to hide mother and son. The moment the Lannisters realise they’re gone she is sure that Pike will stop at nothing to track them down. Just the thought of it makes her heart grow cold.

But in the moments that she does understand Finn’s enthusiastic words about the tourney, she berates him so firmly that he is startled into silence.

“This is a ridiculous expense,” She tells him briskly, as their dinner plates are collected and she stands to brush at her skirts. “The kingdom is starving and you are throwing a grand tourney! It’s unthinkable!”

“But I have given the city food, the people are happy! Lord Pike says the people are still celebrating the coronation!”

She bristles at the name, her lips curling despite herself. “Lord Pike knows nothing about the people,” She snaps, too angry to maintain her genteel demeanor, and marches from the room before he can stop her.

Finn puts her unladylike outburst down to wedding nerves and the tourney preparations continue without a hitch. The stables are filled to bursting with fine horses for the knights and squires who will be competing in the tourney, and in the fields outside the city walls tents and stands are erected for those who are attending and competing. Everything is brightly coloured and covered in trailing flowers, and the shining sun does not match Clarke’s black mood as she allows Harper to lace her into a dress of soft blue Dornish silk, all draping fabric and gentle lines which fall across her curves in a tempting sort of way. Something about it is even more revealing than the tighter dresses with more layers, and she is glad the weather is warm as her arms and back are bare.

They are joined by some of Finn’s Kingsguards as they walk down the corridors towards the courtyard, and Clarke is utterly consumed by her thoughts and worries, folding her hands before her and asking, abruptly.
“Have you seen the queen in the north since she arrived?” At Octavia’s startled expression she presses, “Have you spoken?”

Octavia considers her words, before answering with deliberate neutrality. “I have, she requested to see me when she first arrived.”

“She did?” Clarke’s heart stutters, though she wishes it wouldn’t. “What did she say?” She fixes Octavia with a hard, searching gaze and the guard’s jaw tightens, as if she wishes this conversation was not happening.

“Only to thank me for the work I’ve done,” Octavia hesitates, clearly agonising and Clarke’s stomach sinks when she continues, “And to offer me a place in her Queensguard.”

“She- she-” Clarke stutters over her fury, “She had no right!”

“She had every right,” Octavia insists, fiercely, though she keeps her voice low, more mindful of their companions than her counterpart. “She is my queen.”

“But you can’t go! We-” Clarke just cuts herself off in time, pausing to pull in a breath. Her nerves feel spread thin, close to breaking point. “I need you.” She settles on, at last.

“I know, I won’t abandon you here.” Octavia assures her, her expression tight. They step out into the courtyard, to where the carriage is waiting and Octavia opens the door and helps her inside. There, protected by the open door and the dark carriage she says, more earnestly. “But I can’t just ignore my queen.”

The carriage door shuts and Clarke is left in semi darkness, mulling over what Octavia had said and cursing Lexa as violently as she knows how. She fumes quietly all the way to the tourney ground, though she gives a graceful smile when Octavia and Finn’s Kingsguard help her from the carriage and escort her to the tourney stands, which are already crowded with people.

Upon seeing her alight from her carriage, they erupt into cheers and applause and she forces a smile onto her face. These people are the reason she is here, that she is doing all that she is. The ring on her finger, her looming engagement, the pain that settles in her heart is all to protect the people in this kingdom, and she pulls in a deep breath as she takes her place in one of the high backed, flower strewn chairs laid out for her and Finn in the centre of the rest of the nobles. She raises her hand in a wave, and then settles into the right hand chair. Finn beams at her, clearly already partaking in the mead and fine wines held in silver decanters by the waiting attendants, and she gives a smile in response. To her utter displeasure, Lord Pike is placed on Finn’s other side, and he leans forwards and greets her with a cordial coldness.

“Lady Clarke, looking as lovely as always.”

“Lord Pike,” She nods in his direction once, her face a tight mask of neutrality. In her peripheral she sees Octavia’s hand tighten over the hilt of her sword, her expression twisting into a scowl and she wishes that she had the freedom to show her feelings so clearly. Instead, all she can do is turn away from the man and scan the crowd, and her heart stutters when her eyes fall upon Lexa’s approaching figure.

The queen is dressed in fine, dark jerkins and leather, with a direwolf pin at her breast. Her hair is pulled back in intricate braids and pinned away from her face, and a silver circlet sits upon her head. She is accompanied by her Queensguard, their fine white cloaks bright under the summer sun, and several of her wolves lope at her feet, their dark eyes watching the crowds with suspicion and curiosity. Faith’s light coat catches her eye, and she feels a stirring of longing so intense she has to
turn her eyes away.

Her heart both swoops with delight and clenches with dismay to see Lexa settle herself, surrounded by her Queensguard, into a seat nearby. Finn leans around Clarke to herald her, his teeth showing in his smile.

“Queen Lexa! Wonderful to see you!”

Lexa gives a polite smile in return. “An excellent day for it, King Finn.”

“Is it not?” He spreads his arms wide and Clarke has to bite back a laugh when the goblet holding his wine runs over to stain Lord Pike’s doublet. Finn barely seems to notice, pushing himself to his feet.

Behind them attendants blow horns for silence, and the rowdy crowd calms to a quiet mutter and murmur of curious voices. Finn raises his goblet in a toast to them all and calls, his voice booming.

“Lords and ladies, people of Kings Landing, welcome!” He smiles out at them, and they let out a rousing, drunken cheer of approval. “A special welcome to her majesty, Queen Lexa Stark,” He bows his head in Lexa’s direction and Clarke thinks that she sees surprise flash over Lexa’s expression before it settles into a mask of neutrality and she nods. “This tourney is held to celebrate my marriage, to the beautiful Lady Clarke!” He turns to look at her, and she feels her cheeks colour. Despite his drunken state, there is sincere affection in his expression, and she feels a flicker of guilt. “Today, she will be the queen of our tourney.” He gestures forward an attendant and the girl runs up to hand over a lush flower crown, with luxurious white roses and baby’s breath bubbling from between the leaves.

Finn’s voice drops softly, and he asks. “May I, my lady?”

There is nothing she can do but incline her head. As he places the crown onto her head, she can feel the gazes of the crowd upon her and, burning into her skin like a brand, Lexa’s eyes. When Finn steps away, the watching townsfolk cheer loudly and the smile that slips across her lips is not false.

“We await your command to begin our tourney, my queen.” Finn is beaming, clearly satisfied with his display, and Clarke stands gracefully.

“Let the tourney begin!”

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Tourneys have never been of much interest to Clarke. In Highgarden they have long been regarded as a high honour for the knights who participate, encapsulating the virtues of chivalry that knighthood swears to. The first tourney in Westeros was said to be held in Highgarden, and her house had long been known to hold the most luxurious tourneys in all of Westeros, but since she was a child Clarke has little understood the enjoyment of watching knights riding at full tilt towards one another. As a young lady it had frustrated her endlessly to see the knights who fawned over her with pretty words and fair smiles throwing themselves into needless danger. Even the sight of these men fighting for a favour from her was not enough to earn her goodwill. Now, sat beneath the hot midday hot as men she barely knows enter the lists and bow before her, she finds herself irritable and struggling to maintain her facade of enjoyment.

To distract herself, she calls for yet another goblet of wine and tries to ignore Octavia’s disapproving glance. She has eaten little and the wine is settling in her stomach and making her lightheaded, only further adding to her foul mood. Finn is offering excited commentary on the various knights who appear, and Clarke is only expected to nod and smile and clap politely after each list. Previously, she
thinks bitterly, these knights would have been begging her for favours and flowers. Now that she sits beside Finn, they offer her only a longing, revering bow, and turn their attention to more attainable maidens. She can’t bear to admit that it is only the attention of one that she wishes for, and will never have again.

Lexa’s presence is like a hot needle against her skin, a constant irritation that she can’t shrug off. The northern queen watches the frivolity with a slight, polite smile, her wolves draped around her like a huge, deadly pets. This tourney is far more grandiose than the affair in Winterfell, and Clarke wishes dearly that she could show Lexa the parts of the south that she would truly enjoy, rather than this gaudy nonsense.

She stands to stretch her legs, moving towards the trestle tables groaning under the weight of cheeses and figs, rhubarb pudding and sweet pork, and picks at the food laid out for her. Her head is spinning from the wine, and she reaches out to take hold of the table and steady herself, cringing as it rocks under her weight. A hand steadies it, and she turns to find Lexa ruminating over the food choices, her expression a dark cloud.

“You should be more careful,” She says, seriously, and Clarke gazes up at her. Everything feels very foggy and far away, with the rest of the crowd focused on the tourney behind them, and she gives herself a moment to follow the lines of Lexa’s severe face, drinking it in as she has not since Lexa came to the south. “Lady Clarke?” Lexa peers at her, about to open her mouth to speak again when Clarke cuts through her, her voice short and sharp.

“You know, it’s bad manners to steal other people’s guards behind their back.”

Lexa’s expression flashes with surprised anger and then closes up instantly, turning her attention back to the trestle table as she says. “I didn’t steal anything that wasn’t already mine to take. Besides, Octavia has her own will, she is welcome to come and go as she pleases.”

“In principle, yes,” Clarke snaps, stepping closer on the ruse of taking a piece of lemon cake so that she can hiss, “But do you really think she could ignore a command from her queen.”

Lexa hesitates guiltily, and damn these northerners for wearing their hearts on their sleeves, it makes things too easy for a Tyrell who had been taught to see and exploit weakness from a young age. Lexa recovers herself. “Just as easily as she could ignore a command to stay from one she was sworn to protect.”

“My lady,” They are interrupted by the voice and Clarke steps hurriedly away from Lexa, unaware until that moment just how close their bodies had become in their argument. She turns to see Lady Fern, holding her boy’s hand in hers and smiling hesitantly. She drops a slight curtsey to Lexa, “Your majesty.”

“Lady Fern,” Clarke struggles to compose herself, offering the little boy a smile. “Master Casper, how nice to see you both.”

“I hope you don’t mind, my lady, Casper just wanted to meet the queen of the tourney.”

The little boy is no more than four summers, but he manages to stand up straight and nod with certainty. He’s a plump, rosy cheeked little boy, with a shock of red hair, the sort of hardy child that so many mothers would wish for. His mother is handsome, and his father is tall and well built, so Clarke is sure that he will grow into a fine knight. Lady Fern gives her a warm, sincere smile, and Clarke stoops to speak to the child more easily.

“Do you like the knights, Casper?”
He nods so hard she fears his head will fall from his shoulders, his eyes wide and earnest.

“Do you want to be a knight when you’re older?” Clarke can’t help the smile that tugs relentlessly at her lips.

Casper nods again, and this time manages to say, breathlessly. “Yes.”

Clarke exchanges an amused smile with his mother and pushes herself to stand again, advising him seriously. “Then you shall have to work hard and be a good man and listen to everything your mother tells you, do you understand?”

He nods again, furiously, and Lady Fern dips a curtsey before they depart again and Clarke is left to return to her seat with a warm feeling in her stomach. Octavia gives her a severe look, bending to murmur.

“Were you arguing with the queen?”

A stubborn pride and jealousy shoots through Clarke’s being and she replies, petulantly. “I’m the queen of this tourney.”

Octavia glares at her, clearly unamused. “You’re drunk,” She retorts, her voice low and Clarke feels her cheeks heat under her accusation.

“Ladies don’t get drunk.”

“Then you’re no lady.”

“Mind your tongue,” She reprimands her with no real heat, settling into her seat. Her brows furrow when she realises something is missing. “Where is the queen? And King Finn?” She looks between their empty seats, her heart suddenly pounding. A terrible sense of dread settles around her when Octavia shrugs, and she is forced instead to turn to where Lord Pike still sits, clearing her throat to attract him attention. “My lord, where is the king?”

Lord Pike turns to her, adopting an expression of surprise and says, his voice high and innocent. “You didn’t know, my lady? The king is preparing to fight in the lists.”

“Fight?” She echoes, outraged, and the little smile of pleasure that flickers across his face makes her blood boil. “Who would dare to fight the king?”

His eyes slide past her, to where Lexa and her retinue had been sat only moments before. “Why, only other royalty of course.”

Clarke feels as if the world spins around her when the true meaning of his words hits her. “I-” She pushes herself from her seat, “Excuse me.”

