The Fall of the Commander

by Shtare

Summary

Queen Nia gave Klark very specific duties to perform as the Ice Nation's ambassador to Polis.

Namely, to kill the Commander.

Klark decided to take a different path --

Leksa had every intention of killing the new Azgeda ambassador, as she had the two before her.

But Klark was special, she changed the way Leksa thought of the Ice Nation.

The Commander would complete the Coalition of the Twelve Clans. Even if the stars fell from the skies, and the ice melted under her feet. Even if it meant her death.

Notes

Welcome to the pain train, please take a seat.
This chapter is primarily to set the context of what comes next.

It's gonna get wild.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The terrain changed as Klark kom Azgeda meandered her way down the well-trodden dirt path that marked the boundary between Azgeda and Trikru territory. It was arbitrary to Clarke at the moment, meaning only that she and her party had a week or two left in their journey.

It was a long trip from the Ice Queen’s palace at Troy to the Commander’s tower at the center of Polis.

Klark was in no hurry to get there.

Azgeda was far behind her.

She rode slow, taking in the scenery and enjoying the brief respite from the chaos of Troy.

The more her arrival was delayed the better.

Klark was interested in seeing the Commander’s dissatisfaction, and how it would take form. She wanted to know much disrespect it would take to turn the Commander’s frustration into a rage. A Commander’s rage could become the most fearsome thing in the lands, if she wished it, such are the powers under her will. She is owed the respect and obedience of the clans by default and possessed the judgment of the law and the executioner’s sword. All must bow under the will of the Commander. As Klark often did, Klark imagined Queen Nia wielding the power of the Commander. It would be a sight as terrifying as it would be damaging. The Coalition of the clans increased the Commander's power tenfold. If Nia were to take control of the Coalition, all clans would bleed. Klark wanted to know if Lexa's rage was bloodthirsty, like Nia's. Klark wondered if the Commander savored the cruelty of violence.

The difference between a warrior's obedience and a supplicant's bow was the weight of the boot on your back.

Klark could almost smell the stink of fear and shit of battle - feel the tacky stick of drying blood on her hands.

“I thought Polis was a punishment,” Ontari complained from the horseback beside Klark. Nia’s favorite pet slouched petulantly in her saddle and she shot Klark a malevolent glare.

“What stupidity did you wreak, Klark, and why am I the one suffering for it?”

Klark swallowed her irritation and her reflexive urge to punch Ontari in the mouth.

Nia coddled Ontari endlessly, attracted to the girl’s aggression and pettiness. Nia’s careful, painful attentions groomed Ontari into an unbearable snob and an unrepentant gossip.

Klark preferred not to bring Ontari on raids. She never selected the Queen’s seken when she had personal oversight. Nia foisted the girl on Klark’s delegation, forcing her to bring Ontari despite the girl’s complete lack of diplomacy. Undoubtedly the most obvious of the spies the Ice Queen had watching her.

Nia’s control over Ontari is too great, therefore her control over Klark is too close. Luckily for Klark, Ontari was both stupid and overconfident.

Leksa kom Trikru held no sway over Klark, unless she chose to act.
“I don’t know, Ontari,” Klark sniped, “but I’m curious to know what I did to deserve your charming presence.”

Klark kicked her horse ahead of Nia’s little bitch. Despite being the Ambassador and General Battlemaster, Klark preferred to ride amongst the ranks. She had traveled with the cavalry from dawn, joined in with their bawdy marching songs and watched a man encounter his first snake while mounting his horse. He screamed, the horse reared, he fell, and the horse dragged him behind on a swift canter across the meadow. Klark laughed but did not join in on the mockery that ensued. Good men, reliable men, skilled men. She left them at Ontari’s tender mercy and rode on. The spearmen howled her by, pounding spear-butts and shields in sync with the whoops that acknowledged Klark as their loved leader, glorious general, and fond friend. She had spent many nights at their fires, sharing the stories of their regions and telling tall tales of their own.

Klark waved them by and assumed her position at the front ranks.

The Lieutenants and other Generals spread out from their tight columns to make room for her passing between them. They were silent and severe. Moving in perfect regiment to close the gap behind her. The greeting is cold and ceremonial, rather than out of familiarity. Klark never attempted camaraderie with the other generals. As the highest rank of the army, qualified warriors were either vicious killers, devious strategists, or both. Its the greatest desire of any General, to be marked with the distinction of Battlemaster. An open sign of Nia’s favor, and the power of having the ear of the Queen. Klark’s most dangerous enemies were at her back, in her quarters, and in her close counsel. The Ice Palace at Troy is more of a colosseum than a castle. Nia preferred it that way.

The more Klark thought of Nia’s seken, the more she looked forward to reaching Polis.

At the Commander’s table, she may have hope for something resembling an intelligent conversation. A dinner when she didn’t have to worry about being poisoned or stabbed in the neck by the Generals on either side of her. Where she could get truly drunk, vulnerable. None in Polis would dare exploit her weakness. The reputation of Azgeda alone was usually enough to deter clumsy, would-be assassins.

The border road ended into a large swath of pine forest. The road branched off into three twisting, dusty paths that vanished into the forest in different directions. Paths formed under the tramble of Trikru generations. No charms hung on low branches to warn away ill-wishers, and bar those who serve an ill purpose. No sentries perched in treetop watchtowers ready to rain arrows down on trespassers from above. No person or beast within sight - or twelve meters into the trees, if the scouts she sent out are still living.

Only Silence, but for distant birdsong.

And a somnolent hum -

It was the trees. Great boughs swayed in the cool breeze from the north, the sound of countless leaves rustling against each other in the wind.

Peace, if anyone could believe it.

Klark was skeptical, increasingly so, given her situation.

The trails are unmarked. Polis is south, but choosing the southernmost path may not by the path that leads south. That the farthest path branches south does not guarantee the destination. The paths could turn in a number of directions out of sight. Those that know the way do not need directions
and those that need directions are unwelcome.

Klark needed to choose a path: left, center, right; south, southwest, southeast.

Lingering was not good, neither for any Trikru scouting parties that come upon them nor Klark once her soldiers grow bored enough to stack their horses.

Klark chose the center path - southeast. The direction of Polis - and Ton D.C.

The first destination on her diplomatic tour of Polis. Unofficially, of course. Nia does not send forewarning for a raiding party.

Klark mounted up and her warriors followed, forming ranks and mounting steeds. Klark’s sliver of the Ice Army thundered down the dirt roads. The warriors took to challenging each other to leap fallen trunks and race to the apex of a steep hill. Every time a larger obstacle and a steep hill. Klark allowed their fun. The ice fields of the north stretched flat from end to end, and only a true fool would attempt to ride up the Mountain. Boredom and cold was the life of an Ice Army soldier.

The path twisted west for over a day. Klark was not concerned with locating Ton D.C. The largest village in Trikru territory would make itself known by fire and smoke and the laughter of children. The songs and cries of men and women.

Klark was riding to silence those voices.

Soon, the tranquil, hushed forest would ring with the screams and shouts of the wounded and dying in the quiet dark.

Only one forest stood in Azgeda and it screamed in the night.

Any living trees were gnarled crooked things of little beauty

Klark preferred these grand, towering brown trunks higher even maybe than the tower at polis. Klark liked to lean her head back and watch the sunlight glitter through the gaps in the treetops. Looking closer, Klark saw their great, winding roots shape the land in marvelous untamed growth, so sprawling and interconnected it was impossible to determine origin trees, so strong as to change the very ground with curling tendrils. Klark admired the way Trikru forest grew and stretched. A ferocity of nature, pure in its need to survive. Klark has seen more animals in a single day on Trikru land than she would in a fortnight in the wastelands.

The Azgeda delegation rode until the scouts returned and led them to a small clearing in the forest. Trees were cut down to shape it. Small huts of branches, logs, and animal skins circled a large fire.

If it was part of Ton D.C, the raid was well in motion. If it was not, they found another village to reve along the way, and all the better for Azgeda. Her warriors needed to spill blood if they were expected to be civil in Polis. A little entertainment to hold them over until Ton D.C.

Klark reluctantly instructed Ontari to lead the raid, giving her strict instructions not to flame the village and warn Ton D.C. of their imminent arrival.

Klark preferred to lead her own raiding parties, but she was busy fermenting everything she knew about Ton D.C.,

Klark thought Ton D.C., as the home village of Leksa kom Trikru, was central to understanding the Commander’s mind and heart.
The village was awash in scandal, spoken of with dismay or disgust for the Commander it spawned, emotions climbing now that Leksa’s Coalition is the only thing on the minds and lips of the clans at large. What kind of village produced a Commander that would demand a warrior to lay down his sword, forever?

What more, Leksa changed Ton D.C. leadership as her first act as Heda.

Rumor went that the Commander’s fers was appointed Clan Leader just after the Commander’s ascension. Twelve-year-old Leksa is believed to have abused her great power in order to kill and depose the rightful leader and replace them with a warrior loyal only to her.

Nia’s spies spun another story. A story of a cruel and lurid man that forced fers to battle their seken at the center of Ton D.C. for his own entertainment. The first seken to bleed would be put to the sword of their own fers. A punishment too for the mentor. Punishment for the fers having failed to make their apprentice strong. The rising leader gave the fallen a death of a thousand cuts and mounted their head to the village gates.

Klark was glad to know a piece of Leksa’s formative past. Suffering built compassion in the hearts of strong-minded people. She gained power and used it to avenge the wrong done to her and her own. Replaced an evil man with a well-respected warrior that she trusted to value the people. Changed her home for the benefit of the fers and seken that would come after her fight was over.

Klark sensed a nobility in Leksa’s actions. A rare quality for a leader fighting to survive.

Klark watched a million tiny beams of light filter through the canopy of leaves above her head. The wind changed and Klark watched the leaves rustle, moving in slightly different tandem, like a thousand, thousand soldiers crashing their spear against their shields. Eventually, the screams ceased. The raiding party returned, awash in blood and victory, bearing chests of furs, barrels of ale, and handfuls squawking chicken. Taking fowl in raids was unpopular, the noise, shit, and the cages. Another perfect job for Ontari.

The Azgeda delegation rode until sunset, closer now to Ton D.C. than the village they plundered.

“Camp here,” Klark said, as she chose a small clearing under a rock face. She dismounted and left her horse in the hand of a spear- seken, with explicit instructions to stay away from his mouth.

Klark climbed to the top of the large rock protrusion, wondering how much of Trikru land she could see from that height. The night glowed blue with starshine, the air still and warm, hovering like a held breath, the silence before the strike. In many ways, the lands of the Trikru were more hospitable than Azgeda. The trees felt like a blanket in themselves. Everywhere Klark looked, she found what she needed. A new place to disappear, a few weapons of convenience, enough scavenging to keep alive for one more day. The riches of the Commander’s lands seemed to know no bounds. All the better for Klark.

Ton D.C. before dark was the most fruitful course.

Klark roused them before dawn. The ride could be no more than a day, if not less. A little time for investigation before Azgeda struck in the night, taking everything they had and leaving only ashes behind.

“Ride!”

Klark kicked her horse into a swift canter. The warriors, general to spearmen, were quick to follow with hoots and howls of war. A grin broke over Klark’s face, her cheeks flush, invigorated, by the
thunder of a hundred horses at her back.

Klark was born to ride at the head of an army.

Leksa kom Trikru lounged back in her throne, set above her chamber of state by a set of stairs, impassable to all but the Commander and her attendants. Eleven chairs formed a half-circle before her, each occupied by a leader of one of the twelve clans.

Save one.

Leksa was silent as Titus explained the Commander’s position to the ambassadors. Expanding the Coalition was a risk, but it was more of a gamble to leave Azgeda unmitigated. It was a painful goal, to invite the irreverent Ice Nation, and their cruel Queen Nia, to join the Coalition of the Twelve Clans. A delicate transition was necessary, given Azgeda’s history of reaving and raping more than half the clans in the Coalition with their brutal raiding parties. Leksa was the axis of a precarious scale.

It was unreasonable to ask for decency from the Ice Nation but Leksa was never one to back down from a challenge. The Commander did not turn away from bitter work. She knew what was necessary for the good of her people.

Given the circumstances under which the last Azgeda ambassador departed Polis, she expects the next ambassador to be an assassin. Nia has been trying for Leksa’s life from almost the moment she won the Conclave. The Ice Queen one of the few, but influential, among the twelve clans that doubt the wisdom of the Commanders. Leksa’s killing of her man would be no more than a thinly veiled excuse for mustering her army.

Leksa was called to lead her people - chosen by the flame - born to be the Commander.

Greatness was certain, she had everything to prove, and nothing to lose but her life. As a child Commander, she needed to make clear that she was worthy of the flame. Winning the Conclave was not enough. To win their reverence does not assure their allegiance. Leksa knew better than to expect trust. She built her reputation on her skill with a blade and her ruthless administration of justice - No second chances. No quarter for raiders. No tolerance for questions, objections, or indecision.

Leksa held firm on her plans, even those she despised. Even now she attempted to make peace with Azgeda - going against all of her beliefs and traditions - *jus drein jus daun* - to make the unprovoked killing stop. Trikru, in particular, cannot afford to fight the mountain and the Ice Nation simultaneously.

Leksa has compromised herself, and the image of the Commander, in defying her culture and her precedent of leadership.

Her life was endangered for it

Now, like when she was twelve, she again has everything to prove and everything to lose.

It was even more difficult than she expected to make the clan leaders see the precious lives of her subjects as such.

Leksa used her reputation to browbeat them into compliance and it was beginning to grow threadbare the longer the Ice Nation refused to submit to the brand.
Lexa’s coalition was near to complete.

Forming an alliance with her worst enemies to promote peace for all her people, despite the wrongs they have done her. Despite Costia. Leksa’s actions betrayed her lover’s memory.

But that was all Costia was. A memory.

The dead are gone and the living are hungry

She cannot condemn her people, any in the twelves clans, for the sake of a dead woman.

To be Commander is to be alone - to sacrifice personal needs for the sake of communal well being.

The Coalition of the Twelve Clans was established for just that purpose.

Eleven of the twelve clans have taken the mark of the Coalition and pledged to maintain the tentative armistice between their peoples. Any clan that moves against their neighbor is subject to retaliation by the combined forces of the other clans. The would have no one to blame but themselves for their own annihilation. The threat of mutual destruction was the only thing strong enough to motivate bloodthirsty warriors into laying down their swords and surrendering to the monotony of peace.

The strength of Leksa’s command determined the strength of the Coalition.

Polis was filled almost beyond capacity.

Ambassadors and delegations traveled across the lands, from the great salt to the sand sea, for the Commander’s yearly summit.

Leksa is giving the Ice Nation one last chance to join the coalition, here, before the representatives of the clans and their attendants.

Nia has refused the Commander’s order twice, once by envoy, and once with an ambassador, Leksa was forced to kill for his insubordination.

Nia was sending another ambassador for the annual summit. An ambassador meant to kneel before the Commander, swear fealty to the sanctity of the Coalition, and take the mark - a sigil of Leksa’s own design, inspired by the Ton D.C. flag, and centered with Leksa’s symbol of authority, the gold matrix

It was no secret that the success of the coalition rest on the shoulders of the Ice Queen almost as much as the Commander. The Ice Nation holds twice the territory of any other clan. The coalition will always be unstable so long as the second largest military refused to integrate with the combined armies of the clans - the greatest military force ever gathered.

Lexa can claim to have chosen the Ice Nation as the last to enter the treaty. Holding the most territory, she is the most resistant to change, to self subjugation. They needed the weight of the threat behind leksa to strong arm the queen into joining.

It was four years gone that Lexa waylaid the Clan Ambassadors during their annual summit at Polis to introduce the idea of the coalition. It took another year of gentle coaxing, strategic speeches, and aggressive negotiation to seal the Coalition in an agreement of blood and flesh.

“Hail, Ambassadors of the Twelve Clans,”
“Hail, Commander of the Blood!”

Leksa watched one representative after take the seat of their own power, combined under the leadership of the Commander.

The dream she had nurtured almost from the day she first stood before the Tower at Polis, barely able to comprehend the responsibility of the nightbloods. The quiet hope she shared with her initiate class and carried for them in their absence. Unlike the marks on her back, these scars could not be seen yet went to her soul.

Queen Nia was responsible for more than one of those scars.

And still, Lexa let them into her coalition.

An act of generosity for the good of Nia’s people. For the innocents that have no part in her choices.

The Ice Nation remained staunchly anti-mutual cooperation. It was an untenable situation. The Ice Nation compromised as much land as most of the clans combined, even if most of it was not suited to green, growing things. Invading armies have similar trouble. The inhospitable environment made a ground assault both foolhardy and wasteful, while the bitter landscape hardened Nia’s warriors against pain and fear, but not starvation.

An army cannot eat ice and snow alone.

Nia needs the coalition to keep her people from starving. Leksa needs Nia to join the Coalition, to keep her people from dying pointless deaths.

Unfortunately for them, Nia did not care how many die in the service of her megalomaniacal goals. The Ice Queen agreed to send another ambassador to Polis for a reason. Leksa is no fool. Nia has every intention of wresting control of the coalition from the Commander. Anything to see Leksa dead and Nia entrenched in greater power. Nia would need the support of the other clan leaders to keep power in the wake of Leksa’s death.

A coup.

Something Leksa would be unable to avoid. Some attack that would kill her if she failed to see it coming. Leksa would watch, not balk like a frightened deer. She would not run into the blade trying to escape the threat of a knife. Leksa would wait for Nia to make her move.

If Nia took control of the coalition, that would be the end of Leksa’s fight - and the fights of too many men, women, and children.

Nia would reave and rape and steal what she needed from the other clans. She would strip their lands cleans and pile riches on riches onto her precious capital city. The other clan leaders would stand by and watch it happen just to keep their heads attached to their shoulders.

Fear was the easiest path to power and Nia’s cruelty was well known to the clans, whispers travel on wings, explicit description of her torture dungeons and the evils she exacts in those who displease her.

The Commander’s power is based on respect and loyalty, both ingrained and nurtured over time. the bond between a leader and their soldiers was fragile at the best of times. Easily destroyed and painstaking to reconstruct.
Nia’s rule was cemented. Instantaneous acquiescence in fear of the things they imagine she might do, nevertheless the things she would do to them to achieve complete dominion over the clans. If Nia planned it correctly, she could win.

The Commander’s right to rule is absolute, but there is always another commander, and Leksa has lasted longer than most.

Leksa cannot be beaten in a challenge. Nia will be forced to go for the knife in the dark, to stab her in the back while she sleeps.

Nia needed to send her very best assassin.
Greetings and hello!

This new chapter is more than double the word count of the last. You're welcome.

I dedicate these words in honor of those that commented on chapter one, you keep my inbox empty and a smile on my face.

Enjoy,

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In her haste down the hill, Klark’s foot snagged on a protruding root and she fell over herself, sliding to the bottom of the embankment at the southernmost edge of Ton D.C.

Klark’s hissed a series of inflammatory curses in short, harsh Azgedasleng. Cursing her mother for birthing her and the stars for staring down in abject indifference. Blaming the winter winds for blowing cold and the ponds for icing over.

Klark did not expect to lose control of the situation so quickly.

Ontari jumped Klark’s authority. Klark allowed her to do one thing, raid a small village, and now the girl thought herself a General. Considered herself worthy to lead Klark’s warriors. Klark was still scouting the village from the hill, looking for the ideal entry point and waiting for the right moment to strike, when she heard Ontari shout the order to advance - effectively alerting everyone in the village to their presence - and blatantly flouting Klark’s authority.

Alerted to the attack, the cries of Trikru warriors went up from the village.

While Klark did prefer to kill those with swords in their hands, it was better to sneak and steal than to pry riches from death-tight grips. More efficient and less bloody.

Klark only had so much time to clean blood out of the groves of her blades.

Her warriors ran ahead at Ontari’s call, oblivious to Klark’s absence. Voices were indistinguishable in the bloodhaze, the rush of imminent battle. Klark’s warriors thought of nothing but the spray of blood and crunch of bone. Those loyal enough to question Ontari would have assumed Klark seeded permission, as she had at the first village. Clearly, an errand was as difficult for Ontari to accomplish as listening, and obeying.

The Azgeda raiding party fell upon Ton D.C. in a hale of sawing blades and head-splitting axes. A swift stream of blue and white fur coats streamed into the village, screaming bloody murder.

Ontari led the pack, her sword swinging wildly.

Underestimating Ontari was a mistake Klark would not make again. Klark would pay her back for her insolence later.
Klark watched Ontari seize a fleeing woman, unarmed, to cut her down at the throat before moving on to her next victim. The woman’s young child clung to her corpse, crying.

Then, someone came at her with a hatchet.