Her feet carry her past the waiting guards, shaking off everyone but Octavia, and she is aware that everyone’s eyes are watching her go. People drop into confused, half curtseys as she goes, and she barely sees them, her heart pounding when she thinks of what Pike had said, her blood rushing loudly in her ears. It was one thing to know that Lexa and Finn were training together, with blunted swords and on their feet, but to think of them riding at full tilt towards one another, armed with huge lances... it brings bile to her throat. She’s seen many a seasoned knight carried away to the Maester’s chambers after being struck the wrong way with one of those lances and the thought of Lexa- or Finn- meeting such a fate makes her blood run cold.

She pushes her way into the tent with the Stark banner flying above it too quickly for Ser Lincoln,
who stands guard outside, to do anything about it. Inside the small space is dimly lit by candles and the slant of light let in when she pushed past the canvas. The floor is covered in woven rugs, and a table is covered with armour and weapons. Beside this Lexa stands in only britches and an under shirt, half unlaced to show the bindings that cover her breasts, staring at Clarke with wide eyes, and a pace behind her is Anya, holding a chest plate.

“Clarke?” Lexa demands, as Ser Lincoln step into the tent behind her.

He makes as if to reach out and grab her, but stops himself, his knightly manners preventing him from putting his hands on a lady. “My lady,” Lincoln entreats, alarmed. “You can’t be in here.”

Clarke ignores him, her eyes not leaving Lexa. “This is lunacy.”

Lexa’s expression hardens and there is a beat of silence between them before she commands, her voice low and dark. “Everybody out.”

“Your majesty,” Anya begins to protest, but it only takes one look from Lexa to silence her. She places down the chest plate and casts Clarke a foul glance as she follows the rest of the attendants out, and suddenly Clarke and Lexa are alone together for the first time since that fateful night in the godswood, but Clarke doesn’t let that phase her.

“You’re fighting him? What are you thinking, Lexa?”

“It was your betrothed’s idea,” Lexa is infuriatingly cold next to her fury, as if the ice in her homeland has made its way into her veins and settled there forever.

“How could you possibly think to agree?”

“Why are you here, talking to me about this?” Lexa retorts, and her anger twists her features. “It should be your king that you go to!”

The question strikes far too close to the aching lump of grief and guilt that resides close to her heart, and so Clarke avoids it completely. “Don’t you realise that you could get hurt?”

Lexa lets out a frustrated, bitter laugh and turns to pick up a goblet of what Clarke had assumed was water, but when Lexa drinks and speaks again, the rough quality of her voice leads her to suspect it’s mead. “Even after all of this time,” She says, harshly, turning back to fix Clarke with her dark eyes. The look sends a shiver running down her spine and Clarke is suddenly cold, despite the heat of the day. “You still think me weak! You have never seen me fight, Clarke.”

“You’re no fool Lexa!” She spits, “You know that jousting is part luck, if you were to fall and die who would look after the north?”

The words cause a flicker of something in Lexa’s eyes, and for a moment Clarke thinks she will acquiesce, but then the wall slams back into place and she says, with a sardonic cruelty that Clarke has never heard from her before. “Why Lady Clarke, one might almost think you were worried about my safety.”

“You are the most pig-headed, ridiculous woman I have ever known!” Clarke explodes with rage, covering the space between them in a few long strides, her skirt dancing about her legs as she walks. Lexa’s eyes widen, and to Clarke’s surprise she stumbles a few steps backwards until she collides with the table holding her armour, putting out a hand to steady herself. “If you truly think I do not care for your safety you are as dense as a log!”

“Why would you care about some foreign royal?” Lexa demands, though her voice is breathless and
shaking as Clarke hesitates only a few inches away, their bodies so close that she can see the flicker of gold in Lexa’s green eyes, and the wisps of tiny curls escaping her tight braids. “Why, Clarke?” The question is different this time, laden with a desperation that tugs at Clarke’s heart, and is reflected in Lexa’s eyes as she gazes at her.

It is too difficult to answer in the fleeting time that they have stolen together, and as trumpets sound outside the tent Clarke careens forwards and presses their lips together. This kiss is nothing like their first, tentative and soft beneath the moonlight. Here, in this dim tent, their mouth meet in a crash of passion. Lexa’s arms wind around her, one grasping at her hips and waist, fingertips clenching and biting into the skin that is exposed by her dress, the other cradling her neck, fingers lacing into her hair. Clarke holds her close and it’s thrilling to feel her so warm and alive, their bodies crushed together and pressing back against the table. Lexa’s tongue slides against her lips and when she opens her mouth it becomes messy with teeth grazing and hands clutching. She feels utterly intoxicated by Lexa’s touch, as if it has ignited a spark within her, and now she is addicted to the feeling of Lexa beneath her. Lexa’s hands curl into her hair, fingers crushing the delicate petals of the flower crown and when they part for breath, gasping and panting, their foreheads press together in a motion that is almost too tender for the carnal action that just took place. Clarke lets her eyes flicker closed, breathing in Lexa’s sweet, piney scent for the few seconds they can steal. Lexa’s arms soften around her, wrapping close and pressing them together, and Clarke shudders in her arms.

“Your majesty!” The sound of Anya’s irate voice is enough to break the spell between them and Clarke reluctantly peels herself away. “Please,” Her voice trembles when she speaks, “Please don’t do this.” Lexa’s gaze is solemn, “You know I have to.” The rage rushes back into Clarke’s heart and her brows knit together, her lips thinning. “You’re fools, the both of you.” She spits, and turns to stalk from the tent.

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The fight is torturous to watch. She considers staying away, but her fear draws her back to the stands and she settles in her seat, her fingers digging into the arms of her chair as Lexa and Finn ride at one another. Her heart is in her throat each time the horses begin their gallop, and when Finn is finally thrown from his horse she leaps to her feet, peering at the lists to watch Lexa hurry to his side. Thankfully, the king is not hurt and laughs when Lexa helps him to his feet. When he raises her hand and declares her the winner, Clarke slumps back into her seat and begins to weep despite herself. Around her, ladies gather like a flutter of birds to comfort her, assuring her that her king is well, and the words only draw further tears from Clarke as she thinks of the woman in shining wolf armour below.

Her thoughts hound her like a pack of rabid wolves, and leave her tossing and turning in her bed until the night is at its darkest and heaviest, wrapping around the castle like a heavy winter cloak. When she can stand it no longer, half crazed from fear and heartache, she forces herself from the bed and slides her feet into soft satin slippers, pulling a robe around herself. By the light of a single candle clutched in her hand, she slips out of her door, ignoring the dozing guard on watch. There are sentries posted at every corner and hallway now, and she doesn’t dare to think she can sneak past all of them, but she doesn’t need to. Instead, she finds a tapestry along her hallway and pushes it aside to find heavy wooden door. Led by memories of exploring these hidden passageways with Wells as a child and perhaps some intervention by the gods, Clarke traverses the passageways by her dim light and arrives at a door that when pushed ajar reveals the luxurious suite in which Lexa is staying.

There are still candles burning here, despite the late hour, and Clarke slips through the door, her eyes
wandering the room curiously.

It is large, with several tapestries along the walls similar to the one hiding her entrance and heavy chairs pulled around the glowing hearth. At the window there is a long table, and it is at this that Lexa sits, writing on long rolls of parchment by the light of a few dripping candles. Around her lie some of the wolves, and Faith’s head perks up to watch her enter, her ears pricked curiously. Lexa follows the motion and her eyes widen, her quill falling from her fingers and smudging her parchment when she sees Clarke.

“Clarke,” The chair makes an awful scraping sound against the stone floor when she stands, and Clarke remains frozen beside the tapestry, the flame of her candle flickering in time with her breaths. “What are you doing here?” Lexa crosses the space between them quickly, reaches out as if to touch her and then hesitates, as if she does not dare. It is this motion that breaks the dam in Clarke, and she abandons her candle upon the fireplace and rushes to wrap her arms around Lexa and pull her close.

Lexa is slow to respond, but when Clarke’s tears soak into her shoulder she holds her close, runs a soothing hand up and down her back and allows her to bury her face in the crook of her neck. “Clarke,” She murmurs again, and it sounds like a prayer.

They stand like that for some time, their arms clasped around one another, like a tableau in a stained glass window with Lexa’s head tucked over her own, cradling her close. She makes no other sound, asks no questions, and instead allows Clarke to cry almost silently into her jerkin. This embrace is so different to the one they shared earlier that day, filled with things they wouldn’t dare to do in the daylight. When Clarke’s tears finally abate, Lexa pulls away a little and fits fingers beneath her chin to guide her eyes up.

When their gazes meet she says. “I am well and whole, feel for yourself.” Clarke’s arms tighten around her and Lexa allows it. “I’m sorry,” She whispers into her hair, and Clarke presses her face into Lexa’s shoulder. “So am I.”

For this night only, they offer a small truce in the war between them.

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Clarke sees off the king and his retinue on their celebratory hunt with a smile that hides the grim determination in her features. She kisses Finn on the cheek and tells him to be safe, and watches as he rides away, his eyes dancing with glee. The castle is eerily quiet with so many of its lords gone. Clarke pleads a headache to the dressmakers wanting to measure her for her wedding dress once again, and makes her way back to her rooms, Octavia following, until they turn a corner and come to a deserted hallway that Clarke knows well. She guides Octavia through a door hidden by a tapestry, and together they begin their journey with practiced ease. The journey to the Hand’s Tower is like muscle memory for Clarke, after years of her father’s residence there. She trails her hand along the rough hewn stone walls of the tunnels and thinks of Aegon the Conqueror building these tunnels to allow an escape from the castle, trusting only his closest advisors with knowledge of their existence, and wonders whether they will have to serve their purpose soon. It’s a frightening thought, and one that feels far too likely. If Pike is willing to commit regicide to get to the throne, Clarke is sure that Finn is no safer than Thelonious or her father were, and she even less so. The memories of the assassin in Winterfell and Margo’s sweet body possessed by a deadly killer still haunt her, and she keeps her fingers curled around the dagger hidden in her skirts.

They emerge through a hole so small they have to slouch and shuffle to get through, Octavia’s
armour scraping against the stone, and clamber over crates and baskets filled with grains and fabrics to arrive in a small store room. Octavia presses her ear to the door, and at her nod they both slip through it and into a hallway in the Tower of the Hand. As promised, it is utterly deserted but for Octavia’s brother Bellamy Blake shifting anxiously from foot to foot at the end of the corridor. He hurries to meet them when they emerge, blinking in the sunlight.

“Hurry,” He eyes Clarke with outright suspicion, rushing towards the door behind which sits the chambers of the Hand of the King. “We don’t have long.” At his belt the keys jangle so loudly that they all freeze.

“Is everyone gone?” Octavia hisses, and Bellamy fumbles with the lock.

“Almost, there are still some men stationed at the tower door and some patrolling.” The door swings open and he ushers them inside. “Be quick!”

Inside, the solar is as it was when Clarke had last been here. Dark and sparse, with none of the friendly clutter that had accompanied her childhood here. There is a heavy wooden desk in the middle of the room, and a chaise close to the fireplace. Several locked chests sit in the corner of the room and a stag’s head is displayed with pride above the fireplace. The sight of the dark gems where its eyes should be send a shiver down Clarke’s spine.

“Search everywhere,” Clarke instructs Octavia, “But be careful not to leave anything out of place.”

Together, they set to work looking through Pike’s things in search of anything that could possibly incriminate him, but they find little of use. He has parchments and books on almost every subject, maps and histories of every family dating back to Brandon the Builder, and notes on every matter that could concern the king, from grain stores to troop movement. Clarke carefully picks the lock for each of the chests, but inside they find rolls of parchment which are utterly illegible, written in a language neither of them know.

“They could say anything,” Octavia breathes as Clarke closes and locks the chest. Clarke stands, casting desperate eyes around the room.

“There has to be some clue,” As a harsh knock comes to the door, her eyes land on the drawer from which Pike had taken her dagger. Quickly, she crosses the room and kneels in front of it, picking at the stubborn lock. Octavia hovers close to her, watching over her shoulder, and neither of them notice when Bellamy opens the door.

“Hurry!” He demands, his eyes widening when he sees what they’re doing. “That’s locked!”

“Octavia, you know this is wrong!” Bellamy’s protests do not reach Clarke, as she leaves through the various treasures within the drawer to the stack of letters tied with a dark ribbon beneath them. As she pulls them out, Bellamy hisses. “Times up!” but she is too focused on the wax seal of a flayed man that sits on the parchment before her.

“Clarke!” Octavia’s voice startles her back to herself, and she rushes to lock the drawer again with trembling fingers and follow Octavia out. As they wait for Bellamy to lock the door again behind him, the sound of approaching voices reaches them from the hall that they had first come down, where their escape lies useless.

Clarke exchanges a fearful glance with Octavia. “They can’t find me here.”

Octavia’s brows furrow, and she sucks a breath in through her teeth. “You go, we’ll distract them.”
“How?” Bellamy demands, and Octavia gives a sigh.

“Like this.” She swings a punch at his face, and it meets with a crunch of bone. He reels away, gaping, but his training kicks in when she goes to hit him again, and Octavia takes the moment to turn and order. “Run!”

Clarke does as she is bid, turning on her heel to dart down the corridor in the other direction. The letters are still clutched in her hand, her heart pounding, and she silently thanks the gods that she grew up in this tower and knows its every twist and turn. Hurriedly, she shoulders her way through the door to a large store room, fleeing past the confused servant and out of the door that leads to the middle bailey. Despite the absence of so many of the castle’s men, the middle bailey is still bustling with people, and Clarke hesitates. There is no way that she can make it all the way across the courtyard to the Maidenvault without someone stopping her, so instead she veers to the side and up the few steps that lead to the library.

A stone building settled within the walls of the Red Keep, the library is large, but rarely used. So often a library within a castle is used by no one but its Maester, scholars, and a few enquiring minds. Only when the regent in question shows some interest in learning is the library ever full. Finn shows very little interest in book learning of any sort, and though Thelonious had been curious and thoughtful, he had never been able to give great tomes his full attention. Inside the main atrium wooden shelves line the walls, several stories high and reached only by ornate ladders. They are broken up by four long, slim windows made of yellow stained glass, giving the room a warm, dim, inviting light. There are chairs and tables in orderly rows for the study of the tomes and parchments held here, and narrow corridors lead to small rooms filled with books on specific subjects. Clarke glances behind her, still panting, the letters caught within her stiff fingers, and paces further into the center of the atrium. She has nowhere to hide the letters if she is found, along with the dagger still clutched in her hand, and she spins, searching, when her eyes land on the figure watching her curiously.

“Lady Clarke?” Lexa stares at her, eyebrows furrowed in a genuinely perplexed expression. “What are you doing here?” She edges closer and her eyes widen. “And with your dagger? Clarke-”

“I-” Clarke begins to fumble for an answer, when the sound of Maester Orrin’s voice reaches her from the courtyard.

“I assure you, I have seen no one leaving the Tower of the Hand.”

She curses beneath her breath, glancing frantically around the atrium, and in a moment of frenzy grabs at Lexa’s arm to pull her after her into one of the rooms off the atrium, easing the door shut just as the main door to the atrium slams open.

“Clarke?” Lexa begins, but Clarke spins, dropping the letters upon the small table in the center of the room to press a hand firmly over Lexa’s mouth, silencing her. Together, they stand and wait with bated breath as the guards rattle through the room, and then are finally gone again.

Slowly, Clarke steps back and releases her hold on Lexa’s mouth, slumping back against the table as her shaking legs threaten to give out beneath her. Her fingers curl immediately around the letters again, tangling in the black ribbon and anchoring.

“Clarke.” Lexa says again, and reaches up to touch tentatively at her lips, as if she cannot quite believe what has just happened. Slowly, her expression shifts into anger and then curiosity, “What is this? Why are you hiding and carrying a weapon?”

“I’m sorry,” A strand of hair has fallen from her braids in her escape from the Tower of the Hand,
and she pushes it back impatiently. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Clarke,” Lexa stares at her, “Please explain this to me. Are you in danger?”

For a moment, Clarke considers confessing to everything. It would be too easy in this small, dim room to bury herself in Lexa’s strong arms and hide from everything that has happened. She is exhausted in more ways than one, she sleeps poorly and her heart aches with the burdens she must carry. It is so tempting to rid herself of them and allow Lexa to carry them instead. And yet she knows she cannot; she owes too much to Wells, and the people of this land to give up now.

“I can’t.” She has to tear her eyes away from Lexa’s pleading expression, “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

“I thought-“ The words escape Lexa unbidden, and she hesitates over them before continuing in what seems to be a sudden rush of courage. “I thought after the tourney we had at least decided we could be friends, you and I.”

“We are!” Clarke can’t help the words, her heart clenching. “We’re- we’ve always been more than that Lexa.”

“How can you say that and then marry the king?” Lexa demands, her fury running hotly beneath her words despite her control.

“This is bigger than you or I or Finn!” Clarke curses the tears that are building in her throat, that seem to come too easily around Lexa. “I’m trying-“ Her voice breaks and she turns away abruptly, pausing to fix her eyes to the single burning sconce in the wall and gather herself before continuing quietly. “I’m trying to do the right thing.”

“I don’t understand.” Lexa sounds defeated and Clarke turns, passing her the bundle of letters with the Bolton seal displayed proudly.

“You’re in danger, Lexa. We all are.”

Leax stares down at them, her brows furrowing. “What are these, Clarke? What language is this?”

“I don’t know, but I got them from Lord Pike’s chambers.” Even saying the words sends a shiver down her spine. “He’s been plotting Lexa, he killed the king and he killed my- my father. He could be trying to kill you too, and some of the northern lords are working with him.”

“Why would Pike keep letters with this seal on them?” Lexa demands, her face a slowly emerging storm cloud. “Where they could so easily be found?”

Clarke shrugs, helplessly. “He’s arrogant, he thinks nobody knows what his plans are.”

“Even you?” Lexa’s eyes land on her and Clarke flinches.

“He suspects,” She admits, after a moment, and takes the letters back from Lexa’s unwilling hands. “Be honest, Lexa, after what happened with Prince Aden do you truly trust Bolton? How can you be so blind?”

“I am not blind!” Lexa snaps back, “I have had people watching Bolton-”

“You have?” Clarke feels a flicker of something, perhaps a grim pride. “What have they found?”

Lexa hesitates, mulling reluctantly over her words before finally admitting. “He has received letters signed only with red wax, but there is no proof in that Clarke!”
"Red wax,” Clarke echoes, and her mind works quickly, pulling together a plan. “If you want proof come to Aegon’s Square tonight at midnight.”

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Chapter End Notes

Eeee, hope you guys liked it! This is one of my favourite chapters, so let me know what you think down below or over on tumblr (@onemilliongoldstars)
Book Three: Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait! I spent the summer finishing this fic, so it's basically done and ready to post!

for a quick catch up: Lexa and Clarke had a steamy moment in a tent, Clarke discovered that Lord Bolton is in the city and she and Octavia found a load of letters in a language she can't decipher in Pike's solar.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Book Three: Chapter 4

Jasper and Monty have been utterly invaluable to Clarke since she first met them in Raven’s room all those weeks ago. Not only do they know every alleyway and gunnel in the city, but they also seem to know everybody of importance. Whether they have gambled with them, fought with them, or drank with them, the pair know every face that passes, and can slip money into the right hands to find out almost anything. They are quick to find out where Lord Bolton is staying- his money would make him stick out even if his accent didn’t, they tell her. A girl who works in the kitchen of the establishment he’s staying in is able to tell them which room he’s in.

“We need to send him a note, to lure him out.” She paces around her solar, Octavia watching her with a grim expression.

“How can we?” Octavia makes her way to the writing desk to peer down at the letters. “We don’t know what language this is.”

“We’ll keep it short.” Settling at the desk, she pulls out a short strip of parchment and dips her quill into the ink. “Lexa said Bolton was receiving letters with a red wax seal, so I had Harper fetch me one from the market.” She inclines her head to the red candle flickering on the writing desk.

“What will you write?” Octavia bends over her to watch. “Aegon’s Square, midnight?” She quotes, and Clarke nods, holding the parchment down as she waits for the ink to dry.

“We’re going to set a trap.”

The note is slipped under Lord Bolton’s door by the kitchen girl, and all that is left to do is wait. Clarke sends notes to the many ladies expecting her company tonight, pleading wedding nerves and excusing herself. With their nuptials only two days away the ladies are more than happy to let her alone, and she is able to slip from the castle under the cover of dark with Octavia by her side. They tread the now familiar path to Raven’s lodgings, and the blacksmith welcomes them with flagons of mead and chicken which none of them touch. While they wait, Clarke produces the letters from their place within her corset to show them to Raven.

The girl peers down at them, curious, leafing through the parchment, and then finally ask. “Why are they written in Braavosi?”

Clarke and Octavia’s heads whip around to stare at her, their eyes wide, and Raven looks between them with surprise. “What?”
“You know what language this is?” Clarke demands, the moment she can find her words again and Raven nods slowly, still eyeing her warily.

“It’s an old form of Braavosi, I think.”

“Can you read it?” Octavia asks, sharply, and Raven’s frown only deepens as she glances over the parchment.

“Maybe. My mother taught me some Braavosi when I was young, but that was only the common tongue. This is ancient Braavosi.”

“Ancient Braavosi?” Clarke exchanges a glance with Octavia. “Where did Lord Bolton learn to speak that?”

“Only really the old masters speak in it Braavos,” Raven tells them, offhandedly, her gaze fixed to the letters. “The bankers and such.”

“The Iron Bank of Braavos.” Octavia’s eyes are wide. “You were right, they’re all connected, Pike and Bolton and the Iron Bank.”

“But how?” Clarke sits heavily on the edge of the bed, twisting her hand fretfully in her skirt. “I feel as if we have every part of the puzzle but no clear picture. What can Pike and Bolton be offering the Iron Bank that they want?”

“And why is Bolton betraying the queen?” Octavia mutters, darkly. “The Boltons were always slimy and power hungry, but to stoop this low…” She curses below her breath.

“Once I’ve studied these I’ll be able to understand them.” Raven finally looks up from the letters, “The language is similar and I remember enough of my Braavosi to at least get an understanding of it.” Carefully, she folds the letters back together again and they both watch as she carefully plucks away a loose stone in the wall to slide them behind, utterly hidden. When she turns and meets their astonished gazes, she quirks a smile and says, lightly teasing. “You don’t think I’d trust anyone living in a tavern, do you?”

“You live in a tavern.” Octavia points out, but Raven ignores her, settling next to Clarke on the bed.

“Tomorrow I’ll set to work decoding those letters, but for tonight we have other things to discuss.” Raven looks between them both. “Jasper, Monty and I want to try to get Ivy and Benam out just before the wedding.”

Clarke stares at her, “But the wedding is in two days, Raven.”

“I know, it’s soon, but if we can get them out just before the wedding all of the excitement and chaos will be the perfect distraction. The streets will be filled with people, and most of the guards will be posted on the roads to the Sept and at the castle anyway, no one will care about one woman and a baby in Flea Bottom.”

“Pike will care,” Octavia argues and Raven purses her lips with frustration.

“But the guards won’t think to tell him until after the wedding and by then it’ll be too late. The guards don’t know their importance, they just think they’re guarding Pike’s mistress and bastard, at most.”

“What will you do with Ivy and Benam once you have them?” Clarke asks, watching as Raven’s back straightens under her gaze.
“Jasper and Maya, the kitchen girl at Bolton’s inn, they’re going to pretend Ivy is her sister and take them back to Maidenpool, where Maya’s family is. They have a farm just west of the town, no one will think to look for them there.”

“How will you get them out?”

“The guards will be distracted anyway, what with the celebrations beginning,” Raven shrugs, “Jasper and Monty are going to create another distraction,” A fleeting smile crosses her lips, “It’s what they do best. They won’t even see me slip upstairs and sneak her out.”

Clarke stares at her, taking in the certainty in her features, and suddenly fights the urge to hold her. After so long trying to figure things out alone, it is an undeniable relief to have Raven at her side and know that she can trust her. Carefully, she places a hand on the blacksmith’s shoulder and says, sincerely. “Thank you, Raven. You’re invaluable, I hope you know that.”