The Trikru warrior got a knife in the eye for their trouble. The body went over like a downed tree. Two more attacked Klark from opposite sides, a coordinated assault by those too cowardly to face her in single combat. Both fell long before they could touch her. Knives embedded in skulls, bodies met the ground. From then on, Klark flowed with the river of oncoming opponents, her knives deflecting sword and axe blows accelerating speed. Klark’s fighting style ideal for an onslaught of opponents. She let her body lead her mind, muscle memory and instinct colliding to create an almost supernatural ability to predict attacks, to break through defenses -

A whistle on the air —

The billow of an unnatural breeze against her cheek —

Klark bent over backward and barely avoided taking a spear to the face. The tip scarcely cleared the tip of her nose before her back hit the ground. Klark needed to get up. A spear was rarely a solo weapon. Whoever wielded the weapon would bear down on her.

Klark flipped to her feet and straight into a long sword with a graceful curve, wielded by a willowy woman. Klark crossed their blades and wedged the cross-brace of her knife against the edge of the sword, locking them in a temporary stalemate. The woman had two-toned hair and cheekbones like a tall, sheer cliff face. An exceptional warrior, going by her relaxed grip on the sword and her furious, yet eager, expression. She waved away the warriors that came to aid her, fierce and fearless. Klark liked her immediately.

This must be the one called Anya, the warrior personally responsible for schooling the Commander in the ways of combat and killing. Just the woman Klark hoped to find.

“Far from home, Azgeda scum.”

Anya was not wrong.

A solid kick to the stomach put some distance between them. Klark and Anya circled each other, looking for openings.

“I came all this way just for you,” Klark crooned, “at some effort.”

And it was an effort. Getting Ton D.C. was arduous and difficult. The journey required marching across half of Azgeda, skirted the reaper mountain, and pushing through most of Trikru land before anyone heard their hooves or saw a flash of horse-flesh through the trees. Klark was confident in Fox’s ability to shoot down messenger birds, but it served to have an abundance of caution.

It was important to set the right tone for the opening of political negotiations. Bringing the head of Leksa’s mentor to the Commander’s table would be a nice punctuation to the message of Klark’s haiplana Nia.

Klark needed to meet the real Leksa kom Trikru. To analyze the content of the Commander’s character and see how far she was willing to stoop to appease her own ire. Nothing would reveal Leksa’s truth like a raid on her home village and the head of her beloved mentor.

The fight would also give Klark a good idea of Leksa’s abilities, as well as the strategy and
morality instilled by her fers.

Anya feigned an attack, her attempt to provoke Klark into charging first and recklessly exposing herself to an easy killing blow. Klark was not so foolish as to allow another warrior to lead her by the nose. She was slightly offended by Anya’s low opinion of her intelligence.

A snarl from Klark's side proved that Fin was very offended. He took any slight against Klark personally and paid it back in blood. He was the last living member of her original battalion and the most efficient of her assassins. The mad dog at the end of her long, long leash. Very loyal, if in an indirect fashion. Klark grabbed Fin's chest holster before he could get in her way and gave him a shove, sending Fin off to do whatever Fin did when they took a civilian village. He went, if petulantly.

Klark plamed her favorite dagger and circled Anya kom Trikru.

Around them, the screams of the dying and the howling of her horde mixed to indistinction. Someone lit fire to the huts, the draw straw providing the perfect stage for the fire to dance. It was convenient lighting on a dark night with no moon.

Anya wielded a sword, a distinct advantage over the knife.

Klark threw a light, slim blade, a gauge for Anya’s reflexes. Klark did not come all this way for the night to end so soon.

The knife glanced off the edge of Anya’s sword.

— it was a grooved blade.

Klark dropped to the ground right as Anya caught the tip of the dagger in the v of her sword, pivoted, and launched the projectile back at Klark —

The blade missed by a hair's breadth.

Close-calls were Klark’s forte, by necessity as much as her flair for the dramatic. A weakness can be turned into a strength with the proper motivation and the right mindset. She was considered nigh-invincible by the soldiers of the Ice Army, her kill count immortalized in the memories of Azgeda. Her accomplishments earning her the title of Battlemaster. The rising legend of Wanheda.

Anya did not seem to care about Klark’s reputation as she attempted to cut her head off.

Klark watched Anya’s sword, dancing around each strike, looking for an opening. Anya slowly descended into madness, rage and grief consuming her the longer Klark led her around by the sword.

Long, sweeping strikes.

Full follow-through.

Bold yet guarded.

Quick and forceful.

Strong against distance attacks.

An unbeatable offense and excellent defense. Quite skilled.
Klark found the cracks, as she was taught to do.

Anya flexed her leading leg in advance of a backswing, maybe rocking back with the weight of the sword, maybe compensating for an old injury. She stepped forward to prepare for a backswing, the speeding weight spinning without pause or strain - or loss of control.

Klark ducked under Anya’s wide swipe. She lunged in close and stabbed Anya in the side of the knee with the double-edged blade she kept up her sleeve. The Trikru leader fell to the ground, cursing Klark’s cowardice all the while. A sanctimonious attitude for someone that was just defeated. Klark straddled Anya’s felled body.

Now, for her head. Klark kept a short sword sheathed across her lower back for just this sort of occasion. Klark reached for the hilt at her hip and drew the blade. Klark took a moment to admire the sword, custom forged in honor of her appointment to Battlemaster. A gift from her warriors.

A shine caught the edge of the blade.

Anya kept her head because Klark was almost stabbed in the back. Reflected on the shiny steel of her sword, she saw a warrior sprinting towards her on silent feet. Klark waited until he leaped, vulnerable in mid-air, to whirl around and open a gash down the length of his flank. He fell and did not get back up.

The Trikru leader was gone when Klark turned around. And Anya had criticized Klark for cowardice.

That was the hypocrisy of Trikru. They called Azgeda savage but they themselves lacked honor. Azgeda may be harsh, cruel, and unyielding, but it did not pretend/claim to be other than it was. There was particular depravity in deception. Artifice was a betrayal that undermined the word of any Trikru warrior.

Klark glared around the burning village, through fire and smoke. She found so sign of Anya.

Klark finished her battles, but she was above chasing an enemy. Anya’s fight would go on. For now.

A low-pitched horn blared in the distance. Two short bursts and one long. Murfy wielded Klark’s own ram’s sourced horn and used it to signal an immediate withdraw to the south. Her stealthiest and most intelligent spy watched from the very hill Klark tumbled down at the start of the raid, so blinded was she by her eagerness to wring Ontari’s neck. Which was why she kept Murfy close. As her strategist, he observed the ebb and flow of battle and determined the ideal moment to make a tactical retreat. If Klark were left to her own devices, she would not stop until someone ended her fight or the village was obliterated.

Klark found Fox at the edge of the grove, and they climbed the hill in time to watch Ton D.C. burn with the rising dawn. Fin appeared from the foliage and crouched down at her side, resting his cheek against her leg. A tall shape slid into Klark’s shadow like a knife to a sheath.

“That was graceful,” Murphy sneered snidely. He stood just over her shoulder, behind and to the left, the best position for whispering in her ear and guarding her blindspot.

“Shut up, Murfy,” Klark hissed.

A riotous laugh preceded Roan as he strolled over the hill, a grin on his face and a deer carcass slung over his shoulder.
“We will eat well tonight!” Roan crowed, bumping his shoulder against Klark’s, all friendly with camaraderie. Klark is suspicious of his attitude and his motives for being so cheerful, but she was not concerned. Roan knew the measure of her skill, and he was not so stupid as to provoke solo gonplei he could not win.

Ontari crept from the wasted village and skulked up the hill. Klark allowed the girl to fall in at her back. Fin would sever her ankle tendon with his teeth if she so much as flinched toward Klark. She stared at Murfy with girlish eyes and started describing her kills in graphic detail. Murfy gave her the attention she wanted.

With her delegation accounted for, Klark led them through the trees, to their herd of men and beasts.

Almost a hundred horses galloped north as the sun rose, heavier now for being laden down with pilfered treasures, foodstuffs, and tools. They were bound for Azgeda, to present Klark’s reapings at the foot of the Queen’s throne. The demonstration of submission would appease Nia for the time being, giving Klark a little freedom to act on her own will. Klark sent the other generals with them. Ontari was enough of a lodestone. Klark was keen to keep her Polis delegation as loyal as possible. Leksa would find a five-person raiding party questionable if she had any sense. Klark could not wait to find out.

Polis represented limitless opportunities.

As the ambassador to Azgeda, Klark had an obligation to obey Nia’s strict instructions.

As Klark kom Azgeda, she needed to look out for her own interests. Klark offed to take this shitty posting solely to further her own agenda (serve her own interests). If the Commander worked out to Klark’s benefit, she was willing to degrade herself for her final goal. it would be worth the sacrifice to get what she wanted.

A few days in Polis would give her an idea if Leksa kom Trikru could help her with that goal, either directly or indirectly. Whether Leksa was susceptible to the manipulation depended on the type of woman she was.

A meek Commander would be easier to turn, but Klark would be disappointed to find a leader incapable of matching her skill.

If Leksa was as formidable as her reputation suggested, Klark needed to be unerring if she wanted to live. To take care of where she placed her trust and keep her true position uncertain in the minds of anyone observing her movements.

Nia undoubtedly has spies in the capital. Those loyal to the Ice Queen alone, who would tell her Klark’s every move, every word, every gesture, with the detail and embellishment of a keen mind. Ontari was too stupid to be Nia’s spy, but she was watching, and Nia adored using Klark to rile Ontari’s jealousy. Klark could feel Ontari’s glare on the back of her neck.

If she played it right, she may be able to get away with killing Ontari. Any act of treason could be explained as a bid to win Leksa’s favor - lower her guard - to give Klark and opportunity to stab her in the back and bring the Coalition under Nia’s rule.

So powerful was the Commander, even the great and terrible haiplana Nia must resort to taking her down from within. Leksa would be vulnerable only to those she trusted implicitly. Klark needed to become one of those people, for both Nia’s plan and her own.
If her gambit worked, Nia would have no time to punish Klark for any unforgivable indiscretions.

Anya’s scouts were taking their sweet time catching the raiding party that nearly leveled their village.

Klark lingered by the river, ambling along at a leisurely walk, her delegation strung out, engaged in their own conversation. Klark allowed it. She was lenient with those who have proven themselves under her command. Those Klark trusted enough to follow her orders despite having no awareness of her plan. For the moment, at least.

Klark closed her eyes and remembered bodies strewn in the dirt, moss drenched in blood already congealing. The number of bodies that fell in her wake. Klark kept meticulous count of each life stolen by her hands. It was her only way to honor the dead.

“Wanheda,” Ontari murmured, with pique, “shall I scout ahead and find a useable campsite?” She already held the supply bags, as if Klark’s agreement was a foregone conclusion. Klark knew better than to let Ontari go off on her own. She would not put it past the girl to poison her canteen. Plant a poisonous snake in the firepit. Set up a bear trap for Klark to conveniently stumble upon. No doubt on Nia’s order. Putting Ontari in her honor guard was tantamount to a call for Klark’s blood, but Nia could pretend otherwise so long as she refrained from putting an actual bounty on Klark’s head.

Ontari’s loyalty to the Ice Queen was bought with fear and pain. Both were less reliable than love yet significantly more deadly.

Commander Leksa was both loved and feared, cultivating a reputation of ruthlessness but not cruelty.

Klark was looking forward to meeting such a rare woman.

“Murfy,” Klark called to the only warrior she truly trusted, “take Fin and scout ahead for a place to make camp.”

What Fin lacked in discipline, Murfy made up with patience. Murfy would obey Klark’s commands and had a firm enough hand to keep Fin under control. If they were attacked, Klark trusted Murfy to put the importance of Klark’s plan before the satisfaction of violence. Fin was nigh-uncontrollable when away from Klark’s side but Murfy had his ways. Fin's head was turned to watch her, sadly, as he trailed after Murfy, into the woods and out of sight.

Murfy sent Fin to retrieve them in short order. Fin pulled on Klark’s cuff in awkward affection as he led them through the woods, to a small clearing in the trees. Murfy knelt by a newborn fire. Klark need only meet Murfy’s gaze to know he followed her instructions to bury a cache of food and weapons in the forest. A contingency if the need arose for a quick getaway. Klark was confident in her plan, but she always accounted for the worst-case scenario.

Klark sent out sentries, set up camp, and waited for the Trikru scouts to find her party. Roan cut choice pieces of flank and thigh and draped the meat over the fire pit stones to cook.

Anya’s head would have made a nice gift, but Klark had many other gifts to give the Commander.

Klark cleaned her knives while she waited. Metal rusted under blood, after all.

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Anya rode at the head of the scouting party that found them.
Klark put up a token resistance against capture. She did nothing when Anya pilfered her coat for weapons and found hidden pockets sewn into the lining to hide knives of different shapes and purposes. A portion of her collection, mostly her imperfect pieces, in the event their weapons were confiscated before they were banished from the capital. She turned Klark back and forth, finding even the smaller, cleverly concealed Anya removed Klark’s boots and dug around until she produced two razor blades about three inches long, which Klark kept in the soles for emergencies. Nia emptied her belt and thigh holsters. One of the Trikru warriors snatched Klark’s trench knife from the pile and took a moment to admire it before he made a show of sliding the blade into his belt.

She was going to kill him first when this was all over.

Klark and her warriors were bound, hands tied behind their backs and arms pinned flat to their sides. Anya took the time to restrain Klark personally. They walked behind the horses at the end of a short rope fixed seats of their saddles, Trikru riding Ice Nation horses. It was a precarious position, forced to either kiss a horse’s ass or be pulled off their feet. Klark leaned back in her binds, stretching her legs out in front of her and letting the ropes keep her suspended. The horse walked Klark along rather than her own power. It was almost relaxing.

Her people marched in a line behind her, save Fin, who struggled hard enough to hurt himself and was lashed him over the back of his horse.

“When my warriors told me they found you, I was surprised,” Anya pontificated from her perch on Klark’s saddle, “Surely Azgeda is not so foolish as to camp in raided territory.” Anya sounded bored but Klark could hear the tension in her voice, “I suppose I thought too much of you.”

Anya went on to describe the multitude of ways she would disembowel Klark with her own knives - include the serrated athame Anya had taken a liking to. One of the more odd pieces in her collection for its waxing and waning blade, a ripple of metal. Anya twirled the dagger as she poked at Klark’s loyalties, aiming indiscriminately, to get a reaction. Klark was stoic, thinking.

It was eerily similar to Klark’s strategy for the Commander.

“This raid will be your last, and all your people will know that you died a coward’s death, fleeing from Trikru arrows.”

Klark was used to humiliation, and fear, in much greater measures.

“I will ask for the honor of administering justice beyond 1,000 cuts. Such meager suffering is not enough for you.”

Anya’s threats were kittens compared to the shadowcat of Nia’s wrath.

“You will tremble in the shadow of the capital.”

Klark long kneeled before the ice throne, bowed but unbroken, and endured the consequences.

“The Commander will show you no mercy.”

Klark had to stifle a grin.

“Rumors reaching Azgeda name her a meek girl with a weak chin.”

Anya was so taken aback she whipped around in Klark’s saddle, all appalled fury mingled with sheer disbelief. Anya caught the handle of Klark’s athame and lashed out in one motion, scoring a
neat slice into Klark’s cheekbone.

“Greater lies have never been told. You will pay for your slander.”

“How would you describe her?”

“She is fearless, mighty, and true. She is everything you are not,” Anya said fiercely, utterly devoted to her Commander.

In all fairness, Anya was right. Klark possessed none of those noble traits. The wastelands of Azgeda stripped her of mercy, of weakness. She could hear the voice of Nia’s mockery, derision Klark’s fers would sneer in the face of Anya’s love.

Emotion was weakness.

Love was stupidity.

Stupidity was fatal.

“I also heard that she uses proxies when challenged.”

“No one fights for the Commander.”

“What would you call this?” Klark turned her cheek so Anya could admire her handiwork.

“Another scar for your collection.”

Anya kicked Klark’s horse into a brisk gallop. Her Trikru escorts followed suit. The Ice Nation warriors were forced to run or be dragged.

Klark ran and tried to avoid getting brained with a hoof. Klark’s people managed to stay standing. Ontari fell face-first after a short struggle. Klark took singular pleasure in the way Ontari was literally dragged through the mud, likely aspirating dirt.

Eventually, Anya slowed to a walk. It was a two-day journey to Polis, and she must rest the horses. At least, that was what she told her warriors to justify not dragging the Ice Nation all the way to Polis.

Anya released Klark personally. Klark watched Anya limp, evidence of her failure to defeat Klark in single combat. Klark bided her time.

“Ice Nation horses are slow.”

They were large, lumbering beasts with hairy hooves and wide bellies. Made for the plow, the draft, rather than the hunt and the chase.

“Don’t forget to cool him out and brush him down. He likes a good back scratch.”

Anya walked away, leaving her men to bind Klark and her warriors to separate trees strewn throughout the camp. Klark applauded their caution and resigned herself to a long night of boredom and an aching neck come morning. Klark heard Roan arguing with one of the Trikru warriors but the words were lost on the wind.

Anya sent her men out to hunt for a meal of squirrels and roots.

They left Roan’s deer out to rot.
Klark did not sleep. Instead, she conspired, adjusting her strategy to accommodate Anya’s temperament and the patience Klark’s warriors have demonstrated so far. She had not expected them to be so well-behaved, even Fin, who Anya had already punched unconscious for screaming too loudly around his gag. Her order was a temporary measure that would break at the first sign of offense, but Klark was used to worse situations and conditions.

Klark took note of the way Trikru sentry inched closer and closer to Murfy’s tree. Klark rolled her eyes, despite his inability to see. Her warrior had a way with words, as talented at resolving conflict as much as instigating it. He could start a war with nothing more than a sentence and a rock. If she did not unleash him on Polis, she would be facing the backlash of his boredom. Still, he was more bearable than the rest.

Fox was too agreeable for Klark’s taste. Agreeable people were too eager to please and talked too much. Both traits common in people easily manipulated, and therefore not untrustworthy allies. Fox pleased Klarke by following orders, and Klark did not mind chatter, so long as Fox knew when to be silent.

Roan was a complication she would rather have in plain sight.

Ontari was just a pain in the ass.

Klark’s warriors would be taken from her when she arrived at Polis. She needed to do most of the groundwork without her people. They would stay imprisoned until Klark either convinced Leksa to let them go or Klark freed them herself when the time came.

Night came sooner, then the very earliest hours of the morning. Anya came to Klark before dawn, without an escort. She cut Klark from the tree and tied her hands. The Clan Leader of Trikru proceeded to drag Klark up a muddy hill, still soggy from the last night’s raid. Klark’s boots nearly came off in the mud and Anya pulled her off her feet more than once. Anya let Klark stop only at the top of the hill. Klark looked back down the slope, much steeper than the last. Maybe throwing herself down the hull would be enough to induce blissful unconsciousness, this time.

“Behold, Ice Nation, the glory of Polis,”

Klark looked into the valley and saw a sea of golden light awash from corner to corner. Buildings and fires and all spreading out from the center - the famed tower of Polis. At the peak of the structure, a pyre the size of a small village blazed brightly.

A mountain unto itself, made of flame instead of ice.

Klark was warmed already.

“Heda!”

Leksa acknowledged the call of her sentry and stood at the foot of her throne. Supplications were finished for the day, so Leksa allowed herself some freedom to be casual.

“A scouting party from Ton D.C. requests an audience with the Commander.”

“Send them in.”

A typical Trikru scouting party came through the double doors, led by Anya led a typical Trikru scouting party through the double doors. The situation must be grave to pull the Clan Leader away from recovering Ton D.C. Leksa saw a row of prisoners suspended between them. The Trikru
warriors were distinguished by their shaggy brown armor and black ink tatoo. Anya’s steps were stilted and her dark eyes radiated fury. Anya had more cause than more to hate the Ice Nation.

Anya’s warriors kicked the prisoners to their knees, leveraging the tender skin of their necks at the edges of the blades. The six of them were brought forward and drop into a rough line, hands tightly bound and arms restricted. Excessive security measures for such a small raiding party. They must have said or done particularly offensive to Anya. Anya always bore the brutality of the raids with grim stoicism. Now, she was agitated.

Leksa took her time examining the raiders. Their furs were stained with fresh blood and white war paint, as much evidence of their crimes as Trikru history and the word of other raided clans. Anya bowed low.

Leksa gestured Anya to approach, both as Trikru Clan Leader, and Leksa’s fers, for the words would be different and equally valuable.