An unaccustomed flush rises up Raven’s cheeks, and she shrugs off Clarke’s hold with an embarrassed laugh. “It’s nothing.”

“I want to come with you, help you get them out.” Octavia puts in, eagerly, and Raven frowns at her. “You have to protect Lady Clarke.”

“No,” Clarke shakes her head, holding out a hand to interrupt them. “Octavia is right, you’ll need her more than I will. It will be a dangerous task.”

“When they’re safely on their way I can return and tell you.” Octavia adds, and Clarke nods.

Carefully, she stands and brushes out her skirts, glancing out of the window at the moon high in the sky. “We should go and wait for Bolton.” She feels a flicker of anxiety slice through her. “And see if the queen came.”

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In the darkness, Aegon’s statue looks like a towering, faceless monster from its place in the middle of the cobblestone courtyard. It is mostly deserted at this late hour, but Lexa doesn’t lift her hand from its place resting against the hilt of her sword at her waist, and beside her she knows that Anya is twitching to draw her sword or one of the many daggers hidden on her person. She had protested so fiercely to this adventure that Lexa had thought she would go so far as to tie her down in her solar, but when Lexa wouldn’t be swayed she had insisted on accompanying her with Ser Lincoln, despite Lexa’s protests. They wear dark cloaks, the hoods pulled up to cover their faces, and linger in the shadows of a dark butchers shop. Lit by only the silvery light of the moon, Kings Landing appears cold and ghoulish.

Anya twitches at her side, and from the corner of her eye Lexa sees Honour’s dark form prowling in and out of the shadows, his teeth flashing. The sound of quiet footsteps is all that warns them of the approaching figures, and Lexa spins, reaching for a dagger as Anya begins to pull her sword from its scabbard, before they recognise Clarke’s face beneath the hood.

“Clarke,” Relief flushes through Lexa’s body and she is reluctant to admit that a part of her had thought this could be some elaborate ruse. Clarke’s eyes are alert with anxiety, her lips thin, and she offers a nod to both Anya and Lincoln. Behind her stand Octavia Snow and, to Lexa’s surprise, the Winterfell blacksmith apprentice Raven Reyes.

“I’m glad you came,” She tells Lexa in a low voice.
“Will you explain any further?” Lexa demands in a whisper, allowing Clarke to guide them all back into the shadows. “You’ve told me barely anything, Clarke.”

“Bolton should be on his way,” Clarke’s voice is pitched so quietly that Lexa has to lean in to hear what she’s saying, their arms brushing together. “If the red wax is a sign from Pike, he’ll think that’s why he’s here. That should be all the proof you need.”

“You had a note sent to him?” Lexa guesses, and at Clarke’s nod questions. “How did you know where to find him?”

Clarke casts her a smile that is not quite happy. “I know people in this city who can find things out.”

“I see,” Something flashes across Clarke’s face and Lexa feels as if she has stepped over a lip without realising. There are depths to Clarke that she has only ever guessed at, and to see them splayed out so clearly here is disconcerting, skewing her worldview.

“Look,” At Octavia’s low instruction they all turn, like marionettes, to peer through the shadows at the hooded figure entering the square. His hand rests on a broadsword at his hip, and when he turns dread and shock shoots through Lexa’s body to see Bolton’s face in the moonlight.

She steps forward, reaching to draw her sword, but Clarke’s hand on her shoulder stops her. Their eyes meet and Clarke shakes her head slightly, and then steps out of the shadows before Lexa can do anything to stop her. Beside her, Octavia makes a strangled noise, and goes to follow, but Lincoln puts a heavy hand on her arm and they are left to watch in horror as Clarke steps into the moonlight.

Bolton notices her in moments, drawing his sword with a terrifying hiss of metal and Lexa’s heart thumps so loudly she fears it will attract his attention. Clarke pauses for a second, but no fear shows in her eyes as she draws down her hood and reveals her face to the stunned northern lord.

“Lord Bolton.” Clarke’s voice is cold and low, but it carries across the courtyard with little problem. “You came.”

“You summoned me, Lady Clarke?” His grip on his sword slackens just slightly, though he still keeps the weapon raised.

“Am I not who you expected?” There is a soft, lilting quality to Clarke’s voice that belies her words. “I-” Lord Bolton hesitates, “I didn’t know who to expect.”

“There’s no need to be so guarded, my Lord.” Clarke gives him a pretty smile, seemingly utterly unconcerned by the blade it his hand. “Lord Pike sent me to fetch you.”

“Lord Pike?” The northerner doesn’t miss a beat, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Clarke laughs, and the sound bounces off the stone and brick to make it stilted and strange. “You’re playing coy, like a maiden, my Lord. Lord Pike said you may be suspicious of me, but how would I know to find you here if he had not told me so?”

Bolton’s brows twitch and Lexa imagines that she can see the cogs turning within his head, judging and wondering at this pretty southern flower before him. She is practically vibrating with the effort of not revealing herself from the shadows; Clarke appears so helpless from here, armed with nothing, small and lithe before Bolton’s hulking figure.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?” Bolton questions with a scowl, but Clarke only shrugs.
“You don’t, I suppose, but would I really talk about killing a king and overthrowing a queen if I didn’t mean it?” Though she knows that Clarke is keeping up her ruse, the words hit Lexa to her core, causing bile to rise in her throat.

Bolton’s expression slowly relaxes, his eyes travelling over her, interested and evaluating. “Lord Pike sent you to the north?” He asks, at last, and Clarke gives a slight smile.

“Of course, why do you think I became so close to the queen?”

Lexa’s heart stutters at the words, and she works to keep her expression smooth and cold as those around her shoot her uncertain glances, watching surreptitiously for her reaction.

Bolton’s expression darkens and at his next words Lexa’s patience snaps. “I can certainly understand why she would be so taken with you… Tyrell women have a way with weak souls, I hear.”

Lexa steps from the shadows and rips her sword from its scabbard. The shrill whistle draws the attention of the pair in the square, and they turn to look at her, Bolton’s eyes widening at the sight of her. He draws his sword, swinging to angle it first towards Lexa and then Clarke, but in his moment of hesitation Clarke springs out of his reach and reveals a dagger hidden in the skirt. Her expression hardens from her girlish, innocent smile into one of deadly seriousness and Bolton takes a hesitant step back from them both. He turns to flee, but behind him stand the menacing figures of Lincoln, Anya, Raven and Octavia, surrounding him.

“I should have known never to trust you,” The words spill from between her lips, furious and icy. Bolton’s eyes narrow and fix upon her, “You joined the war of north and south so late, you were the last to swear allegiance to me.”

“Why would we join a war that cost us thousands, in both lives and coin?” Bolton retorts, almost spitting in his rage. “A war to satisfy your father’s thirst for power?”

“My father was a good man! He was trying to protect us!”

“He wanted to cut us off from the rest of the world.” Bolton shakes his head and for a moment Lexa sees a flash of weariness in his eyes. “He was afraid that we would lose our traditions and values, that we would be weak and vulnerable, but he acted out of fear.”

“You’re wrong,” Lexa growls, fiercely. “He only wanted what was best for us!”

Bolton only scoffs, “How could you know? You were nought but a child when the war began, you would believe whatever your father told you.”

“You’re a serpent,” Lexa slips into a defensive position, holding her sword at the ready. “Spitting lies to cover your treachery.”

“If left unchecked your family would pull the north into despair and destruction.” He swings, and their sword meet with a crash that sounds deafening in the quiet courtyard. “We cannot isolate ourselves from the rest of the world, we will not survive.”

“We are protecting ourselves!” Between their words their weapons clash, a chorus working in tandem with them, and they circle each other. Bolton is a good fighter and a seasoned warrior, and Lexa has to keep her wits about her or pay the price.

“You truly think that I do not want what is best for my land?” Bolton demands, fiercely. “The people I have fought for, the land tilled by my ancestors, the castle built by my great grandfather?”
“You swore allegiance to my father!” Lexa twists, her rage fuelling her swing, but Bolton is too fast and she barely catches her footing in time to bring her blade up to meet with his, throwing him away. “What do you want from this? To rule the north?” She spins and their blades meet in a flurry of clashing steel, barely catching blows that would leave them dead if they landed. Bolton spins and manages to catch her arm, cutting through her thick clothes to tear the skin, and Lexa cries out, stumbling backwards.

Anya and Lincoln, content until now to let her fight her own battle, step forward, swords drawn, but Lexa waves them away, glowering at Bolton from beneath the strands of hair that have fallen from her braids and stick to the sweat on her forehead. Bolton is breathing heavily, clearly more affected than he would have Lexa think. They stare at each other for a long moment.

“You Starks,” The contempt in his voice is like ice sliding down her spine. “You think you’re so honourable and good, but your father was just the same as the rest of us. He saw this mess before any of us and didn’t want to be drawn into the war that will engulf the south. He was a coward.”

The words pull a furious snarl from between her teeth and she rains down a series of heavy blows upon him. Bolton stumbles, struggling to match her power and speed, and she bears down upon him, pushing him back until his feet stumble, and he slips, falling heavily on the cobbles. He turns to swing his sword manically towards her, but she kicks at his wrist so fiercely that she hears the bone snap. Bolton cries out, the weapon falling from his limp fingers, and falls heavily onto his chest, trapping his arms beneath her knees to ensure that he can’t reach for another hidden weapon. To his credit, Bolton does not struggle beneath her and his cold eyes stare up at her without fear.

In the ensuing silence, falling across the courtyard like a blanket of snow, Lexa barely feels the throb of pain in her arm. All she sees is Bolton’s hard face, his cold eyes and the genuine hatred there.

“You won’t do it,” Disdain colours his words. “Honourable Stark, you would never kill me like a common beggar on the street.”

“You underestimate me,” She pulls her dagger from her belt, and holds it close to his throat. “Truly, you do. You’re a threat to my people, and I am judge, jury and executioner.”

She thinks she sees Bolton’s throat bob as he swallows, his eyes flickering down to the blade. Then his gaze hardens, and he raises it to stare up at her. “If you think this ends with me, you are wrong.”

The words are his last. With a flick of her wrist, Lexa slices through his throat, and he dies with wide eyes and a gargled noise. The blood sprays out, splattering across her jerkin, neck and face, but she barely winches, staring down at his lifeless face until she is sure she will never forget the sight. It is a soft voice and a familiar hand on her shoulder that finally draws her away from the body beneath her. Blinking, she turns to find Clarke looking down at her, tenderness flickering just below the surface of her expression.

“Lexa,” Her voice is quiet, and Lexa stands mechanically, starting when she realises that her legs are shaking. Clarke’s arm winds around her waist, supporting her weight, and she is every inch the queen she will soon be when she fixes their companions with an imperious view and says. “The queen is hurt, we will take her back to Raven’s rooms.”

They hurry to the tavern above which Raven is staying, and the room seems small and crowded with them all crammed inside. Honour lingers at the door in the shadows, unwilling to follow into this warm, bright, crowded place, and Lexa sees Raven hurry to clear some of the mess from her desk and floor. To Lexa’s surprise, Anya bends to help her, and the pair exchange a glance that she cannot understand. Her arm throbs, and Clarke lowers her to sit upon the bed, her brows pulled tightly as she peers at the wound on her arm.
“This is bad,” She says, her voice low, “I’ll need to stitch it.” She glances back at the people filling the room and requests, “Will you all give us some privacy, please?”

Octavia and Raven nod immediately, and when Lincoln and Anya look to Lexa, she inclines her head. “Wait downstairs,” She instructs, exhaustion sitting in every lip and valley of her words.

Before they leave, Raven pauses in the doorway. “There is a box with bandages and needles and thread beside the bed if you need them.”

“Thank you,” Clarke stands to see them out, and close and lock the door behind them, and Lexa lets out a long breath and allows herself to slump forwards, peering down at the wound. She can barely see it through the ripped fabric of her jerkin, and Clarke hurries to sit beside her with the box of healing supplies Raven pointed out.

“I know it hurts,” There is a brusque, sensible tenderness to her voice, and she gently nudges Lexa further along the bed so that she can sit beside her and tap away her probing fingers. “But don’t touch it.” She looks down at the wound, her brows creased in concentration, but when her eyes flicker up to Lexa’s there is a nervousness to them and a flush upon her cheeks. “I’m sorry, you’ll have to take off your jerkin, I need to get to it more easily.”