Anya was handed a heavy leather satchel, which she promptly overturned, dumping the contents in a shower of clanking metal. Daggers of varying size and design rained to the stone floor of Leksa receiving hall; enough to form a small pile. Metal blades forged in bizarre shapes with handles of unknown material. From jewel-encrusted to those carved from bone. Even more, were kinds of knives she’d never seen before. Surely, these were too many weapons for six warriors to reasonably carry.

Anya presented a serrated blade with a stained wooden handle to the Commander. Usually, objects are passed through Gustus in the chamber of state, but Anya was granted certain liberties. The knife was the length of Leksa’s hand, pieces carved away to create claw-like metal hooks. A brutal weapon meant to torture as much as kill. To pull a person’s insides out and give them view as they slowly succumbed to blood loss. More than one of Lekas warriors died on the edge of those knives. One boy survived three days with his entrails laid on his belly before Leksa ended his fight out of mercy.

Of the twelve clans, only Azgeda used serrated weapons.

“Heda, the Ice Nation sent this raiding party to attack Lowbranch and Ton D.C. They stole goods, burned homes, and slaughtered unarmed villagers, elders, and children among them. We seek the judgment of the Commander.”

The warriors behind Anya cheered and howled at the prospect of retribution. Trikru had more reason than most to hate the Ice Nation. They hoped Leksa would give them permission to kill the raiders themselves in return for surrendering them to the justice of the Commander. They wanted to avenge their dead with spilled blood.

jus drein jus daun.

It was their way.

“We have proof of their crimes.”

One of the warriors came forward and dropped a deer carcass at Leksa’s feet. The animal was half-stripped of meat and already rotting. A cloud of flies circled the beast’s head, as unpleasant as its lolling tongue and glassy, sightless eyes.

“You dare bring this filth before the Commander?”
Gustus was not referring to the carcass.

“Silence, Gustus.”

Leksa valued the opinion of her loyal protector, but not at the moment.

Leksa gestured for a sentry to remove the dead animal.

Leksa nodded for Anya’s warriors to remove the hoods. Leksa was presented with an arrangement of blood, sweat, and mud.

All six raiders bore the elaborate facial scars that distinguished them as blooded warriors amongst their people. Titus taught her the meaning of each symbol, to the best of his ability, but even his vast knowledge did not encompass the intricacies of Azgeda culture and their bizarre rituals. Leksa had not yet encountered an Azgeda wielding a weapon without the marks. The facial scarring was the easiest way to pick out the Ice Nation from among the other clans - beyond their heavy coats of patchwork fur and the stench of death that clung to them.

Something about these six seemed different than the raiders she had encountered before. Those men were dragged before her throne forcefully, fighting like caged animals. These Azgeda sat in their bonds without struggling, eyes downcast instead of defiant. Sober, as opposed to half-crazed and frothing at the mouth. Their heavy coats must have been sweltering in the humidity of the south, but they gave no indication of discomfort. Leksa was unaware such discipline existed in Azgeda. The one furthest was gagged, and he stared at Leksa with abject bate. Still, he was controlled. They were within reach of the Commander, yet none made to strike.

They appeared more civilized, but Leksa was not fooled. Appearances deceive, and none were more talented in deception than the spies of Azgeda. More than likely, this delegation was no different than their queen: impossible to reason with and corrupt to the core. Leksa watched Ton D.C. burn to cinders personally, years ago. She watched her people cut down in cold blood and dragged away to be made slaves. And now these raiders were brought before her, guilty of razing her home village to the ground, again. Raiders were not warriors. Raiders were indiscriminately violent, as quick to attack a child as a warrior wielding a weapon.

Leksa took the war party apart with her gaze.

Three women and three men. They were all of an age to the Commander, as were most of Leksa’s own warriors. Only Gustus and Indra survived long enough to be deemed *seda*. Warriors with living children grown, possessing the wisdom of a generation. A sound leader was open to the wise counsel of their elders. Gustus glared at the kneeling Ice Nation as though the malevolence of his stare could strike them dead. Indra stayed behind, rebuilding Ton D.C. in Anya’s absence.

Their faces were dirty. Their hair was unkempt and over-muddied as to be deliberate. Similar in look to the Azgeda border villages that utilized river mud to conceal themselves among the trees, unseen. The kind of raid striking only in the dead of night, slitting sleeping throats to prevent screams, killing all found in their path. They were rarely seen, slipping past the sentries and returning to the Ice Nation with their bounty long before their presence was noticed. Spies then, sloppily adopting the effect of their clansmen.

And maybe, a poor approximation of spies. Beneath the layer of dirt Leksa saw subtle distinctions of their class. The delicate weaving of small braids with strands of pounded gold. A braid woven from crown to tail in a single, intricate braid, the rest shorn. Stones carved smooth, holes bored for threading. Common Azgeda warriors did not care much for hair decoration. The Generals and the aristocracy, conversely, advertised their greater worth with braids and baubles. The men were
shaved smooth. Their boots were whole and well made, coats cut fit to shape. Faces plump and well-fed. Underneath the mud, they were surprisingly well-groomed, even for Ice Nation standards.

They were undoubtedly the Azgeda delegation.

Leksa must determine which among them was the Ambassador.

Information was the greatest weapon wielded in war. Leksa would unveil the Ambassador before they could reveal themselves in their own time. The raid was a ruse. A way to be brought into the capital with the maximum impact. They were likely pelted with rotten vegetables as they were lugged through the markets on the way to the Tower. A symbol of Leksa’s failure as much as Trikru’s victory. The Commander would have no need to subdue raiders if the practice were abolished.

And Leksa, for all her power, could not force them.

Azgeda was militant in all aspects of life. Power was seized only through physical strength and skill at arms, including the Ambassadorship. The elite in the Ice Nation trained night and day, all their lives, to kill. To be captured after a raid was a great shame. More than someone of an Ambassador’s status to tolerate.

These warriors must have allowed themselves to be caught and carried to the capital.

It was a subtle but destructive attack Nia had sent her.

Gossip in the Tower was good as war for destabilizing the Coalition.

The Commander would neutralize the raiders before Azgeda had a chance to kill any more of her people.

Leksa started with the raider that was gagged and bound tighter than the rest. He seemed tired from his fruitless frenzy and slouching in his bindings. He was too impulsive for the ambassador. Yet, schemes could be elaborate, from the behavior to the demonstrated character. A person could make themselves appear changed from what they truly were. Nia has had more than enough time to conspire against the Commander. No intelligence gleamed in his eyes, so Leksa dismissed him as a threat.

The Commander moved to the opposite end of the line, to a woman, long, thin, and straight as an arrow from head to toe. Her shoulders were tense in fear rather than frustration. Leksa passed her over.

The next was an angry girl, younger than the rest. She bit her lips bloody to keep words of hate from gushing forth. The carvings around her eyes were fresh, pinker than the gnarled white of scar tissue. Too low-ranking for an Ambassador. Nia would never send one so weak to represent her interests.

The second man was handsome in a sly, pointed way. He winked, which could have been a poor joke until he opened his mouth and began laving lathing his tongue against his teeth. Gustus took him to the ground, and he was decidedly not the Ambassador.

The last man was burly, nearly twice the girth of the other members of the delegation. He was noticeable in more ways than one. He had two crescent moons carved around his eyes from brow to cheek - like Nia. This man must be the infamous prince Roan of Azgeda, banished by his mother for treason. Yet, here he sat as part of the Ice Nation political delegation. Leksa looked down on
him, standing just far enough away to keep her shadow off his face. She needed to see his reaction.

“Is it common for raiders to bear the mark of royalty?”

None of them reacted to the question, though Roan took on a decidedly afflicted expression. He turned his face up and his eyes down like the habitually harassed. Leksa knew Nia accepted nothing less than perfection. Roan fell short of the mark. She would never imbue him with the power of the Ambassador. Leksa doubted she would even use Roan as a spy. Too obvious. Roan’s presence was something else, an unlikely story Leksa wanted to hear.

“All answer your Heda,” Gustus intoned.

Leksa held up a hand to settle her royal guard.

She invited the Ice Nation to Polis, after all.

The delegation had arrived, and it was time to welcome the Azgeda Ambassador to the summit of the Twelve Clans; five days overdue. Leksa figured they had not deigned to come down from their mountains. The Commander’s call never held much sway over Azgeda. The Queen was absolute as winter, though evidently growing restless, and looking to provoke Leksa into striking the first blow. Five years have passed since the last war between Trikru and Azgeda. Both clans still felt the hurt of countless lives lost on both sides of the border over the generations.

Except for Nia. The Ice Queen was bored. Leksa was awed by the way a single woman could lay such waste to all the clans. Could hold the world at her mercy.

The mountain took too much from the clans already - they should take no more from each other.

If Azgeda wanted war, they would need to kill the Commander first. No better person to strike the final blow than someone invited right past the guards.

The woman waiting for Leksa at the end of the line knelt lazily, as if she were comfortable.

The Commander raised the Ambassador’s head with two gentle fingers. In a single motion, Leksa was sent adrift on a sea of blue.

But not just blue; green, not enough green to be green but enough to make the brightest, most vivid blue. A color Lexa had never seen before, not on the ground, nor among her people and their many wondrous creations. She glowed, like a smooth river stone, polished and crystal clear.

She wore a fox’s smirk and Leksa knew she was standing in a trap. If she could extricate herself carefully, no harm would be done, and she would have the space to maneuver Azgeda into the Coalition. If not, her fight would be over. If Leksa killed the Ambassador before she struck, the Coalition would still be destabilized. Whether by self-defense or manipulated meant for the Commander to kill an ambassador that came into her halls under a peace sigil. Such an offense would warrant Nia raising her war standard, especially on the third blow. The Commander had indiscriminate authority and dissenters in equal plenty. Ice Nation allies already seeded unrest. Leksa could not allow the Ambassador to ferment conflict.

Everyone, man, woman, and child in the Ice Nation were made to fight. Leksa saw the ice queen’s army muster only once before, stretching to the horizon in a writhing sea of blue and white soon to be stained red.

This ill-fated plan must have been her idea, this Ambassador, with the satisfaction in those eyes.
She must believe Leksa ignorant to her scheming -

Unless she was amused by Leksa’s ditecticery.

Leksa broke her gaze away forcibly. The Commander’s eyes drifted down the Ambassador’s body, ending at the open front of her coat and the torn collar of her shirt; the undergarment ripped almost in half. Leksa was given an eyeful of much more than a handful of supple flesh.

Leksa looked away as quickly as possible, out of respect, but she saw enough to know that she wanted to see more. So many of her weaknesses represented in the sum of a single Ambassador from Azgeda.

Leksa needed to control herself. This Azgeda scum sought to both overthrow the Commander and make a fool of her, not necessarily in that order. Nia has been pushing Lexa closer and closer to war for some time now. Leksa did not build the Coalition to create an army. At least, not an army she wanted to use against the other clans. The Ice Nation must join the Coalition or Nia would force them into a war. The other clans were losing their nerve in the face of Nia’s opposition. The alliance was in jeopardy so long as Nia refused to submit to Leksa’s command.

The future of Leksa’s Coalition rested on the quality of the Azgeda Ambassador, a wild woman covered in filth and squatting on the floor like it was her own washroom. A shameless woman with a lustful gaze and a sinful form - a woman who seemed to think she was winning.

If Leksa could not make Azgeda bend the knee, the Clans would lose faith in the Coalition, and Leksa would lose her head. Leksa would be damned if she was outsmarted by this arrogant example of a woman.

While Leksa looked away, the Ambassador stared on, and she felt the force of the Ambassador’s gaze on her skin. Undressing Leksa with her eyes was likely part of her mission. Nia knew better than any other, Leksa’s weakness for a pretty face and a sharp mind, a soft body and the finest breasts Leksa had the privilege to glimpse.

The Ambassador’s mouth turned up at the corners. She may be finely carved from the ice of the north, but her eyes burned like the heart of the hottest fires.

Searching the Commander for vulnerabilities, undoubtedly.

This Ambassador-spy was positively relaxed. She radiated a calm bright enough to be an approximation of happiness. She looked at Leksa with all the satisfaction of a barn cat in winter.

Uncertainty of her own plan began to threaten.

“Leave us,” Leksa commanded, “take them to the cells.”

Trikru moved to obey her orders and started pulling the raiders to their feet and out of the room.

“Not her,” Leksa said when they came to take the Ambassador.

Gustus only argued a little more than usual before going to wait outside the door.

Leksa met those eyes again, admiring the glint-like icicles in the sun - just as sharp and twice as dangerous.

She could not afford to lose this gamble.
Leksa walked a slow circle around the Ambassador and considered her next move.

Anya taught her long ago that any enemy was most vulnerable when they thought they were safe and in control. Anya taught her to let go of the veneer of safety a village represented, and forget the fantasy of influencing the whole of the clans towards peace. Her fers taught that power was ever shifting, and winds of war could change direction in the space of a word. Anya never thought well of the Coalition, of demanding any clan, especially the Ice Nation, to go against their nature. Anya was wise, but she was not right about everything.

Leksa paused. She lingered at the Ambassador’s back, ideally, making her uncomfortable and uncertain of her fate.

The battle was never lost if the enemy did not know Leksa’s mind.

Leksa slid Anya’s knife from her belt, a gift from before Leksa was called, and considered the familiar weapon. The fat triangular blade was much different from Azgeda’s serrated edges. Diametrically opposed. If only it was as easy to cut the ties of hatred between Trikru and Azgeda as it was to cut the rope binding the Ambassador.

The Ambassador immediately came to her feet in a swift, silent motion, their faces too close, breathing the same air. They went still together.

Leksa took a measured step back.

“Your name, Ambassador?”

“Oh, you are a smart one, Heda Leksa.”

Leksa let the silence address her insolence.

“Klark kom Azgeda, Commander,” she hummed like someone admiring a patch of flowers, “Ambassador to ai haiplana Nai, known among your people as the Ice Queen of Azgeda.”

“Welcome to Polis, Ambassador Klark,” Leksa held out her arm in the traditional hand-clasp, “if it was not quite the welcome you expected.”

“You are gracious and kind, Commander,” Klark said earnestly, her fingers firm and surprisingly warm around Leksa’s forearm, “if a little paranoid.”

Gracious and kind were not words Leksa would have associated with her rule. Paranoia was not a product of a sound mind. Klark’s words were a profound insult to any person presuming to lead their people with strength. Klark sought to find weakness in Leksa’s heart. Somehow, Leksa is more curious than angry. Klark’s belligerent cheerfulness was strangely disarming and not unpleasant, her smile was hungry and her searching eyes enthralled, utterly fascinated with the cartography of Leksa’s face. Klark licked her lips in a protracted manner, as if savoring a particularly delicious flavor.

Regardless, Leksa knew better than to be provoked - or seduced -

Klark would have to work much harder than that to subdue the Commander.

Leksa turned away from her new guest and ascended the stairs, stopping just shy of the throne. The Commander retook control of the conversation.

“You chose an odd way to arrive at a diplomatic summit, Ambassador Klark.”
“I’ve never been to Polis,” Klark embellished, “I wanted to take the scenic route.”

“Did you imagine this farce would make me less likely to kill you?”

Klark’s face did not twist but her eyes widened, briefly cooling with something inexplicable.

“I simply hope you won’t summon a slave to toss me off your balcony.”

Ah. The last ambassador of the Ice Nation did fall to his death from the Commander’s balcony.

But the dead fool and Klark were different, in that the previous Ambassador to Azgeda questioned her decisions. Klark was merely poking for a sore spot.

Only the Ice Nation kept slaves.

“He was kicked, and I would throw you over myself.”

“I’d prefer you kill me more intimately,” Klark purred. She twirled on one heel and began wandering the room, all languidly swaying hips and light sweeping fingertips. “But you won’t kill me, because if you do, Nia definitely won’t join your coalition. With two Ambassadors dead, you seem increasingly unstable, Commander. Add another dead Azgeda noble, and even Floukru won’t object when the Ice Army marches south.”

“Nia has already refused my invitation to join the Coalition of the Twelve Clans,” Lexa stressed, I doubt your life has any bearing on the matter.”

Klark paused, and turned. Their eyes met and held. Lexa wanted to step closer to Klark, but she should not. She should stop Klark from wandering her receiving hall, but she could not.

“Can you really call it the ‘Coalition of the Twelve Clans’ if only eleven clans have taken your mark?”

“Rebranding is never fruitful,” Lexa said, slightly strained for having tolerated similar whispers from other Ambassadors, despite knowing full well that she would see all twelve clans firmly tied to the Coalition before her death. The clans were getting restless.

Death or Peace.

Either way, the sooner the better.

“Azgeda will join the coalition,” Lexa intoned, so sure was she it seemed her voice itself could bend reality to her will.

The Commander descended the steps, each motion bringing her closer to her goal. They met at the bottom of the stairs. Klark bowed her head, more serpentine charm than true deference. She took a step forward as she glanced aside, intent on catching the Commander’s eye, again. They were of a height - equals - when standing on even ground.

“You seem so certain of Azgeda’s choice, Commander,” it was a statement, but Klark’s eyes held a question. This conversation was more than just a conversation. Lexa would likely spend the night rolling the subtext of Klark’s words around her mind, searching for the hidden meaning.

“What choice,” Lexa stepped into Klark’s meandering path to blocked her way, “the eleven clans currently united under my rule have an army to more than match the Ice Army’s elite fighters,” Lexa spat venomously, having seen children smeared in red-streaked Azgeda warpaint, faces
freshly carved, screaming as they charged her vanguard, “in the shadow of the mountain, you are
running out of villages to raid, even within your own territory.”

Klark nodded absently as if accepting Leksa’s grim view of her clan with no disgrace. Klark turned
on her heel again and resumed her stroll around the circumference of Leksa’s chamber of state,
observing with an intensity out of place in an empty hall, lacking an audience. Her fingers seemed
to linger on every surface, probably looking for stashed weapons or concealed exits.

Klark stilled before Leksaa’s altar and held a hand over one of the candles erected along the
wrought metal. Leksa watched the small flame lick at Klark’s skin, black smoke slithering between
her fingers. Not a flinch or a tremble to signal the moment when her skin began to melt.

Leksa took a step forward before she could think better of it.

Klark pulled her hand back and turned to meet Leksa’s furrowed gaze. Her steps drew her closer to
the Commander. The candlelight turned Klark’s hair to fire, a burning torch in a snowstorm. Klark
passed the Commander to ascend the stairs. The edges of their coats barely brush on the path.

“Have you ever been to the North, Commander?”

“No, I have not had the pleasure,” Leksa went with the change of topic, her rebuttal becoming more
of a joke than a slight. Leksa was not sure of how that happened. Her humor had a tendency to be
thin on the ground.

Klark’s wandering led her out onto Leksa’s infamous balcony. After a few moments of indecision,
Leksa followed. Leksa and Klark stood side by side, watching the moonlight turn the trees to
silver. A thousand golden fires burned around the tower, stretching down into the lower town.

“Azgeda is a large country,” Klark mused, as if speaking to herself alone, “based on land alone it is
larger than the rest of the clan territories combined. Most of the land is ice and snow, yes, but do
you know what happens to ice and snow, Commander?”

Leksa’s brows reacted, a silent urging for Klark to continue.

“It melts,” Klark whispered, soft as the first spring sun, “more and more each season, and under all
that hard and cold is ground. Lots, and lots, of ground. Half of Azgeda is habitable at the moment.
When the other half melts, that’s enough arable land to double, if not triple the population. An
army to make the Coalition piss themselves in fear.”

“You prefer to wait for the ice to melt, for children to grow into warriors, as opposed to joining the
Coalition with only the restrictions of a ceasefire and the sovereignty of clan-held land. The
Coalition creates a place where we decide what is in the best interests of all our people, together.
You could have a seat among them, and define our future for all generations to come,” Leksa
aimed for reason and landed closer to desperation, “all of this forsaken for the vain greed of a cruel
queen?”

“It is an imperfect plan,” Klark admitted, her lips pursed gently.

They lapsed into a charged silence, looking out at the stars to avoid facing each other.

“Klark?”

“Yes, Heda?”

“What do you mean when you say the ice is melting more and more each year?”
“We will speak again tomorrow, Leksa.”

The statement sounded like a command, but Leksa already planned to call on Klark tomorrow. Still, it irritated Leksa that Klark would reap the reward of the last word, a momentary advantage. Leksa would out-maneuver Klark eventually. Klark was insolent and offensive but she was clearly possessed of a keen mind and a willingness to spar on the virtue of morality. This woman was Leksa’s best opportunity to bring Azgeda into the fold without resorting to force. Maybe even bypass Nia entirely.

Leksa signaled for the guards to lead Ambassador Klark to her new accommodations; chambers befitting an Ambassador of the Twelve Clans.

A sardonic chuckle, enhanced by the high ceiling, heralded Klark’s exit.

In the first real battle political between the Commander of the Twelve Clans and Klark kom Azgeda, Leksa had the distinct impression that she had lost.

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Anya found Leksa later that night, pacing the ground of her receiving hall. Gustus lurked over the Commander’s shoulder, the man her grim melancholy made manifest.

“Tell me what you know of the Ambassador,” Leksa quipped.

“The bitch with the knives,” Anya said, “she killed thirteen warriors.”

It was an average number for a raid, and far more remarkable that Klark killed only warriors. Unusual for an Azgeda warrior half-mad with bloodlust, seeking to cause pain and take pleasure in equal measure. Leksa would remember Klark’s mercy. Everything she knew about Klark would inform on her evaluation of the Ambassador’s character, and by extension, and her vulnerability to Leksa’s ideals.

“Every knife belongs to her?”

“Nearly the entire sack,” Anya said, to Gustus’ surprise, “she was cleaning a handful when we found them and I took the rest off her myself.”

“The weight alone,” Gustus trailed off, “there is no reason for such excess.”

Leksa lapsed into a troubled silence. Anya could sense the conflict in the Commander. Gustus was deep into pondering the severity of the threat facing his Heda.

“What’s wrong?”

Leksa said nothing. Voicing her concerns would be tantamount to calling them forth.

“They are separated, chained to the heaviest things we can find, and under constant guard,” Anya reasoned, “Azgeda is no threat to us.”

“Azgeda is the greatest threat to us,” Leksa bit out, frustrated by her ignorance of the machinations at play.

If Klark was so prolific a killer as to warrant a hundred blades, Leksa was in more danger than estimated. There was something about Klark. A latent potential, coiled energy, waiting only for the right pressure to unleash her full potential. The knowing in Klark’s eyes and the slant of her smile
set Leksa on edge, to be against someone that considered themselves the smartest person in the room. So confident in her control as to make the opposition begin to doubt. Giving off the sense that everyone around Klark was walking into her trap, willingly, to be triggered at her discretion.

“What will you do?”

“The summit must continue. Five days remain, and Klark will wait until the last day of the summit to declare Nia’s choice,” Leksa with the confidence of one who would do the same in Klark’s position

“Choice?” Anya said dubiously, “Nia will reject the Coalition, and you know it.”

‘Gustus chose his moment to chime in.

“Any chance to provoke war, Heda, “to turn the clans against the Commander,”

A chilly look silenced their sermonizing. The three of them have had this conversation many times before. A cyclical description of the Commander's many enemies and their limitless motives, potential attacks, and possible targets. It always ended with Leksa death; the call for a champion to rise up and kill the Commander. The only formal way to unseat was solo gonplei until Leksa became Commander at the age of twelve, as used her legal power to act out her rage against tyranny.

No Heda No Mo

Nia had plans to influence the clans against Leksa, and Leksa gave her the room she needed to do it. The clans could put aside formality for power. One Heda was deposed by the rage of five clans acting together, in a time when war was constant and sleeping in your village was like sleeping on the front line. Sheidheda was too powerful to be defeated by any one person. Ultimately, more than two hundred people stabbed him, and he still did not die for nearly a fortnight. Titus told Leksa the story in his grave, gentle tone, his eyes warning her to turn away from the dark shadow in the corner of her eye. To ignore the voice that sometimes whispered in Leksa’s dreams when she was vulnerable or enraged or hopeless.

Leksa refused to be held of kind to Sheidheda.

Yet, she could not ignore the possibility that she may not survive her attempt to foster peace amongst the twelve clans. To call for an end to bloodshed and violence is to change a way of life. It was easier to kill the Commander than learn a new way to live. The clans were only swayed to the Coalition by respect for the Commander and the idea of punishments meted out to any individual person that violated the treaty of the Coalition, to be administered by their clan leader.

“You called her Klark.”

Leksa looked at Anya, acknowledging the question. Silence lingered, but it was friendly.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Anya insisted, stepping close to Leksa’s side, as she had when she wanted to teach her seken a hard lesson.

“You have no idea what I’m thinking,” Leksa said, with finality.

“Don’t I?”

“Leave us,” Leksa said to Gustus. He left without comment to take up post outside the doors.
Leksa went to her throne, if only for a place to sit. She looked to the middle distance in the direction of her great candelabra, briefly comforted by the many small billows of flame that danced in the slight breeze from her balcony.

“I saw the way you looked at Klark.”

Leksa was looking at Anya now. She put a cool hand over Leksa’s, limp against the armrest. Anya’s face was sad and sympathetic, but also foreboding.

“And, I saw the way you looked at Costia.”

Leksa rose from her throne and took herself away, leaving Anya and her words behind.

Gustus and one of her usual tower guards opened the doors in advance of Leksa’s departure. The Commander walked the short distance from the receiving hall to her personal chambers. Passing guards bowed with murmurs of heda. Leksa retreated to her chamber and left Gustus outside. She saw his shadow settle in for an overnight watch he would have decided to stake given their new diplomatic guests.

Leksa stripped off the clothes and concerns of the day and lay across her bed, spread. She focused on every muscle loosening against the soft furs and plush cotton. She meant to relax and ended up running through every conversation involving Azgeda from the start of the summit. The plan of masquerading as raiders could not be Nia’s only objective. Leksa thought back to the opening days of the summit, when the clan leaders came together to share the most important news of the year. Most described wars and raids, who did the killing and who died. Five clans were raided by Azgeda before the time of the summit.

Every clan that shared a border with Azgeda

Lake People dealt with a small fleet of ships off the northern coast. The canoes were thin and close to the water, difficult to hit. Each held four well-trained warriors capable of capsizing Lake People boats with a good push.

Rock Line got waylaid in the mountain pass that guarded their northern border. The same pass which they themselves have, and do, utilize for ambushing and robbing countless warriors, travelers, and village folk that chose to walk that path. A battalion of warriors was defeated, the Clan Leader among them. All were stripped of their possessions and left to walk naked and barefooted back to their village.

Bluecliff never expected invaders to scale the cliff for the sheer smoothness of the rock and the height of the drop. The cliff was exposed when Nia sent her climbers. Incredibly strong and fearless men and women than scaled icescrapers to spile for clear ice to sculpt. Many died before Bluecliff could mount a defense against the very place of retreat they sought when the battle was lost. Azgeda managed to steal two of the Clan Leader’s prized mountain goats.

Sankru was rarely raided for lacking most generally sought after resources, and for being devoid of all else but sand and dust. Sankru was saved from starvation by the long coastline that constituted the whole of their eastern border. There was nothing to raid, so Nia sent her assassins. Killers released into the dust for no purpose beyond ending as many lives as possible. The Clan Leader still does not have a full account of the dead. They have received word of no survivors from a least two of border villages.

The Ice Queen was probing, looking for weaknesses in the lands around her, the lands she would need to claim entirely if she intended to maintain control over the Coalition in the long term. She
was testing response times and defenses and morale and battle strategy, and learning better how to destroy them all the while. And none died. A calculated move, to get the information she needed while keeping the Ambassadors as agreeable and unaware as possible.

Except for Bluecliff and Sankru, the two clans, other than Trikru, that publicly voted against allowing Azgeda into the Coalition when the motion was first introduced before the assembly.

The groundwork laid in preparation for Klark’s arrival to Polis. The Ambassador was the killing blow, here to act out Nia’s last rejection of the Coalition, which would either trigger war or spark a challenger for the throne. Nia would instigate an all-clan war after she took the power of the coalition. Nia would not settle for assuming a bond seared into flesh. She did not want to unite the clans. She wanted to assimilate them. Nia’s vision of the future saw only one clan: Azgeda.

Leksa was beginning to see the moving parts of Nia’s plots and the strings that connected them in her vast web of evil intent.

Klark was the final piece of Nia’s endgame

When she finally surrendered to sleep, Leksa remembered Titus’ most important lesson.

*To be Commander, is to be alone.*

Chapter End Notes

Klark and Leksa have met and everything they say to each other comes off to me as a form of flirtation? The pieces are in place and the calm before the storm is about to set in.

Editing this thing was a bitch but I still had a lot of fun writing it. The word count is pretty damn close to a perfect 50/50 split between the two POV. It was an accident but now it feels like a challenge.

I used the same adjectives and verbiage in a few situations for both Clarke and Lexa in an attempt to convey a similarity of mind between them; two women that want the same thing and go about getting it in much the same way.
The Traitor's Gambit

Chapter Summary

Klark spends her first night in the Tower processing her introduction to the Commander.

Enjoy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Klark left the Commander and Leksa faded from view, Klark wanted to return. She longed to bask in Leksa’s glow as to the warmth of a fire in the cold dark of night.

Klark was overwhelmed.

Leksa sought to shatter the very foundation of Klark’s worldview and turn her to the way of good and true.

Klark just might let her.

She grew damp under the Commander’s chilling glare, even as she was disquieted by the gentleness of Leksa’s spirit. Her ire was pure as a hurricane

Her head was spinning and her goals seemed further out of reach than ever before.

Klark did not foresee this particular turn of events.

Polis was meant to be a mission like any other. A task she needed to be performed under the guise of obedience to the Ice Queen. Playing Nia off the Commander was a risky move, but Klark knew only risk delivered reward. Klark heard the stories of the Commander and decided death was worth the effort to win her allegiance. The Ambassadorship was the only way to get an audience with the Commander under Nia’s nose.

Polis was unpredictable. Klark was able to act as far as setting the meeting and the stakes. Everything after the raids was improvisation.

Klark came to Polis with a handful of objectives and no foreseeable way to execute her plan. A couple of pawns but no way to actively use them. The vast resources she depended on to execute her missions were stripped to the barest tools.

It was familiar suffering. Klark remembered her initiation to Nia’s royal guard, the remnant shiver of old bitter chill longed seeped into her bones, flaring up in moments of crisis. A piece of Klark would always be the girl left in the mountains with nothing but a knife, a piece of flint, and a length of rope. Her only objective to survive by any means necessary. Staking her worth on her skills to earn the faith of cruel master. Here, with Leksa, she prostrated herself for another unpredictable personality.

Klark’s plan hinged on the substance of the Commander’s mind, the strength of her heart, and the
content of her character.

Klark was prepared to be disappointed.

Leksa kom Trikru exceeded all expectations, towering impossibly higher than her monumental reputation and her cylindrical stone tower.

The Commander was hard to read. It was a frustrating quality for Klark as an experienced spy assassin. She was accustomed to learning the whole of a target, their deepest secrets, in the span of a night. Enough to destroy them before dawn. Klark’s cons were pragmatic, meticulously planned, and flawlessly executed. She planned down to every foreseeable contingency she could imagine, from every perspective. It was easy to predict the behavior of a person when you know how they live. How they were raised.

The Ambassadorship to Polis was different. So many unknown factors and moving parts that Klark was unable to create anything more than a loose framework and a tentative timetable.

The Commander first and foremost. Trikru emphasized morality but power had a way of changing people. Usually not for the better.

At first glimpse, Leksa seemed to be an exception. Klark did not live this long by doubting her instincts.

The time was coming when Klark needed to choose a side and Leksa made a tantalizing option.

Klark turned to the window, the visual of Leksa burned into her memory so deeply as to see the whole of Leksa’s shape projected in her mind’s eye, as if she was back in the presence of the Commander, silhouetted in the dying sunset light. They measured eye to eye, a perfect match in height.

Leksa had the potential to be Klark’s equal in all things.

Klark wandered her unnecessarily opulent room, extinguishing many candles as she went. She needed absolute darkness to sleep, though. Klark held no hope for it after her fruitful conversation with Leksa kom Trikru, the Heda that dreamed of world peace.

Klark lay in the soft, stuffed mattress and felt the hardwood and furs of her pallet at Troy. Restless, she rolled to her feet and punched at shadows, running through her forms until her arms were nothing but dead weight. Still, Klark paced the room, her body as restless as her mind. Klark was eager for her next brush with Leksa, as good as a salivating hound.

Klark’s thoughts were cycling.

Leksa was not what Klark expected.

Klark had a serious problem.

The Commander.

The way Leksa said her name, Klark.

The sound of the sharp consonants rolling along Leksa’s tongue and inside her mouth. The way her lips and jaw moved, accent unaccustomed to the brisk way Klark was called, just as her mother heard it from the hooves of alpine mountain goats. Leksa drew out the sounds to understand them as she gave Klark’s name a new context.
Leksa commanded the very air around her, standing as she did, straight and proud in the sunset light, unmoved before obstacle or obstinance. Supple and swaying as a predator primed to bring down a kill. She was dignity and authority and poise and Klark was utterly bewitched. Klark wanted nothing but to cast aside her plan and reveal the truth of her mission to Leksa. To throw herself on the Commander’s mercy and hope that Leksa would see the sincerity in her eyes, the truth in her words. It was a foolish and irrational desire, born of emotion rather than reason.

Nia was right to fear the Commander.

She was the kind of leader who drew warriors to her cause, no matter how doomed or foolhardy, with no more than a few words and a furious war call. Leksa possessed the inner strength to dominate her subordinates without resorting to violence. The mercy to accept her enemies under a peace banner despite their crimes. The cleverness to maneuver her pieces into place of their own volition, with her will rather than coercion or force. To have so much power and such certainty in wielding it.

Nia was moral as a hurricane - empty but for the force of her gale.

Leksa was unrelenting as waves pounding the shore to sand.

Klark knew Leksa to be ruthless and formidable, and she found a woman she was not expecting. Rumors tended towards Leksa’s influence over the shape of her body. Not a word leaving Polis bore the majesty of her face.

Her flowing hair, a crown of braids.

Regal beauty like only the finest forged swords.

Those eyes, bright and clear, piercing as a silk arrow.

The lethal stillness of a floating glacier.

Mind and talons of an eagle, keen, sharp, and decisive.

Kneeling in Leksa’s throne room, Klark kept her eyes down to avoid drawing Leksa’s attention. The most certain route to giving herself away was for Leksa to feel the weight of Klark’s gaze on the back of her neck. In Klark’s ideal situation, Murphy or Roan would be assumed ambassador and Klark would be brought to the cells with the rest. Klark worked best underneath scrutiny. Underestimation would have been her ace in the hole. It would not take much to break out intermittently for small tasks and return before Leksa’s aged warriors noticed her absence. This was the most likely scenario.

Instead, Leksa pulled Klark out of the lineup, sure as the night and twice as cold. Klark saw no hint of self-satisfaction in her at her deductive reasoning. Leksa saw right through Klark, unintimidated and firm, and refused to follow Klark’s lead or any of her teasing attempts at conversation. Leksa never wavered. She rose to meet Klark hit for hit and never once took a blow. Leksa’s pride was utterly unflappable.

Leksa was calm and centered, in full control of herself and her emotions. She was grounded, in body and mind. Down to earth. In the Ice Nation, one such as Lexa would be known as a good icepick - the thing you want between you and the sheer ice shelf through a long, perilous ascent.

Nia was outclassed by the Commander in every regard. Nia and her warlords were as different in their proclivities as they were identical in their natures. Brash, impulsive, and fervent in all the wrong ways. Coldblooded killers that took joy in fear and delight in pain. Leksa’s contempt for
Klarkd demonstrated her fierce love for living things.

Leksa wanted the Coalition, not for power, but for peace. No tyrant was willing to hold their decisions up to the debate of their subordinates - no warlord formed alliances with those weaker than themselves for the benefit of the powerless. Leksa was prepared to sacrifice unilateral power for peace among the clans without compromising her dignity. The Commander was frustrated with Klark for not enabling her tumble from the top of the food chain.

The idea of willing surrendering authority, and therefore safety, was so foreign to Klark as to be laughable, if not for the gravity of Leksa’s words.

The certainty of her convictions.

Most importantly, the warriors and politicians of the Twelve Clans that opposed her politics respected her power in spite of her Coalition. Few have seen her fight since her Conclave, yet no doubt was cast on her ability, for not a warrior among the Twelve Clans possessed the courage to challenge her openly for the title of Commander. They criticized her choices but refrained from slandering her name or questioning her decisions. Other than Azgeda, of course.

A few moments in her presence and Klark saw the wisdom in submitting to Leksa’s command.

Sleep continued to evade Klark that night as an ermine darting through the snow, fleeing from the warrior that would kill it, skin it alive, gut it, cook it over the spit, and eat it down to the bones, sucking succulent marrow. The warriors sparred to First Blood for the organs. The splendid ermine skin would become half the right arm of a coat or another glove set for Nia.

Klark carried herself around her room, the movement of her legs would stimulating the creativity of her mind. She thought best in the earliest hours when Nia’s soldiers were at their leisure and Klark could wander Troy relatively unmolested.

Here, in Polis, Leksa’s vital presence made Klark’s next tactics seem - cruel. Certain lengths that seemed so reasonable yesterday were suddenly inadvisable in the face of Leksa’s repulsion. Klark hungered, for all that she had given up pleasing people long ago. Klark was willing to be harsh, but she refused to escalate from unnecessary brutality to outright cruelty. If Klark allowed herself to be fully corrupted, nothing left of her true self would remain to claim her prize; the reward for her years of effort, sacrifice, and suffering. The only lessons Nia was capable of teaching her. Klark would reap the reward of her labor, even if she had to cut the Coalition off at the knees.

The Coalition could be like any other bid for greater influence. It was Leksa that was different. She did not lack temper, but she kept her anger on a tight rein, even as an inferno burned in the forest of her eyes. Her intense gaze spoke volumes, but her emotions did not control her. Her whims did not rule her.

The Commander was the only rule.

Leksa’s power and mercy were burning beacons through the white-out blizzard of Klark’s mind.

Klark wanted Lexa in a way that was wildly inappropriate and entirely inconvenient.

Leksa wanted Klark. She had a sense for these things, and Leksa had a half-mast stare fit for nowhere but the bedroom when she turned her face to Klark. She was curious about Klark and wanted to know more despite her better judgment. Klark saw attraction in her weighted stare. Her body language was vivid, angled toward Klark with interest as much as vigilance.

Klark would bet her life that Leksa was deeply passionate under her stoic mask. The intensity of
her stare promised a thrilling courtship. Klark would beg for the chance to open the Commander like a flower.

The Commander summoned Klark before the dawn came.

Two burly warriors stormed Klark’s chambers without preamble and cuffed Klark behind her back. They grasped her biceps with hands large enough to crush a melon. Klark did not resist as they nearly carried her to the Commander’s audience chamber. Klark’s feet brushed the floor only enough to feel unbalanced whenever she tried to take a step.

The Commander’s double glass doors were opened from within and Klark was unceremoniously dumped at the foot of the stone steps before the throne. Klark had no time to compensate for gravity, nothing to do but tip over and wait for her face to break against the stone -

A boot collided with Klark’s shoulder, bringing an abrupt halt her descent and pushing her to her knees at the same time. The leg’s owner leaned forward, elbow propped on a knee, hand dangling languidly in the air. Leksa kom Trikru looked down on Klark with an expression of mild amusement. Her pelvis was turned and open towards Klark, close enough to touch with tooth or claw. The Commander had exposed herself with her little rescue. Leksa left the vulnerable vein of her inner thigh resting right next to Klark’s face, a blatant invitation for Klark to take a stab, or rather a bite, at ending the Commander.

Klark eyed the Commander’s leg and seriously considered taking out a chunk of precious artery and vein.

Leksa hovered in her lean, staring into Klark’s eyes, intimately close. Waiting patiently for Klark to make her decision. Daring Klark to parry the Commander’s daring thrust. Leksa was returning Klark’s declarative first move and calling her bluff in one move. Her green eyes burned with something warm, something like desire - like joy. Her lush mouth curved into a small smirk of satisfaction to have presented Klark with an unwinnable scenario. If she wanted to live, Klark needed to pass up an opportunity to kill the Commander, and in doing so, she surrendered the high ground in their next verbal spar. Klark was prepared to fight at a disadvantage

So many angles, Leksa possessed.

Saving Klark from painful landing to see what the mercy would purchase in Klark’s regard. Offering Klark a view of her defenses and presenting an opportunity to gage Klark’s level of devotion to her cause, to see if Klark was willing to die for Nia’s vendetta. She taunted Klark with her vulnerable inner thigh to see what Klark would do with such an obvious opening.

Klark stared right back, motionless and aloof. They were, neither of them, the type to take the bate.

The Commander released Klark, stepping away as she gestured to her burly royal guard. Surprisingly, he removed Klark’s shackles and gave her room to stand.

Around them, three Flamekeipas went about snuffing candles in some intricate pattern of turns and diagonals. As the fires extinguished, the image made by the assortment of lit candles remaining lit was one Klark eventually recognized as the symbol of the Commander. The final looping flames were extinguished in perfect time with the rising dawn. The bright blaze of pink light cast on the edge of the horizon faded into pale yellow, into blue. Klark wondered if the Flamekeipas enacted this little ritual every morning. It seemed excessive, even in love of the Commander.