Lexa’s eyes widen, her breath catching in her throat and her cheeks heat so suddenly that she is sure they are blazing red by the time Clarke turns her back to collect a bowl of water from across the room and stoke the fire to warm it. As she moves around the room, Lexa struggles to get out of her jerkin and undershirt. She cannot help but sneak glances at Clarke’s figure, moving around this room with such familiarity. There is something enchanting about watching her complete such domestic chores with skill and efficiency, utterly in her element, and as she lights candles to settle the room into a warm, golden glow, Lexa has to tear her eyes away.

She becomes suddenly aware of her nudity when Clarke sits beside her again, the warmed water and a clean cloth in her lap. She is still wearing her bindings, but she can’t help but hold her shirt against her stomach with her good arm.

“This is nasty,” Clarke tuts, inspecting the wound with the eyes of a healer, and Lexa struggles not to jolt when her fingers touch her bare arm. Clarke’s eyes flicker up to her, dark like a stormy sky, and Lexa’s throat becomes dry. “I’ll have to clean it first,” Clarke says at last, glancing back to the warm water in her lap. “Or it will become infected. This will hurt, are you ready?”

Lexa nods, but at Clarke’s first touch she cannot help but flinch. Clarke pauses, giving her a moment to collect herself, and Lexa grits her teeth as she continues. Her touch is gentle, despite the pain, and clinically efficient. When Lexa sneaks a glance at her beneath her lashes she sees that Clarke is biting her lip in concentration, and feels a flicker of endearment for the southern lady. Clarke eventually finishes and sits back, putting the water to one side, and picking up a needle and thread.

“I’m sorry,” She sounds genuinely regretful. “I’ll have to give you a few stitches, to help it heal.”

Lexa only nods her head, reaching to bunch her shirt up in her free hand and squeeze it tightly. It’s not the first time she’s had hurried stitches, but still a shiver runs through her when the needles pierces through her skin and she feels the thread running through the puncture wound. She swallows harshly, the noise loud over Clarke’s careful, concentrated breathing.

“Why didn’t Honour interfere?”

Lexa blinks, her eyes falling away from the spot on the far wall that she had fixed them to. “What?”
“When you were fighting Bolton, why didn’t Honour interfere?” Clarke threads the needle again, and Lexa flinches, but answers.

“They know when to interfere and when not, if I had been in real danger he would have helped me.”

Clarke arches an eyebrow, “You don’t think this is real danger?” She tugs the thread very lightly to make her point, and Lexa manages a small smile.

“I’ve been in much worse danger than that.” Lexa’s gaze flickers over Clarke’s downturned head, “I wish you hadn’t stepped out there to confront him.”

“I know,” Clarke smiles wryly, “That’s why I didn’t tell you before I did it.”

“You were certainly very convincing,” Her thoughts darken at the words, “Lord Pike killed the king? And your father?”

Clarke is silent for a few moments, but Lexa doesn’t press her. When she finally answers her voice is steady, but thick. “Yes, I don’t know why he killed my father but I suspect it’s because he was close to finding out what was going on.”

“This is bigger than either of us know, isn’t it?” The words are soft, and Clarke sighs quietly.

“I fear so. Raven is going to try to translate those letters for us, then we’ll know for certain.”

“Raven Reyes is going to translate those letters?” Lexa tries to keep the scepticism from her voice, but Clarke must notice because she quirks a slight, sardonic smile.

“Raven is from Bravos, actually, and she thinks she can read them.”

“The letters are in Braavosi?” Lexa’s brows twist with curiosity. “Why would Pike and Bolton be communicating using Braavosi?”

Clarke’s eyes flicker up to her, but when Lexa meets her gaze she looks away again. She can’t read her expression with her head bent over the careful stitching in Lexa’s arm, and her stomach builds with dread the longer their silence continues.

“You know more than you’re saying.” She realises, aloud, and Clarke ties off the final stitch, reaching for a light bandage to wrap around her arm. Her fingers are soft and warm, and their touch against the tender skin of her inner arm sends a shiver through Lexa, freezing the words on her lips. She struggles to breathe steadily until Clarke finally ties off the bandage and says, with the gently sensible tone of a healer.

“We want the bandage to allow blood flow, but protect the stitching. Be careful with it, you shouldn’t have much bleeding, but change it if need be.”

She stands to clear away the water and bandage, and with distance Lexa gains the clarity to think once again.

“Clarke,” The sound of her name draws Clarke to a stop, her fingers pausing where she holds the cloth above the water. A steady drip fills the room. “What aren’t you telling me? Why would Bolton and Pike be using Braavosi?”

With measured movements, Clarke squeezes out the last of the water from the cloth and sets it to one side. She gathers a wine decanter and mug from the sideboard, and pours the wine out, before returning to settle on the bed and hold out the wine for Lexa to drink. She takes it with some
trepidation, her concern growing.

“Do you remember,” Clarke says at last, her eyes fixed just past Lexa on the low fire flickering in the grate, “The assassin in Winterfell?”

Lexa’s eyes widen, and she has the horrible feeling of standing on the edge of the Flint Cliffs, looking down at the sea’s dark waters. “Of course, how could I forget?”

“We never found out who the assassin was,” Clarke meets her gaze, and there is a darkness to her eyes that makes Lexa shiver. “But I have my suspicions. I think he was a Faceless Man.”

Lexa’s brows shoot up and she blinks, struggling to manage the disbelief on her face. “Really?” She asks, at last. “What proof do you have? The Faceless Men are the most skilled assassins in the world Clarke, they never fail.”

“But he wasn’t expecting a direwolf,” Clarke corrects, shaking her head. “I’m only guessing at that first assassin.”

“First assassin?” Lexa echoes, her eyes widening and her voice ricocheting up with horror and surprise. “Clarke, do you mean to tell me- you’ve had another-”

“Several weeks ago,” Clarke glances away again, and the fierce fear and anger in her eyes is enough to make Lexa’s heart ache. “I was hurt.”

“How could you not tell me?” Lexa reaches out and can’t stop herself from touching at Clarke’s arm and reassuring herself that she’s still here and alive. “You were hurt?” She fears she will not forget the image of Clarke’s pale body in her bed in Winterfell, blood on the floor and bedsheets, until the day she dies.

“I have healed well enough,” She skates a glancing touch over her stomach, where Lexa assumes the assassin’s blade made contact. “I was lucky, Octavia saved me, and Roan.”

“Roan?” The more she learns the less Lexa feels she knows.

“Ser Roan, one of my father’s most trusted knights. My mother sent him to Kingslanding to fetch me home in secret, I think her deception is the only reason I am alive today. The assassin didn’t know to expect him, nobody did except maybe my mother. He killed the assassin, but Lexa,” She fixes her with her vibrant gaze again and Lexa feels transfixed. “Your focus is in the wrong place, the assassin was a Faceless Man.”

“How do you know?”

“When she died her face changed,” Clarke’s voice trembles just a little, “I saw it before my eyes.”

“It changed?” Lexa’s eyes widen, her breath catching. “I’ve only ever heard of such things.”

“It was like… water, sliding away.” Clarke’s voice hitches and Lexa takes her hand. She can’t stop herself, sliding their fingers together in an attempt to anchor Clarke to this warm, safe room, behind a locked door. “I never know if I’m safe,” Clarke’s voice is still distant, but her fingers tangle and squeeze tightly.

“I wish I could persuade you to leave this place,” Clarke’s gaze moves back to her and when their eyes meet the depth of pain she sees in Clarke’s forms an ache in her gut. “But I know you never will, I can only try to keep you safe. Have you told the king of your suspicions?”
Guilt flickers across Clarke’s face, and she shakes her head. “I do not know if he’s involved yet,” she admits, and upon seeing Lexa’s horror hurries to continue. “I suspect not, truly, but even so I don’t know what Finn would do with this information. He has little tact.”

“And you will still marry him?” The words spill from her before she can think, but she doesn’t regret them, even when Clarke’s eyes widen.

“You know I must,” she answers, at last, and Lexa’s heart shatters once again when their gazes meet and she realises that she knows the southern woman is right.

“I know.” Her heart cracks within her chest, and they fall into each other’s arms in tandem, clutching at one another as if their lives depend on it. In this moment they are hidden away from the world, and Lexa is able to lean into the crook of Clarke’s shoulder and inhale her sweet, floral scent, committing it to memory. She hopes that in this embrace Clarke can feel the words that she cannot say, the words that would break both of their hearts to hear. Though she cannot voice them, she knows those words will be imprinted on her heart forever and she hopes that Clarke can feel them in its beating and the clutch of her desperate fingers and the tears that soak through the shoulder of her dress.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed this and that some of you are still with me! Sorry again for the wait! Let me know what you think of this chapter and what you think will happen next down below or on tumblr (@onemilliongoldstars)

PS. Does anyone know what TV show inspired the scene in this chapter? It's obscure but hopefully someone might get it!
Leaving Lexa that night is one of the most difficult things Clarke has ever done. Something has passed between them now, in that time they spent in each other’s arms, something hidden and secret and too terrible to say, and now Clarke feels it lodged into her heart, beside the aching pit of pain and guilt that she carries with her. In part it warms her, a secret that she can keep and not fear for, and in part in pains her, an aching reminder of what she cannot have. There is no use lingering on it, and in the day when she is rushed from one moment to the next she does not spare it a thought, but at night between her moments of fear and fury, she treasures her secret. It is a small comfort to know that somebody she trusts is on her side.

In the days that lead up to the wedding she does not see the northern queen, instead fully engaged in wedding preparations. There is no end to the things that need her attention and decisions, and she is run off her feet from sunup to sunset. Her mother, from whom she has not heard since she sent Roan away, sends a formal letter pleading illness to keep her away, and between the lines of these words Clarke can see Lady Tyrell’s utter fury at being disobeyed. Her mother must know all of what her father suspected, Clarke thinks, for surely nothing else could keep her away from the capital now other than her fear. Her heart aches a little for her mother, who had loved her father so dearly that his murder must have crushed her spirit, but the rest of her is childishly furious that she has been left to deal with this alone. Perhaps this is adulthood, she thinks, needing her parents and not having them.

The eve before the wedding she sits in the light and airy solar set aside for her with some of the ladies of the court who she finds the least disagreeable. They lounge on velvet chaises and benches set low to the ground, with gauzy curtains draping over the tall, open archways to the balcony. The room is decorated in the sort of western style that Clarke recognises from her homeland, presumably in an attempt to please her, but instead it only feels like a cheap replica of home. Upon the low table there is a luxurious array of food set out for them, honeyed mead and spiced wine, soft cheese and fresh bread, with juicy figs and fresh oranges, but Clarke can only pick at it. Around her ladies talk excitedly of the celebrations to come over the gentle plucking from the lyre in the corner, but as the night draws in she is reduced to nods and smiles. Octavia is not at her side as she usually is, instead she is with Raven, Monty and Jasper, rescuing Ivy and the baby. It feels strange not to have Octavia with her, even Lady Fern asks where she is, but Clarke only shrugs and smiles.

“Enjoying the night, I would expect.” She answers wryly and the other ladies laugh.

“It is odd to see a female soldier,” One of her cousins, young Marie, as sweet as a freshly bloomed rose, comments cautiously.

“Women fighting is a mostly northern tradition,” One of her other guests comments, wrinkling her delicate nose and sipping her wine.

“No,” Princess Arianna, from the warm southern lands of Sunspear, to whom Clarke has taken a
liking in the few days she has been in the capital, looks up from where she is lounging close with her friend, their fingers lingering on each other’s skin. The woman looks out at them, her beautiful eyes slanted with disdain, and says. “Plenty of women are warriors in Sunspear.”

“I have heard that,” Lady Fern, ever the peacekeeper, nods. “The traditions are different.”

Princess Arianna scoffs. “We do not impose such ridiculous restrictions on our women, they are treated just like men and we are better off for it.”

“I don’t know if I would have the courage to go into battle,” Marie smiles nervously, and Clarke meets her gaze.

“You would,” She says, seriously. “You’re a Tyrell.” As she speaks, a new figure slipping into the shadows jarrs her attention, just as it always does nowadays. Her hand slips to the dagger hidden within her skirts, but when the figure step into a slant of light coming in low through the window, she startles when she realises it’s Octavia, her hair and clothes disheveled. Something settles into her stomach, a low feeling of dread, and she stands so abruptly that conversation comes to a halt and surprised faces turn to stare at her. She manages a wavering smile and apologises. “I’m sorry I- I think I have a headache coming on.”

“We all had that headache before our wedding days,” Lady Fern gives her a warm smile and stands to touch at her elbow gently. “Nerves are normal, my lady.”

A smattering of murmured agreement comes from the rest of the room and Clarke smiles thinly at them.

“Let me see you to your room, my lady.” Lady Fern smiles again and Clarke feels a flickering of suspicion run through her, pulling away from her touch.

“No, no. Please stay and enjoy the celebrations, I will see you all tomorrow.”

Octavia falls into step beside her as they walk back to her suite of rooms in the Maidenvault, and she can feel her heart pounding in her chest. She doesn’t dare to ask what’s happened in the open corridors, where they could be overheard by anyone, so she is utterly unprepared to step into her room and find another figure waiting for them. The room is dim, the fireplace cold and the shutters pulled together. Only a solitary lantern placed on the writing desk gives enough light to tell that the figure in her room is holding a small bundle within their arms. Clarke’s breath catches at the sight and for a moment her heart leaps with relief, until the figure turns and she sees the slants and lines of Raven’s anguished face, stained dark with blood.

“No.” The word escapes her, half strangled, and she fears that her shaking legs will not hold her. Octavia reaches out as if to steady her, but she shrugs away the touch, repulsed suddenly. In Raven’s arms the baby squirms and makes a soft, sad sound, and Clarke edges close enough to see his little mouth open in an O of a yawn. “What happened?”

A long silence passes, heavy and tense, and then Raven finally speaks, her voice shaking.

“We got caught.”

When the blacksmith doesn’t continue, Clarke eyes spin to Octavia, wide and impeaching.

The soldier slumps, appearing defeated and haunted in a way that Clarke has never seen her before. “There were more soldiers in the street than we thought, some of them recognised us and gave chase. Things got bloody.”
“Where’s Ivy?” Clarke stutters over a sob, fighting back her tears.

A noise escapes Raven that sounds close to a whimper and she turns away abruptly, still cradling the baby. Octavia reaches out to steady herself against a sideboard, and when she speaks her voice quivers.

“When it was clear we weren’t going to make it she—” Octavia brushes roughly at her cheek. “She rushed in, she was ferocious, so brave.”

“And she…”

Octavia shakes her head, jerky movements that seem painful and forced. “She didn’t stand a chance, she told us to run and we- I—”

“Stop it,” Raven’s voice is so harsh that the baby quails in her arms, a weak and watery cry. “She wanted us to go and there would have been no use you dying with her, no use in any of us—” She cuts herself off and holds out her hands suddenly. “Somebody- please—”

Clarke’s arm open on instinct and she gathers the baby into her grip, his body warm and heavy against hers. Carefully, she rocks him back and forth until his weak little cries fade into whimpers, and looks on as Octavia crosses the room to place a hand on Raven’s arm. Raven raises her gaze to meet Octavia’s eyes and they are still for a long moment, before Raven rests her head against Octavia’s shoulder, the soldier’s arms strong and steadying around her.

Carefully, she takes a quiet step away, allowing them a moment of privacy. Benam wriggles in her arms and she settles him more gently, looking down. His big eyes are dark, staring up at her, his mouth slightly agape, with drool pooling at the corners of his lips. She has to admit, there is little of him that reminds her of Wells, but if she looks closely she sees something of Wells’ nose and puzzled frown in his wrinkled brow. Wells knows of this child, of that she is sure, and cares for his well being, but no one had truly loved him like his mother, who had put down her life for him. The memory of Ivy’s smile looking down at the baby, of the fire in her eyes and the passion in her voice is enough to bring tears to Clarke’s eyes and she brings the baby up to cradle against her body, pressing her cheek to his soft, downy head and letting her tears soak into his skin.

“Clarke?” She looks up to find the two women looking at her, “Are you alright?” Octavia asks, her voice rough.

Clarke almost laughs, dark bitterness sweeping through her. “How can you ask me that? The two of you, who nearly died on my instructions tonight?”

“Clarke,” Raven speaks more softly than Clarke has ever heard her. “We didn’t do this for you, we did it because it was the right thing to do.”

“You warned us when this began that you couldn’t protect us,” Octavia agrees, “But you’ve tried your hardest even so. You’ve done everything you can.”

“And this baby is still without a mother,” She turns her gaze back to the child in her arms. “It feels… so hopeless.”

“He is the true heir to the throne, Clarke.” Octavia moves closer, standing beside her to look down at the baby. “And here he is alive and safe in your arms, don’t despair.”

“We’re going to fight Pike,” Raven agrees, her voice low in the darkness. “We’re going to figure out his plan and stop him from hurting anyone else.”
Like so many other young ladies in Westeros, Clarke has been dreaming of her wedding since she was old enough to walk. Unlike many of her counterparts, she had been raised to know that she is more than just a pawn to be passed from husband to husband. Perhaps the product of being a Tyrell woman or the only heir of such a powerful family, she had been taught her numbers and letters to a high standard, taught traditional politics by her father and feminine politics by her grandmother. Yet even then she had known that everything she did would lead up to her wedding day. She had dreamed of a wedding in the Highgarden orange groves, with the warm afternoon sun above her and a beautiful dress embroidered with roses. Her groom was mostly faceless, though always handsome, and her friends and family watched on as they were married, birds singing in the trees. The older she got, the more pragmatic she became, but there is still a part of her that longs for a beautiful, perfect wedding, the sort that only childhood can really provide.

Now, on the morning of her wedding, she sits by the fire, picking at her food which turns to ash in her mouth. Her eyes are heavy from a night spent tossing and turning, and the only true friend at her side on what should be the happiest day of her life is Octavia, posted on the other side of the door. Serving girls and seamstresses scurry around her rooms, making ready her beautiful gown, but Clarke doesn’t spare them a glance, her thoughts consumed by all that has passed and is still to come. She eats half heartedly through her toasted bread, smeared in butter, and picks at the oranges sliced delicately on her plate, when a knock comes to the door and Harper steps in.

Clarke is grateful enough to see her that she manages a vague smile. Though the girl is only a maid, she has taken on the role of Clarke’s handmaiden to better hide her expeditions in and out of the castle. Now, she gives Clarke a look which is a little too insightful and says, her voice kind.

“You must eat, my lady, it will be a long day.”

Clarke manages a wavering smile and obediently eats a few slices of orange, letting the juices erupt across her tongue. Harper makes her way to the seamstresses and maids gawking over her wedding gown and shoos them into order with the authority of being Clarke’s known favourite at her back. Several of the maids reluctantly peel away, offering Clarke little bobbing curtsies as they leave the room. The commotion is adding to the ache she can feel building in her head, and Clarke rubs at her temples as she waits. It feels as if she is like to explode with her fear and tension, but she knows that if she can only keep her mind on the immediate worries of Lord Pike and baby Benam, she will not have to think about all today means. Once marrying the king would have been her dream, but to marry him without her mother there, and with Lexa watching from the Sept…

It is too much to bear and so instead she pushes herself from her seat so abruptly that all conversation ceases as the eyes of the room turn to stare at her. She wavers for a moment, and then says, her voice scraping over sudden emotion.

“Could everyone just-” She gestures blindly to the door. “For a moment, please.”

They must hear the desperation in her words, because they leave with exchanged glances. Harper hesitates in the door, glancing back at her and asking, quietly.

“My lady?”

“Just a moment Harper.”

The handmaiden nods, stepping out and letting the door swing shut behind her. The thump of it shutting releases Clarke like a marionette’s strings being cut, and she sags, moving like a ghost to the window, where the brilliant sun streams in. The roofs of Kings Landing stretch out before her, red
tiled, and the sounds of the city just about reach her from here, the sea a distant sliver of silver in the far distance. She knows this city so well, has seen it suffer and prosper, has grown up here, and yet this is not her home. She feels a sudden surge of dread at the thought of her future here. Though she cares for these people as she cares for all of the realm, it is nothing compared to how she feels for the people of Highgarden or even the people of Winterfell. She would give everything for them, commit any crime to keep them well and safe and when she looks down at her hands she thinks of the Maester’s boy’s trembling figure beneath her and Margo’s empty eyes. She drops her hands to the windowsill, fingers curling as if she force her way out of this castle. When she shuts her eyes, it is sad, green eyes that she sees looking back at her and a sob builds in her throat.

How can Lexa still linger with her like this? They shared one kiss in the moonlight, Clarke has done more with handsome stable boys and young lordlings, and yet it is Lexa who hangs around her like a yoke. Their conversation at the tavern recently has settled in her bones; before it, she had believed that any affections Lexa may have had for her in Winterfell were imagined, or at least long gone since her betrayal and betrothal. But in the candlelight something had passed between them, with Lexa’s warm skin beneath her touch, her chest utterly exposed, and now it is harder to dismiss their fleeting kiss as unrequited. If Lexa did... if Lexa could ever... Clarke knows she would allow herself to become an old maid, allow the governance of Highgarden to fall to her unruly cousins, if only for the chance to kiss Lexa like that again. The thought is so terrifying that she pushes herself away from the window, shaking herself thoroughly. They could never marry, could never be together truly and it is a wild dream to think that Lexa could ever forgive her for all that has passed. Regardless, her duty is to her people and not her heart, her father had always taught her that as a ruler she had to value her people above all else and she cannot forget his words now, in the time of greatest need.

A knock comes to the door and when Harper looks cautiously in, Clarke’s back is straight again, her lips pulled into a slight, absent smile.

“Come in, Harper. There is much to do.”

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The choir begins to sing just as the sun hits its highest point in the sky, shining down through the glass atop the Great Sept of Baelor to send light arching in soft rainbows around the Sept. Their voices merge together like a sunset, where the sky fades from indigo to pink and dusk begins to fall, and echo through the grand space so that they can be heard from the steps outside. The Sept is bathed in golden light from the tall stained glass windows that are fitted into every wall, and the glow of the beeswax candles that burn on every surface, scenting the air with the sweet smell of honey. From great vases and hung from the columns and walls are great cascades of beautiful flowers, lavender and honeysuckle and, of course, roses, filling the air with their floral scent and appearing lush and beautiful. The sept is filled with people, with the noblest of them all stood in the inner sanctum, while the other lords and ladies fill the onlooking balcony, the steps outside and the streets surrounding the Sept.

Lexa stands at the front of the inner sanctum, surrounded by her Queensguard and her advisers. She has never before attended a southern wedding and the pomp and grandeur would sit strangely with her if she did not feel utterly numb from head to toe. Her dress is a soft grey, embroidered with gold, and the crown that sits within her curls is heavy with jewels. Most of the wolves have slipped away into the crowds of Kingslanding, no doubt frightening the life out of the smallfolk, but at her side sit Honour and Faith, their coats starkly contrasting and their dark eyes watching everything. When the choir begin to sing Faith’s ears prickle, but Honour remains utterly unaffected. They are as different as night and day, and yet they both press their bodies close to her legs, as if aware that her soul feels like it is balancing on a knife edge.
A hush, like a thick snowfall, falling upon the gathered onlookers draws her attention to the back of the grand sept, and her breath catches in her throat when she sees the two figures silhouetted by the hot sun in the tall doorway of the sept. They seem to glow, illuminated as they are by the bright sunlight, and Lexa feels her breath catch in her throat when they step into the darkness and her eyes first fall upon Clarke’s form.

She has seen much strife and heartache in her life: has been covered in the blood of her enemies, has held the hands of her soldiers as they have died, has nearly frozen to death in the icy snows of the northern winter. Part of her expects her heart to be harder now, protected by the ice that seems to her formed within her veins, and yet somehow she feels more exposed than ever before. Clarke’s dress is a beautiful soft blue, with golden roses embroidered upon it, tiny diamonds and sapphires making up their centres so that the dress sparkles when the light hits it. Around her waist sits a golden girdle, intertwined roses with thorns that shine and stag’s antlers where the two sides meet. The silky skirt trails away into a train that becomes a cascade of roses, beginning where the fabric is artfully gathered at the back. Clarke’s beautiful golden curls, which she remembers brushing away from her smooth cheeks, are piled high at the back of her head and run down her back. Buried within it are none of the usual jewels or flowers, but instead only a small golden crown, made to represent curling roses and antlers. The sights settles deep within Lexa and her own crown seems to weigh doubly heavy as she watches Clarke approach on the arm of her uncle.