“Ambassador Klark,” Leksa said in a tone unfamiliar to Klark’s ears, “will you join me this morning?”
Leksa’s authority was palpable. Klark acquiesced to Leksa’s request, mostly because the request was a formality and Klark did not have a choice. It was a rebuttal to last night’s te et te if a bit unsophisticated. Leksa’s opening salvo.

“You don’t plan to kill me this morning,” Klark mused aloud, genuinely surprised by Leksa’s choice. Klark would have chosen differently, in Leksa’s position.

“Not this morning in particular, but now that you ask --

Leksa held out a hand, and her man placed a woefully familiar sack in her grasp. It was the wheat satchel Anya used to collect Klark’s weapons. All of her knives, athame, and spearpoints, straight backs and sheep foot, daggers of every size and shape. Each the reap of a raid, kill and plunder. Klark did not know where her shortsword was. Leksa dropped the sack at Klark’s feet, the sound of colliding metal sweet and sure, a further temptation. Klark felt less than compelled.

“So many weapons,” Leksa observed idly, “what is it you fear so deeply, Klark?”

A bold choice of words.

“A quick death,” Klark replied. If she was sure of anything, it was her fears.

The Commander seemed to ponder that response as her man scooped up the sack of Klark’s weapons and whisked them away somewhere, again. If Leksa paraded them before Klark again, Klark could not guarantee her restraint. She would only get so many opportunities. Leksa’s royal guard left with the weapons like an honor guard. Their absence left the two of them alone in Leksa’s audience chamber.

Klark could not have planned it better.

“Come with me, Ambassador.”

Leksa went to the balcony and Klark eagerly followed.

Klark paused at the threshold. Concrete beams framed the Commander’s silhouette against a painted dawn sky. Another image added to the kaleidoscope of changing color that followed the Commander in Klark’s mind, living shades of red pale enough to be a woman’s ass under a stiff hand, purple more vivid than any found in bruise or root, the blue sky more stunning than any sky Klark had ever seen.

The sunrise in Azgeda was always grey.

Klark walked slowly to Leksa’s side and gave the Commander her full attention.

Leksa did not grace Klark with a glance as she spoke.

“Melting ice,” Leksa remarked, “less and less each year?”

Evidently, the Commander did not engage in idle conversation. The thought tugged at the corner of Klark’s mouth.

“Yes, Heda,” Klark husked, “the seasons change slowly in Azgeda. Bone-chilling cold brings snows unending, and then, for three moons, the sky clears and the sun becomes hot,” Klark said, her words unable to convey how the sun sizzles exposed skin like cooking meat, reflecting off the snow and burning faces to blisters. When life and death depended on whether one stood in the shade or the sun. When a breeze on a clear day was cold enough to cut.
“So hot, Commander. It melts our miles and miles of frozen wasteland into puddles of mud and swamp that can swallow a horseback warrior whole in an instant.”

Leksa watched attentively, enraptured. Klark drew Leksa into her world, describing the way she watched the seasons change over the years of her life, the melting season stretching longer as time passed.

“So hot that the freeze is melting away to quickly. So hot, the melted ice vanishes into the air instead of becoming new ice when the snows return. The glaciers of our mountain were straight but jagged when I was a girl. Pale mountains towering tall enough to disappear far beyond cloud cover. When I left Troy, the mountain was smooth and a handful of ice climbers had ascended to the peak and returned to tell of the peak, a feat that once meant certain death if your friends could not laugh you out of the foolish quest.”

Leksa’s brow furrowed. She turned her back on Klark and walked over to the edge of the balcony still had a carved stone railing. Klark would have no more trouble pushing her over the railing than the open space beyond the wide window. Nia would celebrate and bestow Klark with another blood-soaked title. Klark’s Queen was vicious and gleeful.

If this conversation bore fruit, Klark would have a new Commander.

“You know nothing to explain it,” Leksa asked, turning back to Klark and walking a short line to the Ambassador.

Klark watched every movement, every minute detail of the way Leksa handled her body, held her arms and moved her legs. Klark fixated on every tense thigh muscle, the subtle gravity of her hips. Her low shoulders, relaxed arms, upright head. Leksa was more relaxed than Klark had ever seen her, devoid of mantle other than her medallion. Her presence remains that of the painted warlord seated on a throne, taking court with the whole of the clans, at ease with the world surrendered under her rule.

The vast majority of the world, at least.

The concern that shadowed her expression was a macrocosm of existence. The greatest worry to Leksa was the greatest threat facing her people at any given time. At the moment, Klark met those qualifications.

“Nia’s butchers, her so-called scientists, can conceive of no explanation, for the sole reason that they refuse to acknowledge the difference. The Earth around them changes before their very eyes and they say nothing. Do nothing.”

“You think this disappearing ice is a threat to Azgeda?”

“The heat, the melting, is not natural Commander,” Klark whispered, “I can feel something in the air. A disturbance. It is like a pressure in my ears, a pain in my head. My mother taught me to read the land as she did a human body. She said that to know the ways of the land - the sky - the sea and the animals is the only way to understand the purpose of all living things. The ultimate nature of nature itself,” Klark trailed off, losing Leksa’s attention in favor of suspicion.

Klark memorized every word of her mother’s meticulous medicinal journals and she may have absorbed some of her teachings too deeply. Some of her words were considered blasphemous to Azgeda, to Nia. And maybe now to Leksa as well.

“She was a healer, Heda,” Klark tried to explain, “she used plants and herbal remedies to save
children from fevers and warriors from battle wounds. I have kept her garden but,” Klark trailed off for lack of words.

For all she was Klark’s mother, she was equally a healer.

“Klark?”

A healer that helped people - innocents and killers alike.

“The plants are dying Commander,” Klark confided in Leksa, hoping for her belief, “plants that survived Praimfaya, the harshest winters of the tundra, and many seasons under my clumsy care,” Klark breathed, “and now they die.”

“The garden was barren when I left Azgeda, Commander.”

Nothing Klark said to Leksa was untrue.

“And your mother?”

“Leksa?”

“What happened to your mother to leave her garden in your keeping?”

Leksa’s eyes held a shadow of grief and the steel sorrow of one that had known loss.

“She died,” Klark admitted, throat tight.

“How?”

“A raid,” Klark said tiredly, “they killed everyone in the village, three hundred and thirty-seven people, 105 children.”

“And you still serve Nia?”

“Bluecliff burned my mother’s village. She traded remedies for food with the last Clan Leader on the border. She offered to train some of their people in the ways of healing, as she did me. They accepted her offer and leveled the village when they decided they had learned enough.”

Leksa said nothing, but Klark could feel her aura of shock.

“Does that surprise you, Commander? To learn that not only Azgeda reaps and reaves and reigns harm? We of Azgeda simply lack the shame to hide it.”

“You speak true?”

“On my word as Klark kom Azgeda, I will never lie to you, Leksa.”

“Perhaps not with your words, if you are true, but you are willing to create elaborate falsehoods to serve your needs at detriment of the Coalition,” Leksa snapped, undoubtedly referencing Klark’s raiding ruse, “lies are lies, whether they are wrapped in silence and secrets, or exposed to the light of the sun.”

Dawn broke in true, the full sphere of the sun rising.

Klark watched the first beams of day awash Leksa in gold, suffusing her being with light.
Klark basked.

“Truly, your light is blinding, Commander,” Klark said without scorn, “I am humbled.”

Leksa stared, her bright eyes darting, searching for something in Klark’s face. Klark could show her true face in the quiet, if not with words.

In the audience chamber, a heavy door slammed shut.

The Commander walked back into her audience chamber without further ceremony. Klark took a moment to collect herself before following.

Klark paused as she cleared the threshold.

The lieutenant of Leksa’s guard waited, a towering man with facial tattoos and a thin wiry beard. He stood always at the Commander’s back and glared at Klark with all the rage of a prickled bear. Klark paid him no mind. She liked the big, lumbering ones.

“Gustus,” Leksa addressed him, surveying the accompanied formation of six warriors armed both with swords and the fervent desire to use them to rend Klark’s flesh.

Klark walked unceremoniously from the chamber. Klark was swept in between Leksa’s men, the six young men at her back and the sole royal guard, Gustus, between Klark and the Commander.

Klark could kill him without a weapon before the warriors could stop her, but the Commander was undoubtedly quick enough to cut Klark down before she could get within arm’s reach of her goal: Leksa’s heart in her hands. Klark preferred the less bloody way, but she would take it one way or another. Leksa’s influence would get Klark what she wanted, and if everything worked out, Klark would be able to give Leksa all the Commander wanted and more.

Leksa and her guard split from Klark at the gilded entrance to the hanging box contraption Klark noticed when she arrived to the Tower. It was operated by the pulley system likely powered by brute strength somewhere under their feet. A quick way to bypass a hundred levels.

The six warriors did not break stride, moving her to the middle of their formation and pushing her down the stairs at a quick jog. Their stifled giggles told Klark that they were trying to chase her, waiting for her to fall down the twisting stairs in her haste to get away from them, to keep them from stepping on her heels. Little did they know, a steep, uneven descent was effortless to one born and raised in the nomadic huts of Azgeda. Klark grew up trying to keep ahead of the shifting ice and turning winter under the insulation of snow, their only defense from the cold in the dead of winter. Klark was surefooted, essential to keep her feet when wasteland winds buffeted, reducing the warrior to stumbling blindly lest the power of the gust freeze the eyes from their skull. Klark was able to outrun ice cracking beneath her feet before water could dampen her boots and pull her under. Klark saw many of her subordinates disappear beneath the ice that way, their bodies lost even after the thaw; a warmth that was not quite warmth so much as it was less cold and thinner ice shelves. The stairs were mostly straight, carved from the wall. It was a well-trodden path compared to her home.

Klark was jogging as she hit the bottom step and continued out into the day.

Leksa was waiting in the shadow of the Tower. Behind her, hundreds of bodies moved back and forth to create the illusion of a cloth ocean.

The hot, wet air of Polis hung heavy on Klark like a sticky film over her skin. A lack of wind held the stink of the city stagnant in the wind, treating Klark to the smells of horse shit and human odor.
In Azgeda, the cold air was nothing if not clean enough to pick a flesh to bone.

Klark was wearing an intimidation hood the last time she entered Polis. Her hearing did not convey the number of people in the capital, so many that everyone was forced to walk sideways, brushing up against every person they passed, in order to squeeze down the narrow, stone-inlaid streets. The throng parted for the Commander to pass by, pressing in closer, tighter, to each other in order to make room for Leksa to walk unimpeded and unmolested. Most kissed their hands and wished the Commander health and long life. The children smiled and waved. The devoted fell to their knees, outstretched on the ground to show their allegiance to Leksa. Surrendering their pride in themselves to instill their pride in her. Their absolute faith.

Klark has never before seen so many people gathered together, willingly, in the simple act of celebrating another day among the living.

The Battlemaster, bloodiest General of Azgeda, was never nervous among large crowds. The only way for assassins to disappear in the otherwise barren streets of Troy. Klark was intimidated. If even a portion of them decided to rush her simultaneously, Klark would be unable to fight back.

This enormous horde was not calm, they hollered and screamed for their Commander. The atmosphere was charged but not angry, not fueled with an undercurrent of loathing and anxiety like the air in Troy, those that breathed short, uncertain as to the meaning or the outcome of Nia’s daily musters.

Polis was disorganized. Stalls were jammed together, packed tightly along the edges of short wooden shacks and tall interspersed watchtowers. Most huts were made from nothing more than sticks and draped cloth, hanging precariously upright in the temperate weather. Great slabs of sizzling stone cooked foods unfamiliar and exotic to Klark’s senses. Her mouth watered at the scent of sharp spices.

An hour in the throng of the market and Klark was growing overwhelmed.

Every part of Polis was excessive. Resources of fabric, metal, and wood were wasted on frivolous decorations to adorn necks and wrists and market stalls. The heavy smell of spices mingled with rot and human stink strong enough threatened to burn Klark’s nose. The sound of a thousand voices overlapping, trying to be louder than their neighbors. The number of people pushing by each other - the amount of skin bared to the sun. It was so unorganized and chaotic and careless.

Klark pictured the ice rain that fell in Azgeda, droplets of rain frozen to sharp points, falling through the air like missiles, ripping through the delicate leather and cloth pavilions and the people taking shelter under them in equal measure. The blistering winds that could kill in minutes and the barren land that refused to sow. The people of Polis have never fought the land itself for the right to live upon it. The miles green bountiful forests and lush carpets of springy grass that bordered Azgeda, surrounded the capital. Everything in Polis was soft, from the cloth to the flesh to the stone. Azgeda was dangerous on the clearest days, the miles of wasteland and relentless storms testing the will and fortitude of the most seasoned warriors.

The civilians seemed to outnumber the warriors two to one.

Polis was ripe for the sacking.

Large stacks of crated produce were left nearly unattended by manned stands. Klark swiped an apple as she walked by, unseen by Leksa, Gustus, or the trailing subordinates. It would be enough to get her by for a day or two if needed. Water would be more difficult to steal. A canteen was more obvious in her sleeve than an apple.
Thievery was Klark’s oldest skill. To become seken to haiplana Nia, young warriors must steal an item of the Queen’s present to her before the throne. Klark was never one to lose, and the Queen’s apprentice had as many advantages as challenges. Almost.

The people were shameless and bawdy. Most glared helplessly, but some cursed her line and more than a handful spit in her path. One child actually threw a rock at her, cheering on by his fellow follower-friends.

Klark snatched the projectile out of the air before it could collide with the back of her head.

A look of panic came over the child’s mischievous face, the blood draining from his face and leaving him sallow and grey. His accomplices ran off, whimpering like puppies. Klark noticed the crowd around them go still, becoming silent spectators, body language expressing worry and eagerness in every variation. Interest and scrutiny, the kind that spread rumor. Klark waited. She wanted everyone watching.

Klark winked at the boy and tossed the rock back to him, underhand.

The boy caught the rock easily in the cradle of his palms. He stared down at the fist-sized stone, and then back at Klark. She would remember the awe and relief she found there, the amazement that a warrior bearing the mark of Azgeda would show mercy to a playful child. That Klark could refrain from retaliating against an attack, no matter how ineffective the means and innocent the perpetrator.

The boy ran to his mother’s embrace and the people returned to their milling with an undertone of whispers, some fresh new gossip for the artisans and food purveyors to excite themselves with. A taste of potential violence in the confines of their banal existence.

Klark sought Leksa’s face and found a disapproving frown.

The Commander was unexpected as ever. The frown was not a cover for pleasure - she was genuinely displeased that Klark had shown kindness to one of her most vulnerable subjects. She must sense the manipulation in Klark’s actions, the carefully calculated way Klark laid the groundwork for her long-term plan. A subtle turning of public opinion.

The Commander was popular among the civilians as the warriors. They admired her beauty, worshiped her strength, and loved her for her mercy. Klark wanted to begrudge them for their naivete, except Leksa was pure of intention and good at heart. She was everything Anya and the rest of her people thought her to be and Klark needed to find out if there was anything more to Leksa beyond noble ideals and the will to see them done.

Klark broke from her place in the line. Gustus made a swipe at her, but Klark was already at Leksa’s side. The Commander did not acknowledge her presence.

Gustus caught up and grabbed Klark’s arm.

A single glance and minute nod from Leksa had Gustus releasing Klark.

They resumed walking.

The Commander did not dismiss Klark from her side.

“You’re capital is impressive, Commander,” Klark said drolly. And it was impressive, full of marvels. Trinkets shining like staring at the sun. Eventually, all the colors just swirled into one.
Looking at the Commander had much the same effect. Klark kept Leksa’s colors, black coat, brown hair, green eyes, in her peripheral vision.

“I’ve heard tales about the glory of Troy,” Leksa offered, her low voice colored with disgust, likely in reference to the crucified criminals that lined the streets.

“Troy is a bitter taste, difficult to acquire,” Klark admitted, “Nia has no tolerance for frivolity.”

“Nia has precious little tolerance,” Leksa clarified, “as you must be aware.”

“Better than most,” Klark murmured.

Leksa shot her a sharp look, “whatever you must do to survive.”

The words rend Klark to the core, for all they permeated her mind with every waking moment of her living memory, emerging now from Leksa mouth in defense of Nia. Klark held no blame to her - it was easier to agree with an absent enemy than the enemy standing right before your eyes.

Klark spend so much time fixated on that idea that her mind could no longer cope. She looked for something else to hold onto and found it. If anyone was capable of believing in Klark, it would be Leksa, with her open mind and all her quiet rage.

Klark stopped in her tracks and stared into Leksa's eyes in search of her soul.

"Maybe living should be about more than just surviving."

Leksa froze a half-step in front of Klark, their gazes never wavering. Leksa said nothing. Simply watched.

Then Leksa looked away and carried on, Klark at her side.

Klark and Leksa walked in comfortable silence. Klark made an effort to settled into Leksa’s presence, musing over her next moves.

In the space that cleared the Commander’s path, An individual broke from the crowd.

She was seemingly harmless, and within her rights as a citizen. It was not a crime to cross the Commander’s path in Polis. She was dressed akin to any other civilian woman, complete with an intricately woven head covering and matching shawl. A gentlewoman, old enough to be a mother, her swishing skirt entirely unsuited for a warrior.

Klark recognized the carefully casual steps of an Azgeda spy.

An assassin.

One of Klark’s, to her personal surprise. Klark remembered the orders she left the woman years ago. The last words of a General to their soldier before sending them off to war - to death -

*Be vigilant, and if you get a chance at the Commander, take it.*

Nia’s words - Nia’s demands. Nia’s agenda.

Now, the memory chilled Klark to the bone. Skin rippled and hair raised at the idea of the Commander’s death. Of Leksa’s death.
If Leksa made a habit of walking the streets, the assassin could have crossed the Commander’s path countless times since she was planted. She chose to act at Klark’s appearance, and Klark was unsure of what that meant for the assassin’s loyalties.

Whether the Assassin succeeded was dependent on Klark’s discretion.

A staged assassination was a little heavy-handed for Klark’s usual style. It was too early in the game for such an obvious tactic. Klark was not willing to take the risk of tipping her hand. She did not know how long until Leksa’s mercy, or Nia’s patience, ran out. Klark needed to make moves, no weapon left unsharpened, no hesitation. This particular weapon was not a favorite.

Klark recalled all the knew about the assassin - a sufficiently skilled woman all around. Selected to be a spy as a child when she was younger even than the boy that threw the rock. Unmarked and conveniently expendable. It took a lifetime to master the ability to truly become something other than Azgeda, to assimilate into other villages, regardless of size, unnoticed. Klark sent her to Polis as a fish merchant’s daughter out of Sankru many years ago, wanting an asset in the capital despite not knowing when she would need to use it, trained for the same reason Nia trained all her assassins: ending the Commander’s fight.

More than one holder of the flame had fallen at Nia’s hand, once removed.

The Queen must know of Klark’s whereabouts, for the presence of Wanheda in Polis was the assassin’s signal to move at her earliest convenience.

Klark needed to make a choice.

Nia or Leksa. The Commander or the Ice Queen. This moment was the first crucial impasse of Leksa’s plan. The essential choice that would send her down two radically different roads, all the way to the end of her fight. She could save Leksa’s life, or she could let the assassin dole out Nia’s justice, and wait for the next opportunity at the Commander’s life.

Klark made her choice the moment Leksa pulled her out of the delegation. Klark saw in the Commander what the Commander likely saw in Klark, the innate ability to lead. To convince the hearts of men to die with a turn of the head and a few inspiring words. Klark knew why Nia feared the Commander so greatly.

Heda, indeed.

Klark tongued at the razorblade she kept tucked in the side of her mouth between her gums and the flesh of her cheek. She sucked on the thin, wickedly sharp metal, pulling at the blade until she held it between her teeth.

The woman moved fast, closing the distance to Leksa.

Klark waited for a heartbeat, to factor in fabricated reaction time, for Leksa’s benefit. She used that moment to pinch the blade between her thumb and forefinger, every muscle braced for the blow.

Klark spotted her moment and moved faster than the Commander’s would-be killer.

The assassin lashed out for the final blow.

Klark struck first, in a wide arch.

Klark’s strike was slower and shorter to avoid cutting Leksa in the process. Each of her warriors has acquired like wounds, inflicted accidentally by Klark’s wild fighting style. Fighting by the side
of Wanheda posed risk to one’s health. Klark would not abide the spilling of Leksa’s blood Klark held no god, did not believe in the divinity of the Natbeidas, but she would not allow one such as Leksa to be ended so poorly.

The only holy ground to a righteous killer was the sanctity of life. Klark chose life - green trees and green eyes and green fields, over the bitter, devastating winter. Klark may be the Commander of Death, but Nia pulled Klark’s strings. If Klark was to turn, she could take no half-measures. She needed to prepare herself to lose everything she valued, including her warriors, to earn the trust of the Commander. If Nia suspected Klark’s treachery, Klark would die before she had time to convince the Commander of her sincerity.

To be so many things at once wore on the mind.

Klark focused on the one thing she was good at. Killing.

The assassin lurched to a sudden stop, uncomprehending of the mortal wound as her body tried to process the sudden disconnect between her head and her shoulders. The slice was clean and deep, down to the bone, vessels, and esophagus severed. The skin held for a moment, halting the breath of the crowd as onlookers tried to understand the glimpse of silver metal in the sunlight.

A hundred eyes joined Klark and Leksa in watching the woman’s slim red necklace burst into a spray of gushing red blood.

Klark and Leksa were standing too close.

Klark closed her eyes against the familiar viscous warmth. She had no desire to see Leksa’s face defiled with a murderer’s blood. Her actions would put the Commander on a pedestal in Klark’s regard, a grand treasure for Klark to admire and protect from harm, Battlemaster General, Wanheda burning down the world she spent a lifetime building with a single stroke.

Much like the assassin, who crumpled where she stood, as witnessed by all of Polis. The assassin’s mind did not have time to comprehend Klark’s betrayal. Her final moments provided no pointed fingers, no condemning stare, no gargled gasp of the traitorous General’s name. Nothing to imply to Leksa that Klark played any role in the circumstances or the outcome, beyond reactionary violence that saved her life. Except for Azgeda’s propensity for spies and assassinations, and Klark had a proven talent for subterfuge and staging. In all truthfulness, Leksa would likely suspect Klark’s strings attached to her would-be assassin.

Nia would hear rumors in the space of a bird’s flight. The first ripple in a wave that would inevitably draw Nia’s attention. Klark was officially on a timer, and she needed to delay Nia’s war for as long as possible to better her chances of getting out of this alive as she clung to the Commander’s coattails.

Protecting the Commander’s life would be a good thing for Klark’s prospects, in Polis, at least, but Klark remained unsure. The verbal spars Klark exchanged with Leksa have shown the Commander to be insightful and thoughtful in a way Nia’s tenacious warlords were usually transparent and greedy in their hunger for power. Leksa was veiled, and unreadable. An unmoving pillar of power.

Klark saved Leksa’s life and Klark expected a death sentence or a reward by what she had gleaned of Leksa’s character. Klark just gambled the entirety of her plan on Leksa’s judgment of her guilt in regards to the attempt on the Commander’s life.

Not at excellent gamble for Klark, but the best of her few options.
The only option that provided any hope of something good remaining after everything was over.

Klark looked at Leksa.

The Commander’s eyes were round and incredulous, shifting from frustration and into fury. Klark watched the transformation with utter fascination. Leksa’s emotions were momentarily plain but gave no insight into Leksa’s thoughts or her opinions. The blood spatter on her cheek was akin to the death-stain that never quite left the raw side of a cultivated fur, to a statue of the gods, broken and desecrated in a raid. Klark never meant to stain Leksa with her misdeeds. Klark did not have the luxury of preventing extenuating circumstances.

One could only protect others from a position of power.

Gustus tackled Klark to the stones. The warriors rushed to secure the assassin’s bleeding body like it would reanimate and go after them next.

Klark committed treason against Nia.

An act that would inevitably come to light, no matter how long Klark and her warriors spun stories to delay Nia’s suspicion.

Klark began to fit her plans around the curve of Lexa’s jaw.

Chapter End Notes

So I did the final edit of this chapter in one sitting, I hope it doesn't show too much. I ended up expanding on Clarke's view more than I intended, so Lexa's perspective was moved to the next chapter. More of Clarke's existential crisis is also incoming.

Clarke waxing poetic about Lexa was one of my first ideas for this story. If it weren't for Finn's death, Clarke and Lexa's relationship would have evolved at a different pace. They kissed after meeting for the third? time. The opposite of a slow burn. Clarke originating in Azgeda turns the tables. Where Lexa pursued Klark in the show, Clarke will pursue Lexa in this AU. The dynamic of Lexa having to prove herself civilized to the "moral" Skaikru is flipped, and the Commander is now the noble party compared to Azgeda (raids etc). Clarke will have to do some serious wooing.

Shoutout to anyone who can pick out the quote I stole from Angel, a favorite show of mine from the 2000s. Hint: Season Five.

As Always, Thank you,

Shtare
The Dictator's Pathos

Chapter Summary

As always, a huge thank you everyone reading and that goes double for kudos and commentators.

***

Leksa struggles to deal with the consequences of Klark's impulsivity.

Enjoy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once again, Klark knelt before the throne of the Commander bound in chains.

The morning did not progress as Leksa intended.

It was pandemonium.

The Commander thought some sun and at a glimpse of the diversity of Polis was a good start toward productive diplomatic relations with the Ice Nation. Leksa wanted to give Klark kom Azgeda a personal view of Polis, and through her capital, allow Klatk to see how Troy could flourish and grow under just leadership, Thrive under the protection of the Coalition, instead of withering under Nia's boot.

Leksa knew better than to assume that Klark would cooperate with her kindness. She should have prepared for violence.

But of course, Klark was armed despite her nonviolent demeanor and coy sweetness. As much a weapon to manipulate Leksa’s mind and her perception of her senses as her razorblade had been to kill that harmless woman. Gustus was barely able to extradite Klark from the enraged crowd, splattered in the blood of her victim before the mob descended on the Azgeda Ambassador.

Leksa was forced to cut down more than a score of civilians after they refused to heed her command to stand down.

The Commander was to be obeyed in all things, even if her people were forced to tread on ground soaked with the blood of their own. Leksa had no choice but to steal their vengeance for the sake of the Coalition. Destroy the peace of the few to save the lives of many. Leksa’s people would see Leksa sparing the life of the enemy, tried and judged guilty by a hundred witnesses, in spite of protest and tradition.

A position Leksa put herself in by not killing Klark the first time she crossed Leksa’s path. By letting her emotions cloud her judgment and her assumptions get away from herself.

Leksa had been fooled, in more ways than one. For a moment, Leksa truly believed Klark’s tragic words. She sensed no lie in the story Klark told of her mother and the fate that befell the village of
her birth. She had spent the night mulling over unanswered questions: How did Klark get to Troy? Were no villagers left alive to rebuild? Did Klark go to Troy because she truly had nothing left or because she wanted to serve the Ice Queen? The Commander received plenty of war orphans made from border skirmishes and long-standing blood feud between clans. These children came to her bloodstained and bereft of family - despondent and screaming. The children of villages razed to the ground; fowl, livestock, warriors, and civilians turned to the slaughter. The escaped children made to watch from hatches and hide holes the villages used to hide from the order of nomadic Flamkeipas. Those youthful faces, desolate and utterly destroyed. Leksa wondered if Klark had been a child when everything she loved was stolen from her. She agonized over the possibility of Klark being there to witness it all.

Now, any thought of Klark provoked a single blazing memory, imprinted in Leksa’s mind like a lit match in the pitch dark.

Klark’s face in the road. Red stains the pale and tawny, her expression blank as a fresh fall of snow. The weapons she wielded pinched between her thumb and forefinger, a square blade without a hilt, much shorter and shimmer than any dagger design Leksa was aware of. Small enough to fit in the crease of Klark’s cheek without impeding her speech and sharp enough to decapitate a woman with a single blow.

Leksa now held the razor-thin blade as Klark had. She twirled the thin, lightweight murder weapon between her fingers as she walked the length of her chamber - again, in the other direction -

Leksa had supervised her warriors to cut the seams of Klark’s coat and strip Klark of her clothes. They probed her mouth and other orifices for more hidden weapons.

Klark stared at Leksa all the while, eyes heated as if they were alone.

Leksa had them drape Klark in cloth, a blanket from Leksa’s own chamber. It was easy to rationalize away, being the closest residence to the audience chamber. If Leksa had other motives, that was nothing new. The Commander rarely had the luxury of doing anything for one reason. A metal cinch was tightened around Klark’s waist to keep her dignity intact - also Leksa’s personal possession.

“Leave us,” Leksa commanded her royal guard, standing ever vigilant along the walls of her audience chamber.

Leksa needed to be alone with Klark to hear the lies of her actions. She needed freedom from observation to decipher any iota of truth Klark may deign to supply.

Leksa’s audience chamber emptied.

Leksa allowed Gustus to remain. She had little desire to rehash the conversation later for his benefit later.

“Speak, Ambassador.”

“What would you desire of me, Commander?”

“Oh, the truth.”

“So I swore,” Klark said, clear-eyed, “Ask me, Commander.”

Klark radiated self-satisfaction, watching Leksa with hooded eyes, heavy with intent. Her body language was open despite the binds that restrained her. She would tell Leksa anything at that
moment - everything - except what the Commander wanted to know.

“I assume this morning was another of your tasteless games?”

“I’ll admit, my courting isn’t what it once was.”

“Courting,” Leksa repeated dryly. If this was Klark’s attempt as seduction Leksa had been a party to worse. If it was a promiscuous excuse, Leksa could easily call her bluff.

Leksa could not deny the way her heart leaped in her chest.

“I’ve chosen you, Leksa kom Trikru,” a long, loaded pause, “to be Commander of the Twelve Clans.”

“You would bestow upon me a title I already possess,” Leksa voice was thick with derision. Leksa did not miss Klark's subtle reference to Azgeda's refusal to take the brand. Leksa wanted to be grateful that Klark had the dignity to mock her in private, but she had a growing irritation for games. Klark could only push Leksa so far before she would be forced to take action. This Ambassador of Azgeda was more impertinent as the last, yet may be willing to take the brand Leksa to stabilize the Coalition. Klark was too potentially useful to be trustworthy.

No matter how much Leksa wished otherwise.

Again, Klark said nothing. Her infernal smirk never budged, small, like Klark was trying to resist laughing at the spectacle Leksa became when she was slower to react than an Ice Nation savage. An Ice Nation savage that passed on an opportunity to end a future warrior of the Commander. To kill a child is to kill the epitome of unlived potential, an act requiring one to be entirely devoid of compassion. Leksa was not impressed by Klark’s simple mercy. If Klark killed the child, any hope she had at fulfilling her goals would have been dashed between Leksa’s sword and the crowd ire. To spare the child earned Klark a far greater boon - one she discarded when she killed an unarmed woman.

“Tell me why you have come here to Polis.”

Leksa had little tolerance for innuendo and no patience for lies. Klark was treading on thin ice.

“To make you an offer.”

Somewhat straightforward, at least. She made a bold claim for a woman with not even the clothes on her back with which to barter. Leksa was grudgingly interested in Klark’s strategy.

“You have nothing that I want.”

Nothing Leksa needed.

“I have the third of the Ice Army under my command,” Klark boasted with incredulity, “I have the faith of Azgeda in my heart and the commonwealth of all goodhearted people on my mind.”

Klark waited for Leksa to notice her magnanimity. The Commander betrayed no reaction. Klark spoke with the same husky, playful tone she employed to turn Leksa’s eyes and gain the Commander’s attention. Klark was looking to provoke a reaction from Leksa, regardless of whatever truth lie behind her words. Leksa had nothing to say to that, so she moved to her next item of issue.

“Why did you kill her?”
“She was an assassin. I saved your life.”

Another game, like the raiders. Klark becomes something she is not to accomplish an unrelated and unknown goal. This game, Leksa was willing to play if only to delay Klark’s inevitable execution for murder.

“If you saved my life,” Leksa banded, affecting stoic gratitude, “no matter how I distrust your motives, I owe you a debt.”

The Commander went silent and waited for Klark to name her boon. Klark seemed unsatisfied if slightly disappointed by Leksa’s playful reply. Leksa watched the furrow between Klark’s brows deepen as she considered Leksa’s offer of reward. Klark’s face was consumed in emotion as much thought. Leksa was perturbed. This choice should be one Klark longed to be laid at her feet. This game gave Klark the opening she needed to convince Leksa that Klark was for the Coalition, that she saved the Commander’s life in preparation for taking the mark. She had the opportunity to present herself with honor and with it, the potential to earn faith. Killing her own assassin would be an efficient way of proving her innocence and ingratiating her to the Commander. It was a nice tall tale.

Leksa expected Klark’s usual flirtatious mirth.

Klark knelt at Leksa’s feet, a broken obelisk of sober solemnity. She wore her chains as offerings and honor as a burden. Her eyes were hardened by time but ablaze with purpose. Severity tightened her mouth and grief pinched at the corners. Everything she did, she did to survive.

“I am going to make you an offer, Commander,” Klark’s rumbling voice assured gravely, “all I ask is that you consider my words thoughtfully before you make your decision.”

Again with the same. Leksa raised an inquisitive eyebrow and found herself toeing the edge of anger, and on the other side: betrayal. Leksa invented no small amount of confidence in Klark by allowing her to walk the streets of Polis unchained. Leksa resisted the urge to give Klark a cold dismissal. Leksa went along with Klark’s game, met her on her terms, and only got more of the same. Leksa had no more tolerance for Klark’s lies.

“You conceal your motives as slyly as your weapons, Klark,” Leksa snarled.

“Forgive me, Leksa, your presence is disarming,” Klark’s eyes were beseeching, her deep voice a bass note of remorse.

“Evidently not,” Leksa corrected, holding the blade Klark used to spill her people’s blood where Klark could see the glint of stained metal.

“Consider it a show of good faith,” Klark offered, “she was one of Nia’s spies and my presence provoked her to act,” Klark turned to the mourning family with raised palms extended, “sorry.”

Leksa had no more tolerance for Klark’s games.

Klark’s blue state fixed on Leksa and she offered a devilish smile.

“Technically, I betrayed Nia when I saved your life,” Klark murmured, “Nia is probably hoping you’ll kill me for her and destroy your Coalition in the process.”

Only Leksa halting gesture kept her royal guard from swarming the mouthy Azgeda Ambassador for the sheer insolence of the statement.
“Why would your Queen want you dead?” Leksa asked, watching as Klark’s lips twisted unpleasantly, “other than political expediency,” Leksa amended curtly.

Klark’s expression evened out and she seemed to consider Leksa’s question.

“Let’s say,” Klark paused, almost rolling her eyes above her scornful frown, “I’ve outlived my usefulness and therefore I am no longer worth what I cost to feed.”

Klark’s head tilted in Leksa’s direction. Leksa watched Klark unabashedly examine her from head to toe, her head tilted to the side as if she couldn't quite believe what she is saying. What she saw when she examined Leksa with *those eyes*.

Leksa did not dignify Klark’s pageantry with an answer.

“If you have nothing to say in your defense,” Leksa began, leaving Klark one final opening to grovel for forgiveness. She had enough openings.

Klark laughed softly, a sound Leksa strained to hear. Klark’s smile was wide and obvious. Her face - her whole being - seemed changed. Leksa stood.

“Well?”

Leksa intoned, swiftly losing her patience.

“I can only tell you the truth as I know it. You must decide if you believe me, and what will happen if you do.”

Leksa got the distinct impression of mockery, but it was an intonation the same as any of Klark’s effects - artificial. Beneath it, her voice was hardened steel. Leksa felt a slight breeze on the back of her neck. Klark intended the words to be taken as blithe and disrespectful. She knew Leksa could not sentence her to death without killing the Coalition and she was taking full advantage of that fact. To others, it was an Azgeda warrior spitting in the face of authority; nothing new or particularly interesting. To Leksa it was a promise.

Klark was sending Leksa a message. Asking the Commander to believe that she is telling the truth. Giving the knowledge over to Leksa’s hands so she might decide how and if it was used. Letting Leksa know why she came here as Klark kom Azgeda, not as Nia’s substitute. More, Klark may be willing to actively undermine Nia in the Commander's favor.

She was going to make Leksa an offer. Presumably, an offer Leksa would be inclined to accept in her limited interests.

If Klark could be an ally against Nia, Leksa had an obligation to hear her out.

She doubted the merit of the premise.

Leksa had no more energy for this battle tonight.

“Gustus,” Leksa’s royal appeared at her back, Johrum at his side, “take the Ambassador to her chambers. See that she remains there until I summon her.”

When Gustus escorted the ersatz raider from her presence, Leksa retired to her room. She dismissed the *Flamekeipas* and went through the candle ceremony personally, reigniting the candelabra in a reverse pattern from the morning ritual. The smooth motions and gentle light were relaxing. Anything to occupy her hands while her mind whirled on a loop.
Klark killed someone - a civilian woman with a family and a child and a livelihood. A person on any account, essential to the community of Polis. She was of Sankru, but the Coalition made all the Clan’s Leksa’s people. She must do for Sankru what she would do for Trikru. Klark had no right to that woman’s life and therefore much pay with her own. Klark must know that. A few conversations past and Leksa was beginning to think she barely gleaned the extent of Klark’s intelligence - her cleverness. She knew the consequences of her actions.

Klark had no reason to desire the long walk to the executioner’s block. Whether she came for Nia or her own agenda, Klark’s goals were best accomplished alive.

*on my word as Klark kom Azgeda, I will never lie to you.*

After her promise, Klark murmured Leksa’s name, nearly in the purr of a snowcat, rumbling syllables drawn out long as if to savor the sound. Moments ago, Klark named Leksa Commander of the Coalition of the Twelve Clans, the culmination of Leksa’s reign up to this point, regardless of the influence Klark believed she held in the part.

A person like Klark, secretive and smart, needed incredible significance to endanger her life for the sake of a meaningless kill.

*I have chosen you, Leksa kom Trikru,*

An attempt on Leksa’s life was nothing new.

*Unless she wants to take the mark whispered a traitorous, insidious part of Leksa's mind.*

Klark’s presence was making it more difficult for Leksa to organize her thoughts.

Truly, your light is blinding, Commander,” Klark uttered quietly, her gaze steady and sure, voice devoid of intonation beyond the words themselves. The sunset glow turning Klark to burnish gold as if she were a statue finely carved in worship to the divine spirits of the Sankru faith. To Leksa, Klark was a goddess of light. "I am humbled."

But Klark was not the first to liken Leksa to light.

*Mochof, Heda, gon yu soncha. Ai gonplei ste odon pas ai laik yu kwelnes nomo.*

The elders of Ton D.C. sat with a younger Leksa to count her fingers against the stars. Nyko, the newly appointed Trikru healer, anointed Leksa’s newborn forehead with a gentle swipe of his thumb. The only Fleimkepa older than Titus died in the cradle of Leksa’s arms. He touched her face with his withered hand and thanked Leksa for her light in his encroaching darkness, relieved of burden. His fight ended peacefully. A gift bestowed to few souls under Leksa’s care.

Leksa does not believe in common happenstance. These words have followed her throughout her life; now uttered from the lips of an enemy. An enemy of whom Leksa meant to make an ally.

Klark kom Azgeda was no common Azgeda savage. She did not display the fervent patriotism Leksa loathed in Azgeda politicians and held none of the poorly concealed aggression common in the Ice Army. Klark admitted to fault as easily as she accused others of committing her approximation of wrongdoing - a shade of objectivity Leksa was unprepared to oppose.

Leksa was tempted to entertain an impossibility.

If Klark was truly untainted by Nia’s corruption and sound of mind and sure of purpose to serve as an asset to Leksa’s cause, Klark could be the key to sealing the Coalition in abject spite of Nia. The
final blow to the looming giant and the final brand seared into reality. If Leksa allowed Klark close, and Klark was true, Leksa would get everything she wanted - and possibly more.

Klark was capable. The way she moved and held her body told Leksa that she was not easy to defeat. The way she cocked her head back and smiled screamed that she was never willing to lose. The intelligence in Klark’s stare was cutting. Her words were weapons, real as any blade, and wielded with precision. Klark went for the throat and seemed disappointed when she could not draw Leksa into doing the same, regardless of the extent of her baiting. Klark glowed with excitement as she threatened the Commander like she wanted nothing more than to bleed out on Leksa’s floor, struck down by Leksa own blade.

Such extremes would not be necessary against a woman that saved the Commander’s life.

Leksa ceased her pacing abruptly.

Nothing was as it seemed to be in the political sphere. Anything goes when the prize is absolute power and the cost is your life. Klark could have recognized the assassin in the crowd and united the assassin’s intentions. Klark could have staged the assassination as she had the raids and capture to gain Leksa’s favor. Klark could have seen a concealed weapon Gustus did not look to find. Leksa’s thoughts waged a war of belief. Leksa would need a few hours to hash it out, but she was rarely allowed such personal time.