The warmth and the heady scent of the flowers and the beeswax candles gives an almost dreamlike quality to the scene. Bathed in golden light Clarke appears like something from another world. The rest of the congregation drop into curtseys and bows as she passes, and Lexa feels something strangely close to pride swell within her heart. When she passes Lexa Faith whimpers and Clarke’s eyes dart towards them. Her expression, which until then has been one of serene calm and happiness flickers, and when their eyes meet Lexa wishes they had not. If she had not met her eyes she wouldn’t have seen the crack of heartbreak shining out from her beautiful face.

It is easy to persuade herself that this was a self fulfilling prophecy if she thinks of Clarke as only the spoiled southern girl she once thought she was. In those slow days in Winterfell in which they grew to know one another, never once did Lexa dare to hope that Clarke returned her feelings. Since those days, in her worst moments she has thought herself a manipulated plaything, and in her lightest moments the subject of a fleeting infatuation. Never once had she thought that Clarke could seriously return her feelings, and never once had she thought that anything more could happen between them. She had always known that Clarke would one day marry some powerful southern lord, but to see her doing it with such pain in her eyes… it is all that Lexa can do to keep herself still and expressionless.

Before them, up the few steps to the dais, stands the king and the High Septon, placed between the towering statues of the Mother and the Father. Finn’s face is split into a wide beam and there is something so childlike to the way that he can barely keep himself still for his excitement. His crown seems overbearing on his head, slipping back just slightly in his hair.

Clarke passes Lexa and elegantly makes her way up the few steps of the dais. Her uncle transfers Clarke’s hand from his to the hand of the king, and the High Septon clears his throat. The choir stop singing, and an expectant hush falls over the onlookers as all eyes turn to them.

“You may now cloak the bride and bring her under your protection.”

At his words, the king takes the gold and bronze cloak from a waiting attendant, richly embossed with the sigil of his house, and in one sweeping motion draws it around Clarke’s shoulders, sealing them together forever.
Raven still remembers the first time she entered the inner sanctum of a castle. When she was twelve years old Sinclair finally gave in to her constant barrage of pleading and took her to see the king to request that she become his apprentice. With his hand on her small shoulder, he had guided her into the dark hall and from his throne Lord Stark had appeared like something from another world. The old man had gazed down at her, and she remembers thinking that he seemed tired and drawn with what she now realises were the months leading up to the outbreak of war between north and south. He had asked her, very simply, if she could work hard and be loyal to Starks, and she had answered with a shaking voice. Though she had lived under the shadow of Winterfell for most of her life and watched nobles come and go, she had been glad to never be required in that drafty hall again.

Her time in Kings Landing has not afforded her the luxuries she had in Winterfell as Lady Clarke’s friend. There had been no invitations to eat with her, no games of cyvasse or hours spent idling away the time together, so when she steps foot inside the Red Keep it is with her head bowed, dodging between servers and guards, with her secret pounding close to her heart. If she were not so consumed with what she knew she would be scared for her life. Sneaking into the Red Keep on any day is a fool’s errand, let alone during the wedding of the new king, when the castle is filled with the most powerful people in the land. The tunnels Octavia had guided her through the night before would be perfect for this moment, but she has no knowledge of them on her own and what she knows cannot wait.

She is lucky that a passing cook mistakes her for new help got turned about. The man pushes a carafe of water into her hands and shoves her in the direction of the Great Hall, instructing her.

“Keep those lords and ladies sober enough to see the bedding ceremony.”

The Great Hall is a mad affair of rowdy, jovial lords and ladies. Evening has fallen since the wedding first took place and the nobility have been celebrating for hours, easily long enough to drain most of the wine from the city and lose any control that they once had of their manners. Those who are older or more dignified still sit at the long tables that are placed around the edge of the room, but the rest of the guests are lingering in the space in the middle of the room, some dancing, others laughing and talking, a few arguing with raised voices. The hot, bright room brings Raven back to her senses a little and she hesitates in the shadow, her eyes searching through the room until they land upon Clarke and her new husband, both sat at the high table. On the King’s other side sits the Queen in the North and the sight of her sends ice to Raven’s heart. With hurrying feet, she slips through the thronging people, past a Kingsguard distracted by the sight of some women dancing together drunkenly, and makes her way up onto the dais on the pretense of filling the empty water cups at the high table.

Lady Clarke is looking out onto the crowd, her eyes far away, and she startles when Raven appears beside her and leans down to fill her cup.

“Water, m’lady?”

Clarke’s eyes are wide, but her voice is utterly composed when she answers. “Yes, thank you.”

When Raven leans over to fill the goblet, she purposefully knocks it so that it spreads water across the table, rolling onto the floor.

“Oh! M’lady-”

“No, let me.”

They lean down to collect the goblet at the same time, and in that moment that they are hidden Raven grabs at her arms, draws her near and hisses in her ear.
“Pike is trying to have the queen killed! He’s trying to start a war with the north and kill every Stark, put the Boltons in Winterfell! He has the Iron Bank at his back and half of the families in the realm have sworn loyalty to him. The Iron Bank have employed the Faceless Men to assassinate her! She has to leave now.”

Horror passes across Clarke’s features, the colour draining from her face as Raven confirms her worst fears. Her lips part as if to speak, but before she can a hand grasps at Raven’s arm and wrenches her upwards so hard that pain shoots through her leg and she lets out a yelp. Holding her upright is a stern faced Kingsguard, his white cloak billowing, accompanied by a servant with a pinched expression.

He rushes to explain himself to his new queen. “Apologies your majesty, the girl slipped past us but she isn’t authorised to be here. She’ll be taken to the dungeons immediately.”

Fear lances to Raven’s heart and her eyes flicker from Clarke and then find the watching Lord Pike. Suspicion settles inside of her and she wonders what the Lannister Lord has found out about Clarke and her friendships.

Clarke opens her mouth to protest but before she can say anything another hand settles on Raven’s shoulder and a blessedly familiar voice says. “I’ll escort her to the dungeons.”

“Lady Anya,” The Kingsguard’s brows furrow, “There is no need to-” But before the words can leave his mouth the king stands, utterly oblivious to the commotion behind him, and shouts for the attention of the watching crowd. His cheeks are flushed, his pupils dilated, and Raven can tell from here that he’s had more than a little wine.

In the distraction, Anya yanks at her arm and Raven stumbles into hurried steps behind her, following as she is led from the dais and through the nobility watching the king. The distraction is a blessing from the gods and they are able to make their way out of the Great Hall without being accosted by Pike or the Kingsguard. As they emerge into the yard where the celebrations are continuing in the warm night air, Anya’s grip on her loosens a little. From the darkness a large, low form emerges, one of the queen’s direwolves loping at Anya’s heels. The Queensguard must spot Raven’s wide eyed glance, because she says quietly.

“They go where she commands.”

Raven can only nod, and it is Anya’s fierce expression and the sight of the direwolf at her side that allows them through the castle gates. Once beyond the castle walls Anya releases her hold on Raven’s shoulder, looking down at her through the darkness. Something catches in Raven’s throat, a strange swell of nostalgic familiarity and she clears her throat, tucking the strands of hair that have fallen from her braid away to distract herself.

“I was… surprised to see you in the city.” Anya confesses, after a moment of silence and Raven’s eyes flicker up to her, wide.

“I came to get my leg looked at.” There is something sharp and defensive to her voice, but Anya doesn’t push back.

“I know,” At Anya’s words, Raven softens a little. “Sinclair told me.” The thought of the knight asking about her sends a curl of something strange to Raven’s stomach and she finds her breath caught in her throat. Anya clears her throat, embarrassed, and continues more gruffly. “Your leg still pains you?”

Automatically, Raven shifts upon her leg, her fingers twitching to rub at her stiff muscles. “Yes,” A
moment of silence settles between them.

“What were you talking to Lady Clarke about?” Anya asks, and the words bring her back to herself.

“The queen,” Her eyes widen, flickering over Anya with consideration for a moment. For as long as she’s known her the knight has held her queen’s protection in the highest regard, even if that led to some very questionable decisions. “The queen is in danger, Anya. Pike is plotting against the north, he wants to have the queen killed while she’s here and wage war upon the north, take us back! He has the Iron Bank behind him, you have to tell the queen, she has to leave and prepare her defences!”

Anya’s face stiffens to stone, her lips a thin line, and she waits until Raven has finished to ask, very seriously, “You’re sure of this?”

“Completely.” Raven takes the translated letters hidden against her breast and presses them into Anya’s hands. “Here.”

Anya’s hands fold around them. “Thank you, Raven. I will warn her majesty.”

“Good,” For a moment they are still, simply looking at each other, and something unsaid seems to linger.

“I pray we meet again Raven Reyes.” Anya says at last, holding out her hand to grasp Raven’s elbow in hers. Raven returns the gesture.

“As do I.”

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Clarke barely manages to swallow back her furious words as Lady Anya places a firm hand upon Raven’s arm. Every bone in her body aches to follow them and pull Raven from the knight’s grasp, but the strange look that passes between them and Finn’s words stop her, keeping her chained to her seat. She can feel Pike’s angry gaze upon her and yet she cannot bring herself to draw her eyes back to the man who is now her husband. Lady Anya, to her utter relief, appears firm but gentle with Raven as she guides her out of the hall, and it is only when the door shuts behind them that she realises that Finn is swaying unsteadily, his word meandering from one topic to the other. She forces her eyes, so heavy that they feel like the hem of a skirt drenched and soaking with sea water, to find his and the moment that they do he sways heavily into her chair. She stands abruptly, winding an arm around his waist to keep him steady.

“My beautiful wife,” Finn says, a smile on his face and tenderness in his eyes, and Clark’s eyes are drawn to where Lord Pike is watching them, a tight coldness in his eyes.

“I think your new husband may need to lie down, your majesty.” Lord Marcus stands from the other side of her to murmur discreetly in her ear. He offers her an apologetic wince. “This may not be the tender night of first wedlock that your Septas told you of - if only your mother-”

Some distant part of Clarke wants to laugh at that, wondering how the lord could claim to know her so well and not realise that Tyrell women were taught the ways of the marriage bed from the moment they began to bloom.

From Finn’s other side Lord Pike appears, like a snake from the long grasses. He places a hand on the king’s shoulder and says, his voice like that of a kindly, amused father. “I think it is high time the king and queen were escorted to the bedding ceremony, don’t you my lord?”
Lord Marcus cringes again, his nose wrinkling with distaste, but he nods all the same. “Before the boy falls unconscious altogether.” He mutters, but Pike chooses to ignore him and turns back to the rowdy room.

“It is time for the bedding ceremony!” He shouts above the noise, and people laugh and cheer raucously at the news. “Our new queen shall go first, accompanied by her closest ladies!” Lord Pike’s eyes bore into her and Clarke feels a shiver of fear run through her, as though the lord’s gaze can see beneath the embroidery of her dress. There is something in his look, an expression of triumph that makes dread curl in her stomach and threaten to expel what little food she has in there.

At her side, Lady Fern and Lady Myra appear, her cousins and Harper close behind them, and they offer her excited little smiles and murmured words of reassurance as they begin to lead her from the dais. The crowd cheer their approval, dropping into curtseys as she passes, but Clarke’s eyes search the room desperately for the northern queen. Lexa is nowhere to be found, her wolves are gone as is the queen herself. None of her guards or attendants are in sight and Clarke cursed herself for sending Octavia away to check on Lady Tris when the celebrations devolved into drunken dancing and feasting. Raven’s words ring in her head like the chiming of the city bells, but there is nothing she can do to escape her ladies as she is led from the great hall and down the corridors of Maegor’s Holdfast. They climb the wide stairs together, Lady Fern holding one of her hands tightly between her own, Harper on her other side.

“All will be well, your majesty,” Lady Fern is saying, as they are shown into the royal bedchamber, but Clarke can barely hear her so hard is her heart racing.