The Commander’s time was too valuable to spend on Leksa’s personal concerns.

Leksa wished that she waited until the afternoon to summon Klark to her side.

As it was, Leksa was expected to spend the afternoon receiving supplicants and mediating disputes. She collected taxes, judged crimes, and welcoming migrating families.

Leksa slid Klark’s square knife into a slim gap in her leather waistbelt.

In her receiving hall, Leksa was reduced standing in front of her throne, tense all over, absent in all but body, as her people came before her to fulfill their responsibilities as citizens of Polis. Leksa need only hear them with her full attention and the was incapable of that while Klark was confined to her chambers of accusations of murder. Leksa was ashamed as she was weak. For whatever doubts she allowed herself to entertain, Klark killed the civilian. A death Leksa witnessed personally. A fact well known by the witnessing citizens, all the Commander’s people alone while they lived in and around Polis during all seasons. At least, until one of them falls and the Ambassador of their clan sees an opportunity to extract a favor from the Commander.

These citizens chose to leave their clans behind and live under the authority of the Commander were those to come before the throne of the Commander. All of them watched her with questioning, judging, hurting eyes as they lay their harvest offerings at her feet.

They were owed her protection, as the clans within the Coalition were now owed her protection.

Warriors cycled through her throne room in pursuit of the Commander’s justice, dragging civilians or derelict soldiers for punishment. Leksa equally deaf to the criminal proceedings. The Commander distractedly sentenced each of the accused to a hundred blows. A few public lashings would sate the crowd’s thirst for Klark’s blood - for a few days -

Enough time for Leksa to learn the truth of these events to formulate an appropriate response. To see if there was a way out of ending Klark’s fight.

The line began to dwindle in the over-bright hours before sundown. Leksa was inordinately
pleased to receive the final supplicant of the day.

A group of women were escorted by Johrum to stand before the Commander. Gustus introduced them through the matriarch of the group, an older and frail-seeming woman with a stooped back and angled knees who radiated a quiet, self-contained power all the same. She who led named those accompanying her as former Bluelake villagers under the protection of the Bluecliff Clan Leader. They were on a pilgrimage to leave Bluecliff behind and join Floukru on the great blue. Leksa was prepared to welcome them and send them on their way until the Bluecliff Ambassador burst through Leksa’s doors unannounced.

Leksa’s chamber door burst inward, wood frames colliding with cement walls in a discordant crash. Tollik kom Bluecliff had energy aggressive as his entry. He walked leaning forward, angled only toward the next obstacle he intended to force open or trample over, regardless of its form or intentions. Leksa and the woman bound for Floukru were among the opposition, to this leader of men.

"Heda!" These women are unwell," insisted the shrill voice that called to Leksa, “they will not survive the journey. Let me bring them back to the village, to our healer.”

Leksa had half a mind to allow the Ambassador his wish. The women were painfully thin and clearly undernourished. It would place him in her debt and it would get the problem solved as quickly as possible.

"Heda, we beg for your mercy. There is no peace to be built in Blue,”

The Ambassador, Tollik kom Bluecliff, slapped the aged woman across the face.

She hit the ground with a definitive thud a sharp sound that brought the mind to places of permanent damage. Two adolescent girls ran too late to cushion her fall and knelt beside her. The Ambassador moved to strike again.

Leksa nodded to Gustus, in the Ambassador’s direction.

Gustus beat him bloody for the presumption of violence and the second attempt.

Leksa personally helped the matriarch to her feet, laying steadying palms on her rail-thin forearms. She wiped a tear from the woman’s eye, disguised as a caress to the cheek.

“Go by way of Ton D.C., and tell Indra kom Trikru that you travel under the protection of the Commander. She will see you safely to your destination, seda. ”

Lexa accepted their glistening-eyed gratitude with a small smile and nod.

Bluecliff had no reason to resort to violence unless Ambassador Tollik was trying to hide something from the Commander. Leksa assumed the war would be between the Coalition and Azgeda. Perhaps Leksa will be made to wage a civil war before the Coalition Army faced the Ice Arm. Leksa needed to take better account of the members of her Coalition - who they were speaking to and meeting with -

Some must be colluding with Nia. Leksa had thought it suspicious to see women so underweight come from the village with the greatest acreage of fertile land in all the Twelve Clans. Nia would demand significant offerings from a Clan looking to become a fief in her kingdom. Leksa intended to wait for Nia to make her move, but she may as well get her guard to get some answers as to the loyalty of the coalition.
Leksa retreated to her throne and watched the flames to settle herself.

"Heda," Gustus immediately interrupted, "the Ambassador of Sankru requests an audience."

It was not Ambassador Sagan’s first request. Leksa barely had a chance to get back to the Tower that morning before she was inundated with messenger requests from Ambassadors, merchants, fishmongers, goat herders, and their ilk. Anyone with enough material income to sway their Clan Leaders decisions wanted to know how the Commander would punish the Ice Nation murderer. They thought a public punishment would have a positive effect on getting the market back to business as usual. They thought they could get further pay from the Clan for the danger of working in Polis, where an innocent merchant may be stuck down by the Azgeda savages walking freely in the street -- and so forth. Leksa turned the rest of the messengers away after the third recitation produced more of the same.

Leksa wanted to speak to someone without an overt agenda.

"Bring me Anya and tell the Ambassador to wait," Leksa decided briskly.

Gustus bowed and gestured to Johrum to do her bidding. Leksa took out her dagger and leaned forward in her throne. Leksa firmly grasped the hilt and carefully angled the blade by her fingers to trim her nails while she waited for her former mentor to arrive. Anya was wise as she was reasonable. Her opinion could provide a guiding compass for Leksa’s travails.

Leksa was frustrated by the necessity of navigating political deceptions.

The Commander did not make decisions based on the whims of her people, Clan Leaders included. If Leksa allowed the military might of the Coalition to be directed by alternatively bloodthirsty or fumbling Clan Leaders, the Coalition would fall, surely and forever, Each had their own motivations for joining the Coalition - most of which were either currying the Commander’s favor or pushing for the relaxation of fishing and trade regulation. Distilled, it was different manifestations of greed. The clans with enough men to take control in a coup were the loudest speakers, those without might were the first to disagree with the loudest voices. Both were equally bloodthirsty and intent on forcing Leksa into war with the Ice Nation, as the Coalition forbid them from waging war on each other.

They could avoid war with the Ice Nation if they let Nia kill Leksa and then joined Nia under the auspices of the coalition. The civilian deaths would be significantly less if Nia took over the Commander’s place after Leksa’s death.

The single Ambassador to mention the possibility was Floukru.

Nia wanted the Commander’s power more than she wanted war.

The Ambassador from Floukru told Leksa that she was present as an observer only and intended to have no voice in the council proceedings. Leksa thought the surrender of influence to be foolish and unnecessary. The Ambassador’s presence was irrelevant if she refused to contribute. All the same, Leksa recognized Luna’s choice in sending an Ambassador. Floukru would have forewarning of war if their Ambassador never returned from summit in Polis.

Small insights from unexpected places would be essential to winning whatever form of war Leksa sensed on the horizon.

When the Council was in session, a few hours each evening, the Floukru Ambassador watched Leksa from across the room with wide incredulous eyes, openly judgemental. Leksa felt exposed
and belittled under that stare, the look of someone that did not understand Leksa’s responsibility to her people and could only see the blood spilled by Leksa’s hand. Blood Floukru deemed to be sacred as the sea itself, no less sacred than Natbleda. The clan believed in a sanctity of life in all people that must be respected lest the writhing ocean waves tear you asunder surely as the enemy’s sword -

“Heda!”

Johrum’s call preceded Leksa’s audience chamber doors creaking open.

“Anya kom Trikru, Heda, and the Floukru Ambassador, Kora.”

Leksa stilled, her shoulders settling back in rigid austerity.

Anya stepped forward, smudged and half asleep, stumbling and she came close enough to the throne to trip on the stairs. Anya reeked of alcohol and was wearing someone else’s ill-fitting clothes. Johrum must have found her at one the rum houses she frequented when she visited Polis.

Leksa hid both her irritation at Anya’s condition and her relief for the presence of truly trustworthy company beyond Gustus and her Royal Guard.

The Commander was preparing to descend the steps when a smaller woman followed on Anya’s heels into Leksa’s receiving chamber.

Kora only, because those that join Floukru abandon the clans of their birth permanently for Floukru, while the citizens of Polis did so only as long as their trade engaged.

“I did not bring her,” Anya clarified, sensing Leksa’s frustration, “she saw Johrum and followed us to the tower.”

Anya glared at Johrum, who stared staunchly ahead from his place at the top step of the stairs before the Commander’s throne. Leksa did not fight the incredulous raise of her brow, that the Flourkru ambassador would seek out such vulgar diversion and company.

“I would have stopped her, but she bears the mark of the Coalition and is, therefore, my superior,” Anya’s voice was carefully measured but Leksa recognized the rebuke in it.

As a Clan Leader, Anya’s status would be one rank below that of the Commander and above all others. As an enticed provision to the Coalition, Ambassadors were privileged at the Commander’s table and thereafter took precedence over the Clan Leaders while in Polis. Many Clan Leaders thought the same as Anya. A few Ambassadors were Clan Leaders themselves to avoid the distillation of power. Sankru was among the latter.

“Speak.” Leksa told Ambassador Kora, leaving no uncertainty that she would be escorted from the Commander’s presence immediately following her testimony. Leksa turned her back on the impudent woman and began to scale her stairs, disinterested in whatever personal business she came to peddle. Leksa had mortal concerns at the moment.

“I am here to speak on behalf of Klark kom Azgeda.”

Leksa reared around in a whorl of black fabric and descended her stairs in the span of a blink.

“Why?”

Leksa got close to Kora, slightly breathless with anticipation about what possible connection
Floukru would have with Azgeda, Klark in particular. The Flourkru Ambassador looked suddenly nervous, as though she did not earn the Commander’s attention, as if she had not challenged the Commander’s integrity with her relentless scrutiny during summit meetings.

“Floukru welcomes refugees from all clans,” Kora began, voice trembling and yet strong.

“All of Polis know this,” Leksa hissed, “say something relevant.”

“Every third moon, we find a child of Azgeda, an apprentice, or some war widows waiting on our shores bound for the peace and purpose of Floukru,” Kora said with a lingering sense of wonder. “We ask each of them how they learned the secret way to our beach and they all explain the same phenomenon. A bright light carried them to the shore like the sun descending to earth, wearing a crown of white stars. That description, always, and some parting words from the whoever helped them.”

The Ambassador paused and looked questioningly to Leksa.

The Commander nodded.

“They said that living should be about more than just surviving.”

A chill shivered down Leksa’s spine, provoking a hair-raising cascade of reactions down the length of her body. Klark’s words from another woman’s lips, the same spoken to Leksa only hours previous that had triggered the same hair raising reaction. Leksa dismissed Klark’s sentimentality at the time but -

There may be more to Klark than Leksa was willing to see.

More evidence that Klark may be the ket to bringing the Twelve clans under the Commander's leadership

Klark’s scars embellish the Flourkru Ambassador’s story. Her forehead was decorated with a series of triangular points spaced in three sets of three angling points, two pointing away from the center. Scar tissue white as bone. A brutal and beautiful battle mantle.

To a child, a crown of stars.

For those locked in Nia’s torture dungeons, robbed of all light, Klark’s gold hair haloed by the sunset could be the very light of the sun come to life - shards of the clear blue sky in her eyes and a gleaming crown of shining white stars.

If Klark was smuggling dissenters and potential warriors out of Azgeda, her goal at the capital may be very different than what Leksa - or Nia - anticipated.

“Leave us,” Leksa commanded or the Floukru Ambassador, nodding for Anya and Gustus to remain.

Gustus escorted Kora from the room and then returning to Leksa’s side. Leksa dismissed the royal guard that lined the walls and they filed from the room with the same diligent formality, Johrum included. Leksa did not mistrust her guards, but she must handle the question of Azgeda very carefully. More than one amongst them lost family in the raids and had reason to see all of Azgeda annihilated. Gustus and Anya would disagree as fervently as any of her people, but they had the good sense not to speak their grievances publically, and in doing so speak out against Leksa.

With only the three of them present, Leksa’s audience chamber seemed cavernous.
“So, who did she kill?”

Anya was prepared for Klark to lash out and expected it - or heard gossip spreading in the town. Leksa needed to stop reducing the issue to a question of Klark’s character.

“She killed a Sankru supplicant in broad daylight,” Gustus growled, “a woman walking down the street.”

Anya’s surprise was sedated, her bewildered gaze taken aback more than her posture, sprawled on the stairs. She looked to Leksa or clarification. Leksa refused to give her time to pounce.

“I will not kill her,” Leksa decided, “until I learn the truth of this.”

”Truth, Heda?” Gustus’ rage went apoplectic, barely able to conceal his quivering cheeks and newly deep yet alarmingly shortened breaths, “what truth is to be found? Order must be maintained. You cannot afford a show of weakness, not when the Coalition is so close to being complete.”

Leksa ignored Gustus, as was her prerogative. His opinion was justified. Unfortunately, Leksa’s oldest guard did not consider what was necessary to complete the Coalition without starting a war in the process. Gustus was more than happy to let Nia wage her war, confident in the Commander’s ability to lead and win.

Anya had the foresight to consider the virtues of working with the enemy. Anya was oddly quiet, attempting gauging Leksa’s mood with searching eyes.

“Speak.”

“I know what you want me to say,” Anya murmured.

“And what is that?” Leksa asked, exasperated with Anya’s way of teaching after the previous night - the reminder of Costia -

“You are the Commander and your people must respect your ruling even if they disagree with your decision, which they will.”

“Nia does not need one woman to wage war,” Leksa said, not too arrogant to see how weak it was a defense for her motivations. “And she may be the one Ambassador willing to take the brand.”

“Did she say that?”

Not in so many words.

Leksa silence spoke on her behalf.

“We have a chance to take one of Nia’s warriors off the field,” Gustus growled, “and not even the Commander can defy tradition.”

jus drein jus daun

Some traditions were older than the divides between the clans.

Leksa would have responded to the contrary but Anya interrupted with new insight.

“She’s one of Nia’s best,” Anya crunched nuts she pulled from her pocket as she spoke, “her Battlemaster.”
“Truth?” Gustus gasped, his furrowed brow going immediately to Leksa, who ignored his scrutiny.

“Truth. Nia is not the only one with spies. Klark kom Azgeda fought in the Ice Army during the last winter war and was given a battlefield promotion to General for killing the Bluecliff Clan Leader. She won the title of Battlemaster two seasons ago, by defeating every sitting General in Nia’s Army in personal combat.”

Bluecliff burned my mother’s village to the ground

Only after learning her ways of healing. Was it not raiding to take what you need and leave bodies in your wake? Murder took on a new context when exploitation was involved. Could Leksa begrudge Klark for her vengeance

the Earth around the changes before their very eyes and they say nothing. Do nothing.

“A Battlemaster can only be considered after they have won a hundred victories in battle,” Gustus continued, “she would be the first in a generation.”

Leksa was absorbed with her thoughts and inadvertently allowed the silence to drag.

“If it was any other ice gona you would have cut them down in the street so their blood may mix with that of their victim,” Gustus whispered.

Leksa did not deny the accusation.

“Jus drein, jus daun,” Gustus reminded, as though Leksa could forget.

“Have no doubt, I will do right by my people,” Leksa promised, daring her warriors to second guess the Commander’s priorities. Anya and Gustus had nothing to say in return. They merely watched Leksa pace with concerned brows.

“Who was the woman?” Leksa asked eventually, cursing herself for not thinking to inquire before. Leksa remembered her face - serene and austere - a moment before her facial muscles fell slack and her body hit the ground. The cut was so clean it caused a delayed reaction, the seam of flesh opening when the woman tried to reflexively swallow. Leksa’s hands, face, and neck were cleaned of blood when returned to the Tower, but she could still see the red dripping between her fingers. Feel the sugary stick of the viscous fluid beading on the skin of her face.

“A baker,” Gustus informed, “her man and child are waiting in your ante-chamber with the Sankru Ambassador as his party,” Gustus was not one to hide his disdain.

“Bring them in.”

The Ambassadors of the twelve clans and their attendants trickled in small groups into Leksa’s audience chamber, like a small leak in a dam that would eventually burst and flood everything Leksa held dear. Leksa had yet to call the summit to order for the day but petition hours were free for public attendance. Everyone with power wanted to see how Leksa would handle the murder in her streets and discover if they could reap any benefit from the Commander's momentary vulnerability. It was the Commander’s responsibility to keep the peace in Police and to balance the debt if she failed.

The day waned and the spectators grew restless.

The Sankru Ambassador was late. Not even the Ice Nation had the nerve to blatantly flout the
Gustus summoned Johrum, a senior member of Leksa’s royal guard, and sent him to retrieve the family of the deceased. Leksa braced herself for a difficult conversation. The Sankru Ambassador was known to be divisive and stubbornly proud. Gustus busied himself with escorting the rest of Leksa’s royal guard back into the audience chamber. The Commander was seated upon her throne in full battledress. Her face was devoid of warpaint but the golden medallion at her brow glistened gold in soft candlelight, equally a testament to her power.

The Sankru Ambassador and the murdered woman’s family arrived and Johrum was not with them. The Ambassador was dressed in extravagant finery compared to the simple spun cotton of the dead woman’s husband and young son, too young yet to bear arms. Behind them, the Ambassador was attended by an assortment of Sankru warriors and politicians. All parties considered the Ambassador’s entourage outnumbered both Leksa’s royal guard and the combined attendants of every other Ambassador.

“Heda,” the Ambassador bowed quick and shallow, eager to get it done and move on to his lynching. Leksa had no desire to parade Klark before this court of public opinion. It would be more expedient to handle the matter in private. Leksa would not put it past the Ambassador to cut Klark’s throat on Leksa’s steps. She preferred such an even be avoided. Blood was difficult to clean from porous stone.

“You know why we have come, Heda, the Azgeda must be punished for the guilt of their Ambassador. Queen Nia sent her soldier here for one purpose - death! It is clear to all that Nia is behind this crime, but as the Queen is absent, the Ambassador woman must bear the punishment in her Queen’s stead,” Ambassador Sagan turned slow, addressing the room at large. Holding attention in the court of public opinion

“I demand the Commander’s justice! Vengeance is owed to the people of Sankru.”

“Jus drein jus daun,” the Ambassador roared.

“jus drein jus daun!” Echoed the room.

Leksa barely resisted the impulse to check Ambassador Sagan. He did not give the orders here. The Commander was not a person to be dictated to. Luckily for him, these proceedings were a shade too somber for a demonstration of force. What’s more, the gathered seemed to agree with Sagan. Murmurs of agreement rose from the corners of the room at the end of his speech. They were small rumbles of discontent that could rise into a fearsome adversary if Leksa did not cut it off at the start. Before she could speak, the man stepped forward. He was the truly injured party, beloved of the dead. His son stood beside him, silent and solemn.

“We are simple people Heda,” the farmer went down on his knees, a greater show of devotion than Leksa was comfortable receiving, “my houmon - she is a good woman. Was. She did not deserve this death.”

“I will learn the truth of this matter,” Leksa murmured, “you have my word.”

To the crowd, Leksa issued her command.

“We will delay the proceeding of the summit for the requisite three day mourning period as established by Sankru tradition. At that time, the Ambassador’s fate will be decided."

“My people do not care for mourning, Commander, we want justice!” Ambassador Sagan howled,
enraged. He turned to readdress the crowd

“Do you see this Commander,” Sagan asked the assembled, “forms a Coalition to consolidate her power and then refuses to use it in defense of those she has claimed as her people! Untrustworthy and faithless, stooping to sending spies against her loyal Ambassadors,” Sagan spoke adamantly and ever louder, “this one was found snooping in my private corridor!”

Two Sankru warriors dragged a bloody and unconscious Johrum to the foot of the Commander’s throne. Leksa stood immediately. The royal guard reacted, spearing coming forward from rest to on guard. Leksa nodded tightly to Gustus, who immediately instructed a handful of Leksa’s guard to remove Johrum to the healer’s tents.

Leksa abandoned the pretense of the regal Commander and loomed over the Sankru Ambassador despite his height advantage.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Sagan was not expecting the Commander to address him personally, in front of a crowd of his predatory peers, as eager to eat him whole as an enemy he presented them. A hint of intimidation simmered in Sagan’s eyes, the flicker before the fault. His fear made him angrier and more desperate.

“First you spare the Ice Nation savage, and then you send your man to steal from me! To see the great Commander so reduced --

Sagan could say no more because Gustus had a hand around his throat, fingers locked under his jaw. Gustus lifted Sagan off his feet and held him in the air, not too high that he could not listen to Leksa’s words and see her face.