“She knows that, don’t you m’lady?” Harper smiles at her encouragingly as they lead her across the large room, to where the expansive bed, embroidered in gold and black with heavy curtains and a dark wooden frame dominates the room.

“The king has had so much to drink I don’t expect there’ll be much to do,” Princess Arianna rolls her eyes, stepping closer to brush a strand of wispy hair behind Clarke’s ear. Her eyes narrow, running over her, and she says quietly. “Surely you are not scared, little rose?”

“No,” Despite herself, Clarke’s voice wavers, but not for the reasons they think. Princess Arianna hums and sets to pulling the crown from her head and unpinning her curls as Fern and Harper work to unlace her from her dress. Clarke’s hair falls about her face in a tumble of golden ringlets and Princess Arianna hums approvingly, running the back of her knuckles gently over Clarke’s chin.

“Your king will be struck dumb by the sight of you,” She smiles wryly, stepping away. “I’m a little jealous myself.” Harper and Fern slide her bodice away and urge her to step out of her skirts. Even when they unlace her corset, Clarke still feels as if her breath is being stolen from her throat. Her fear swirls in her head like wine, making her feel hazy and disconnected from the hands upon her and the gentle voices of her friends and companions. Princess Arianna’s gaze is too shrewd and suspicious for her liking, and she is vaguely glad when Harper leads her behind the screen in the corner of the room to slip away the rest of her clothing. Her mind races as the maid servant guides a floating nightdress over her bare body, and then slips an embroidered robe up her arms, leaving it open to show the gauzy fabric beneath. Clarke’s mind races, struggling against the wine she’s drank and the exhaustion of the day to know what to do. Her heart screams at her to run to Lexa and ensure her safety, force the northern queen onto the first horse she can find and send her back to Winterfell where she is safe, but she forces herself to stay still. Her fingers tremble when she reaches up to loosely tie the belt at her waist, and she slips from behind the screen as Harper gathers the last of her skirts.

“Come,” She bustles the noble ladies out of the room as if they are no more than clucking geese
underfoot. “The king will be here soon, we must give her majesty a moment to prepare herself.”

The noble ladies murmur their congratulations and well wishes, and Lady Fern pauses to touch a gentle hand to her cheek, but moments later they are all gone and Clarke finds herself blissfully alone. The moment the door shuts she turns on her heel, her eyes glancing through the room for some way out. She hurries to the balcony, though she knows that it is too far to jump. There are guards at the door and a whole manner of lords and ladies in the corridors who would question her absence from the king’s bedchamber. Her heart is pounding so loudly that she can barely hear herself think, and she lets out a grunt of frustration as she surveys the room again, before her eyes land on a tapestry and she hesitates. A memory returns, so suddenly that she is almost wrongfooted by it. Lady Tris’s voice in her head: “You can get all the way to the kitchens, and the great hall, and even the king’s bedchambers!”

Her bare feet slap against the floor in her rush, noisy in the silent room, and when she twitches the tapestry away from the wall she finds a dark wooden door, with a snarling dragon’s head engraved upon the handle. In that moment she cannot worry about Finn or Lord Pike finding her missing, she cannot worry about the whispers or the questions that will follow her absence. All she can think of is Lexa’s safety, and so she takes off down the dark passageway with neither torch nor cloak to help her. The passageways are dark and twisting, and without the light of a torch she is forced to run her hands along the walls to keep her balance. Once in the darkness she fears she can hear footsteps somewhere, echoing off the strange stone walls and throwing the sound, and she presses herself back into the cold stone, her breath coming hot and loud. Eventually she peels herself away from the wall, almost running down the dark tunnels until she emerges, so suddenly she almost falls, into the warm night air of the Godswood.

She is caught by the bushes guarding the way, their gnarled branches snatching at her clothes and curls, and she fights her way out, struggling to catch her breath. For a moment she is disorientated, blinded by the light of the moon and in the distance she can hear the raucous sounds of the celebrations in her honour. The soft grass gives beneath her feet, and she curses herself for not bringing a cloak, wondering how she can go searching for Lexa dressed as she is when a movement catches her eye. She turns, groping for the dagger she keeps in her dress before she remembers it is not there. Goosebumps spread along her arms when she catches sight of the dark figure again among the trees, but when they step into a beam of moonlight she almost lets out a cry of relief.

It is Lexa, blissedly alone and utterly beautiful in the soft grey gown that she wore to the wedding. For a moment Clarke feels frozen in place, unsure whether her presence will be welcomed, but then she is running, her bare feet soft against the grass. Lexa doesn’t turn until she is almost open her, and her lips part in shock, her eyes widened as she takes Clarke in. Automatically, the queen reaches out to steady her when she gets close enough, her fingers warm and firm through the thin fabric of the nightgown and the robe, and Clarke presses her hands against Lexa’s chest.

“You have to go! You have to leave here!”

Lexa blinks at her, still reeling at the sight of her. “Clarke- what-”

“You’re in danger,” Clarke’s hands fist in the fabric of her dress and she clings to her fiercely. “Pike is trying to have you killed while you’re here, he wants to kill Aden too and put the Boltons on the throne and start a war-”

“Clarke,” Lexa cuts through her, her voice hard and steadying now. “Are you certain of this?”

She is shaking when she nods, her voice suddenly caught in her throat, and she gazes up into Lexa’s face as something close to resignation and despair pulls across the queen’s expression. Her grip on Clarke’s shoulders softens and she closes her eyes for a moment, her brows pulling together.
“I should have known,” The quiet words are all Clarke sees of Lexa’s grief for her northern kingdom before her eyes open again and flash with fury. “How do you know, Clarke?”

“Raven read Pike’s letters, she came as soon as she could.” Her voice is trembling and she is glad of Lexa’s firm body against hers. “Lexa you have to go now, take a horse and escape before Pike realises.”

“Come with me.” Her warm hands slide across Clarke’s shoulders and cup her cheeks, guiding their eyes to meet. Her gaze is heartwrenching, filled with her desperate plea, and Clarke feels tears drip from her own eyes at the sight. “Please, we should leave here together.”

“You know I can’t.” Clarke’s voice breaks over the words, placing her hands over Lexa’s and bringing their foreheads together. “I have to see this through, as queen I can protect you.”

“Pike will kill you when he realises you know.” Lexa insists, “He already suspects.”

“Not if I kill him first.” Their eyes meet again and Clarke holds her gaze this time, determined and headstrong. “I won’t let him hurt you, I won’t run away.”

“Then how can I leave you?” Lexa whispers, pain in every word. “Clarke.” She hears the sob tear its way from Lexa’s throat, feels Lexa’s fingers tighten against her skin and sees her jaw clench to keep it inside.

“Lexa,” Clarke presses their bodies together, “You have to go, for Aden, for your kingdom-”

“And what does my kingdom mean if I don’t have you?” The words spill from Lexa’s mouth and they feel like a punch to the stomach, knocking the air from her as soundly as a strike. Lexa’s eyes meet hers and there is no remorse in them, in fact they are alight with passion. “Why be queen when I cannot be with the woman I love?”

A choking sob leaves Clarke and she wishes that she can be an alchemist and bottle this moment forever. Never will she forget the elation that sweeps through her, drowning out her fear and anguish, at the sound of those words, and she reaches up to touch Lexa’s cheek, her neck, wind her arms around her to bring them together again.

“Don’t you see?” Her voice is soft and calm now, like the still water of a pond. “I love you too, and that is why I am asking you to go.”

Lexa’s expression crumples, something close to heartbreak seeping into her eyes and she holds Clarke so closely that she feels like a doll, delicate and fragile, and brings their lips together. Their kiss is soft and sweet and their tears salt their lips. In the moonlight, hidden within the trees of the godswood, they are hidden from the world, though their problems snarl like monsters in their breasts. Clarke kisses her back and her heart beats in her ears, each thud the same words over and over: I love you.

When they finally part, she looks up at Lexa through the silvery light and takes their clasped hands to press a kiss to both of hers.

“I would not ask you to pledge yourself to me.” She murmurs, and she can feel Lexa’s gaze on her downturned head. “I know you will always put your people and your country first, which is why I ask you to go while you still can.”

Lexa swallows, squeezing their fingers together and nods. “For you then, I will.”

The words are like a blow to the heart, one that she has orchestrated and struck herself, and she nods
shakily. Slowly, like ice thawing away in the spring sun, she draws their fingers away from each other, and takes a shaking step back the way that she came. When she turns back, almost to the tunnel entrance, she finds Lexa still watching her, clasping her hands together close to her heart.

If she left part of her heart in Winterfell when she left, Clarke knows as she disappears into the tunnels that the rest of it has been planted in the ground of the godswood, like a sapling which will never grow again.

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The chill that runs up Clarke’s spine as she gets closer to the king’s bedchamber is nothing to do with the cold. The moment she feels it she pauses, her breath catching silently in her throat and her hands stalling against the rough hewn stone walls. She knows this chill too well now, feels it settle like dread into her bones and turn them to stiff, unwieldy iron. It is the same chill she felt before Margo turned on them that fateful night and the same chill that woke her in Winterfell, when the moon was bright and death hung in the air. Her stomach rolls with what little food she has put into it, and she cannot stop herself from moving forwards, grasping uselessly for a dagger that she does not have on her person. A loud crash from up ahead startles her from her reverie and her feet speed up, slapping against the stone floor. It is so dark that she does not realise she has come upon the rooms until she almost falls through the tapestry. At the last moment she saves herself and manages to push away the tapestry just enough that she can see the scene inside.

Her cry gets caught in her throat. On the bed where her husband should be waiting for her there is only a bloody corpse, Finn’s lifeless eyes staring up at the canopy, his throat cut in one quick slice. A person in black robes stands above him, thoughtfully cleaning his dagger and looking down upon the dead king with a sort of morose curiosity. Several things run through Clarke’s mind very quickly. An absent, far away sort of grief for the man who was to be her husband, who she has known since childhood. And then, fighting against the cold curl of fear, a horrified realisation. If this man escapes, Pike will surely pin the blame for Finn’s death upon her, and have her sentenced and dead within a day. Nobody but Lexa knows she has left the room, and she cannot explain her lack of injury. She could cry for help, but is a sad truth that the guards down the corridor will ignore any sounds coming from the room of a newly married couple, no matter how distressed.

She will have to kill him.

Her breath steadies and a cold, calm sort of clarity settles around her, clean and clear. Carefully, she slips from behind the tapestry, her bare feet quiet against the stone slabbed floor, and manages to cross the two steps to the sideboard, her fingers curling around the base of a heavy silver candlestick, before the assassin notices her presence. He turns, his eyes widening with surprise when he sees her and his fingers curl again around his dagger.

She will never truly know how she managed to avoid the thrust of his dagger and his deadly hands. Perhaps the force of her grief and rage was stronger than she could have known. Several times, she catches sight of Finn’s body, drenched in dark blood, lying lifeless on the bed, and feels herself gripped with somethings stronger than herself.

She only truly comes back to herself when she is standing over the assassin’s body, now with a new face, her own hands covered in a mixture of his blood and hers. Her beautiful nightgown and robe are torn and stained, her hair knotted where his hands had tangled and pulled to try to fend her off. She only realises that she is shaking when she tries to step away, and the dagger in her fingers falls to the ground, clattering sharply against the stone. She flinches away from the sound, and stumbles against the edge of the bed, falling back upon its surface.

Beside her, Finn’s glazed eyes stare up at her and she feels something horrendous and terrifying
swallow her whole suddenly, in one mouthful. Her heart shatters at the sight of her old friend and new husband dead beside her and she almost chokes on her breath. Slowly, unable to help herself, she reaches out to touch him. He is still warm beneath her, dressed in a soft fur robe, and she lowers herself down until their bodies are resting closely together. Though she cannot claim to have loved him as a wife ought, he had been dear to her as a friend and when she catches his glazed, glassy eyes again, a cry of such despair escapes her that she thinks it will wake the whole castle.

They find her what feels like hours later, covered in Finn’s blood and her own, weak with her injuries. The body of the assassin still lies at the foot of the bed they never shared.

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let me know what you thought down below or over on tumblr (@onemilliongoldstars)

I can't wait to hear what you guys think of this one!

(PS. If you want more cllexa fic, you should check out my tumblr because I'm posting little prompts and one shots over there this month!)
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!