“You were late, Ambassador Sagan,” Leksa explained through clenched teeth to a man who certainly Johrum’s presence despite his claims. Sagan chose to use his clanswoman’s death to exact his pound of flesh from Leksa’s side. Leksa would return the favor in kind, “Johrum was sent to escort you to the meeting.”

Leksa’s eyebrow piqued, “in case you had forgotten the way.”

There was no greater wound than that done to pride.

"You scorn your dead by refusing my offer," Leksa told him, "the summit will continue."

Leksa said nothing of Klark. The Commander knew better than to trap herself into an obligation. Saying nothing also afforded Leksa an undetermined length of time to come to her decision regarding Klark’s fate.

Leksa nodded and Gustus dropped Sagan to the floor. The Ambassador was helped to his feet by his attendants and hurriedly pushed into his chair. He coughed and heaved into the sleeve of his robes. The rest of the Ambassadors ignored him, sitting silently and looking at the Commander to open the summit.

The other Ambassadors laughed in an effort to break the rising tension before blood - more blood - was spilled.

“Hail Ambassadors of the Twelve Clans,” Leksa intoned.

“Hail Commander of the Blood!”
The cheer was quieter than it was the day previous - fewer voices joined in.

“Let us begin.”

The Commander closed the summit early and none objected. She sent a sentient for some food and instructed Gustus to bring Klark to her antechamber, dungeon chains and all.

Leksa was unsure what to make of their last encounter.

Klark was undeniably flirtatious. They coy attitude seemed an element of her personality as much as whatever character to chose to adopt for her dubious purposes. Leksa did not trust the subtle affections, though she could not help but enjoy them. Not many had the nerve to speak to the Commander blithely, nevertheless with warmth. Trikru believed soft emotions were the fastest way to die. Leksa knew Azgeda was different, but not how much. Leksa knew few from Azgeda, having met only two Ambassadors, the Queen, and the Prince. Then Klark.

Every one of them carried that same mischievous gleam in their eye, a small smirk at their own cleverness and the gleeful facade of someone getting exactly what they wanted.

Klark was utilizing a strategy. Nothing more.

*To be Commander is to be alone*

Klark shared her secrets as though she already possessed Leksa’s confidence and expected equal reciprocity in return. A chance to rifle through Leksa’s darkest memories and bring the most valuable back to Nia for extortion. Klark would be disappointed. Leksa no longer had anything precious to lose to Nia’s war.

Still.

Leksa remembered a moment. A few steps before the strike, when the woman was walking down the dirt and stone road parallel with the devotional crowd. Leksa noticed something before Klark made her move. A minor adjustment in the corner of her eye. Before dealing the blow, Klark took a single step forward and angled her body away from Leksa, shortening her range of motion. At first, Leksa thought it was a technique but it seemed unnatural movement until she paid close attention to the way Klark walked, transferred her weight, turned corners.

Klark was left-hand dominant.

A peculiar and intriguing trait which Leksa would not have noticed if Klark had been allowed another of her multitude of weapons. With knives in both hands, it would be impossible for an opponent to tell the feature of her battle technique. Such a rare quality was a boon on the battlefield. An automatic advantage against any opponent who assumed wrongly of Klark’s nature.

To Leksa, it was her first grasp of the upper hand and a blatant reminder to keep Klark's duplicity at arm’s length.

When Klark arrived, the label had been dragged into the chamber and laden down with food and drink. The sun had long set, candles the only light with which to see. Leksa sat facing the entrance, the only other chair left open.

“Will you eat at my table?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Klark raps, voice rough.
A bristle of heat crawled up Leksa’s spine. As ever, Klark wanted to play a dangerous game.

Klark came to Leksa as if gliding on air. She possessed a grace unknown to chains as if the weight of the shackles were as familiar to her as the Ice Nation clothing she was permitted to re-don. The chain links made no sound as Klark moved.

Klark walked to the table with casual ease but her eyes scan the plates as if they were coiled snakes spitting venom.

Lexa helped herself.

“What are my people eating food like this?”

“They are unharmed and well-fed, I assure you. The wild one has bitten two of my guards, ripped off one of their ears.”

“Fin,” Klark winced around his name, “he is prone to temper when upset. Those guards should be rotated to a different shift, outside of the Tower, for the duration of our stay.”

“You think he will kill my guards?”

“If any of them touched him with their hands,” Klark said tersely around a mouthful of meat, “yes.” Klark behaved as if Leksa were meant to know her man as she did, utensils held askew in her hands.

“They escorted him to a cell - pending punishment. I trust you have some means of keeping him under control, from now on.”

“So the others are not in a cell?”

“They are in suitable accommodations for the delegation of an Ambassador. As for how long they will remain there, that depends on the value of your word,” Leksa enunciated, deadly serious.

“The only way to keep Fin under control is to bring him to me,” Klark said simply, her expression open and matter-of-fact.

Leksa searched Klark’s eyes for signs of a trick. Leksa was no so proud to assume that Klark could not fool her, but she did choose to believe that liars were occasionally willing to tell the truth.

“And an Ambassador is typically allowed an entourage.”

Leksa nodded to Gustus, who left with his usual cohort of five well-seasoned warriors, minus Johrum. Leksa watched them leave and felt Klark’s eyes, on her skin, warmed under the weight of Klark’s stare. Leksa felt her penetrating attention with her whole body. Leksa’s gaze followed the way the blue in Klark’s eyes changed - pale around the iris, veins of darker blue cutting through like ice going way into a bottomless cavern. Nia was said to keep such a place, to punish any she deemed fit with an eternity of falling, or at least, falling until dehydration took its toll. Klark’s pupils dilated. She watched Leksa while she shoved food in her mouth, carefully spearing each piece with nothing but her peripheral vision and the instinct leading the fork to her mouth.

“I am still waiting for an offer, Klark,” Leska said. She was uncomfortable eager to bring Azgeda into the Coalition. Unrest grew by the day with Nia undeclared and mustering strength. The power balance was more precarious to longer Leksa failed to solidify her power. The Coalition was essential to the survival and prosperity of her people. Leksa had no time to amuse Klark's fantasies while Klark sat on information that could turn forces in Leksa's favor.
“You’re not in the right mood for politics right now, let’s talk about something else.”

“We have nothing else to discuss,” Leksa hissed, rising to her feet and righting her chair. For Klark to assume the Commander’s moods influence policymaking - absurd. She was not interested in whatever political groundwork Klark was laying for Nia’s sabotage. She needed to know the truth of Klark’s mind to know the best way to eliminate Nia with the least amount of bloodshed. Nia would come to Leksa, eventually, if all else failed. Leksa would rather get to Nia first. She needed dependable allies, true to their word and noble in their intentions. Leksa was trying to look beneath the veneer of violence, the maniacal gleam in Klark’s eyes, to the subtext that would belay her true intention in seeking Leksa out in this way of companionship.

“Heda,” Gustus' voice, returned.

Her warriors hauled in Klark’s deranged warrior. He was wearing a metal muzzle that the blacksmith must have forged. It was a brutal tool, soldered around the back of his head as well as his neck. Leksa expected him to fight like a thing possessed, but instead, he was meek, lead by chains affixed to the neckpiece. His eyes were empty.

“Take it off,” Klark said more harshly than Leksa had ever heard, “take the mask off, right now.”

Leksa’s warriors did not comply because Leksa did not instruct them too. She was too busy watching what was seemingly Klark’s first genuine display of emotion.

“Now!”

Klark’s warrior, Fin, reacted to her rage. His eyes cleared and brightened, equal parts outraged and relieved to see her. The emotion intensified to the point of his eyes misting over. He was having trouble standing but he fought those holding him up in the effort to get to Klark. He strained against his bonds, yanking guidelines from the hands of two of the four warriors holding him. His stare was locked on her like she represented everything good in the world to him. Tears slid over the edge of the metal seam under his nose - the edge of the muzzle.

He cared for Klark. He loved her. Even one such as Leksa could see it plainly.

Gustus restrained Klark. She kicked him in the side of the knee and he bowed over in pain. Klark waited until Gustus’s face was close enough to crack his nose with the point of her elbow. After the blow, Klark tried to go to her warrior.

Leksa stepped into her path. If Klark wanted to get to her man, she would stop. She would wait for Leksa’s permission and then she would obey when Leksa granted her wish. It was the only way to ensure that Klark’s warriors would survive. Leksa was not above sacrificing the rest of the Ice Nation delegation to spare Klark a thousand cuts. If Klark was willing to meet Leksa halfway, she could resolve the raid and the murder without spilled blood.

jus drein jus daun

Klark was already the opposite of everything Leksa once believed the Ice Nation to be and represent. It was right that she would be the one to make Leksa question to most fundamental pathos of her people - to spare her the loss of her warriors, the pain of that failure.

Klark stopped, but she was displeased - almost hurt - that Leksa stood in her way.

Leksa did not move, flinch, or blink. She was unmoved and unmoveable. She needed to see how Klark would react to being denied the only thing she has clearly wanted since she arrived at Polis.
Klark’s frown was disappointed. She did not move.

Leksa did not like it, no matter how Klark complied with her orders.

“Remove the restraints,” Leksa acquiesced, maintaining eye-contact with Klark, “and the mask.”

If Leksa did not know better, she would suspect that Klark was grateful. Leksa returned to the table to watch. As soon as Leksa moved Klark rushed past her, sliding on her knees to her warrior’s side.

Klark cared for him. It was undeniable.

Sharp pain in Leksa’s chest was not muffled by the wave of dismay that rolled over her, for having considered -- it was a ploy. Klark used the truth to tell her lies, surrounding her poison in a sweat layer of melted sugar. The made overages at Leksa to get behind her defenses. Klark was Nia’s sword in the night. The dagger in the darkness that was meant to destroy Leksa at the hand of one she trusted. One of Nia’s, no less. The shame of such a death would never leave the memory of Leksa’s rule. Leksa would defile the flame with her failure before she succumbed to death. Her spirit would find the next commander in hate, rather than in power. Klark was in Polis for a mission - nothing more - Leksa would only invite disaster if she dared believe otherwise.

Klark led her warrior back to the table. He walked strangely, his shoulders slouched and head forward, arms crooked in front of his body as if ready to strike at any moment, though his hands hung limp. It was a paradoxical display and Leksa was dubious as to this warrior’s frame of mind.

Fin refused the seat Klark offered him, Leka’s vacated place at Klark’s side, in favor of crouching on the floor by her feet, pressed close to her side. Klark’s hand rested on the top of his head as if he were a favored pet, lightly stroking his hair. Leksa was put off her food. Leksa turned to the table and moved a plate at the setting opposite Klark, which was typically Gutus’s seat. The permissive signal that welcomed high-ranking members of the royal guard to eat at the Commander’s table. Those assigned to the shift quickly took plates and returned to their posts to tear into the meat.

Johrum was returned to them with stitches and bruises, but an unaffected air. He was the first to tear into the meal.

“Days in Polis and you say nothing. Hathor is missing an ear because of this beast.”

And so it began. Leksa invited them for precisely this purpose. Her warriors would get to talking, Klark would be provoked, and Leksa would be given a glimpse of the truth of things.

“He is called Fin,” Klark lisped around a leg of chicken. She ripped a chunk of meat from the bone and chewed before handing the bone to her crouching soldier. He took the meat from her hands and devoured it whole. Leksa’s warriors watched it vague disgust, not deterred in the least.

“Fin should learn some manners,” Johrum grunted, “and how to address his betters.”

“He can’t talk to anyone,” Klark’s quipped, “Nia cut out his tongue ten years ago.”

Klark pretended not to notice the way her words were a stone thrown into still water, sending a great rippling wake over the room with the impact. It was easy to forget; evil people did not discriminate between their enemies and their friends. All were subjected to the same backlash when Nia was displeased. Johrum chewed his chicken longer than necessary.

“She didn’t like what he had to say,” Klark sneered, going for the jugular, “he talked too much.”

Johrum was ashamed of himself. He was a fierce warrior with a gentle spirit. To have prodded so at an old would in a fellow warrior rest heavy on his conscience, even if that warrior was Azgeda.
Leksa gently dismissed him with a nod, allowing him to retreat to the periphery of the room for the remainder of his shift. He took the reprieve gratefully.

Eventually, Leksa gestured for her warriors to remove Klark’s attendant.

Klark looked a moment away from crying out betrayal. It was a heady rush of power, to have pushed Klark back on her heels, into an emotional state. Leksa had Klark reacting instead of acting, just as Klark had done when they first met.

“He will be escorted to your adjacent chamber. So long as he keeps his teeth to himself, he will remain by your side,” Leksa said, resigned to the truth of Klark’s affections.

The rest of Johrum’s comrades and the whole of the royal guard were given leave to end shift. Fin flinched at the noise of dropping plates and watched after Klark wistfully. It took one look from Leksa to send Gustus out of the room after them.

And just like that, Leksa and Klark were alone.

“What really happened to Fin?”

“I just told you.”

“You were lying," Leksa said, unsure but willing to hazard a guess.

Klark laughed and it was the music of the birds. It faded away and Leksa would hereafter long for its return. Her expression collapsed in on itself. She tossed her utensils down the table and got up. Klark began to wander the length of Leksa's hall as the did that first evening. Klark went out onto the balcony for a short moment and came back around to complete a circuit of the hall.

On her turn, Klark noticed Leksa’s antechamber. It was a raised section of the room off to the side, wedged in the corner and supported by the threshold to another space. Klark walked through and had her breath taken away, Leksa assumed hen she did not immediately reappear. Leksa could picture the space Klark found perfectly: a room half the size of Leksa’s receiving hall and missing twice the amount of ceiling. The floor was also partially collapsed in the far corner. However, the partial ceiling, the wall by the door of the antechamber, and the opposite wall were more than enough to protect from the elements. Like Leksa’s other leisurely chambers, it was decorated with an abundance of candelabra and gigantic plush furniture. Klark would spot a corner of the room that was entirely pillows. Leksa imagined they would engulf Klark entirely if she took a running leap into the pile as likely she had with snow when she was a girl.

Against her better judgment, Leksa allowed Klark’s aura to lead her to the antechamber, a few steps deeper into the Commander's chamber of state, to an almost-room off to the left, bare but for hard benches and chairs - low tables to discuss matters of war and strategy. Leksa reminded herself that everything was a transaction. She lowered herself gracefully into the pillows.

“You are troubled,” Klark said lowly, “a weight behind your eyes.”

Leksa pulled away.

“Forgive my impertinence Commander, but I would prefer to negotiate your best mind,” Klark was playful, but her eyes seemed contrite, “allow me?”

Klark gestured to her lap.

“Don’t be afraid, Commander,” Klark teased, “I won’t hurt you.”
It was the challenge that made Leksa comply when Klark pulled Leksa’s head into her lap, a pillow made of her legs. Klark’s fingers, cool and surprisingly delicate, began to rub at the medians of Leksa’s temple, her forehead, the back of her skull.

“Why are you doing this?”

“You deserve it. The coalition is a worthwhile goal -

“Why are you doing this,” Leksa emphasized, looking up at Klark from her position of weakness - vulnerability. People have layers and Leksa was slowly parsing out Klark’s catalog of duties from the pieces of her soul.

“I wanted to care for you,” Klark said simply, “as you have cared for me.”

A warm meal and safe rest. The lives and comfort of her people.

The privilege of the Commander’s ear.

Much too high a price to pay for care and Leksa will have to watch closely to see what Klark expected to get from her care - information the least.

Klark produced a low bowl of water, a saucer, and a clean cloth. Things Leksa’s Flamekeipas kept in abundance for maintenance of her wounds, sparring more than battle. Klark wet the cloth wrung the excess and laid the cool strip of fabric over Leksa’s feverish forehead. Leksa almost sighed in relief. It was a hot day and she made a great many mortal decisions, weighed countless potential consequences. All the thinking and planning left her feeling a little bit overheated. The points of Klark's fingers began to rub slow circles along Leksa's temporal arch. Leksa's eyes slipped closed.

"Leksa,"

Leksa opened her eyes to the call and was blessed by the image of Klark's softly smiling face. Her eyes were liquid and dancing in the firelight. Leksa was lost in the cascade Klark's hair, surrounded by an aesthetic of eclectically decorated braids, each of different thickness and intricacy, some shining glints of metal and abalone, others displayed glimmering baubles, shining glints of metal, thin loops of copper wrapped around and woven through, the long feather of an eagle, some bore little hanging charms --

“I would see no harm come to you,” Klark whispered as she caught Leksa's eye, “I would see your wishes done.”

"I would have your will accomplished."

Leksa sat up and the cloth fell into the space between them, forgotten.

“You are Ice Nation. Your truest loyalty will always be to Nia.”

Leksa gave Klark one last, searching glance before the Commander turned her back on Klark and walked away.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not a huge fan of this chapter. It feels stiff and fractious. The ending feels abrupt.
I digress

The Flamekeipa’s last words roughly translate to: Thank you, Commander, for your light. My fight is over and I am no longer your weakness.

This chapter is a bit of a delve into Lexa’s psyche to demonstrate her vulnerability to Clarke’s... methods. At this point, Lexa is very closed off and distant from even those closest to her. Her life is about fighting or thinking about fighting and pretty much everything related to her personal life is tinged with grief or distanced by status. Klark will attempt to break through her hard outer shell to find the warm, gooey center.

The Ambassadors Tollik and Sagan are incidental OC that became necessary for the functioning of the plot. As is Hathor the one-eared man. I quickly realized that we got precious little context to the grounder government in the 100 in season 2 and 3 beyond vivid visuals, so I had to improvise a little. Johrum is a canon character from season five confirmed to be a part of Leksa’s royal guard by Madi under the influence of the flame.

A shoutout to anyone who liked my little tidbit about Leka "overheating," after thinking too hard. AI jokes. Lol.

Thank you,

Shtare
The Survivor's Dance and the Believer's Doubt

Chapter Summary

Klark goes out on the limb and Leksa makes a decision.

Enjoy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You are Ice Nation. Your truest loyalty will always be to Nia,” Leksa said, voice rough and deep as an ache.

Leksa rose from Klark’s lap and departed.

Klark let her go, albeit reluctantly.

Leksa’s absence left a chill in the air that clung to Klark’s skin. Leksa’s words cut Klark to the bone in a way she had never before felt vulnerable. Her noble judgement was nothing like the cold, unforgiving condemnation of the Ice Court. The Commander’s disapproval was the pure heat of the sun burning Klark from the inside out.

Leksa’s cool reprimand was a reminder for Klark about the persistent problem of Nia, which should have been a mercy for them both and a reason to keep distance ---

But oh how Klark burned for Leksa’s touch.

Klark’s attention was inexorably drawn to the Commander like a cliff crumbling into the sea. As a buoyant leaf caught on the wind and carried slowly to the ground. Klark was a stubborn ice floe caught in the rapids of Lexa’s swiftly melting river. Klark admired Lexa like the essential gravity of falling snow for she was as deadly as she was captivating. The utter beauty of pristine stillness lived in the arch of Leksa’s spine, the mercilessness cold in her hands and the icy layer in her eyes. For all Lexa shielded her emotions behind brutality, she felt so very deeply - held warmth in her eyes when she looked at Klark and Klark alone. Every interaction between Klark and Leksa was loaded with meaning, every pause filled with lust.

Watching Leksa walk away imbued Klark’s body with a rush of heat. The feeling was fundamental as nature and irresistible as death.

“You are Ice Nation. Your truest loyalty will always be to Nia.

True sadness dwelled in Leksa’s eyes at the thought of Klark forever out of her reach. To see the burgeoning desire in the Commander’s simmering stare was a heady rush in Klark’s veins. The bashful dip of Leksa’s chin and the eager softening of her lush mouth were equal parts rapture and torture.

Klark left Leksa private space and returned to the Commander’s public audience chamber. She found it empty. Klark helped herself to the remains of Lexa’s dinner table, better served than the greatest Azgeda feast, before making her way out onto the balcony.
Leksa stood at the edge, her head downcast against the darkened sky.

Klark moved to the Commander’s side, less than an arm’s length between their bodies. Leksa’s eyes were lowered, fixed on the fire-lit revelry of her people down below, the glow reflected there. Polis was Leksa’s village - her home.

“Fin was from my village,” Klark confided. Standing close, it was a soft conversation for two alone. A silent request for the Commander to treat Fin with the same grief-torn respect Leksa gave Klark. Fin was the only constant in Klark’s life after Nia took an interest in the bright young child and her golden hair. The girl whose best friend refused to let her go alone.

“He followed me to Troy and labored under the same fers.”

Understanding changed the lines of Leka’s face completely. Tight judgement melted into soft sympathy shaded with a sort of remorse. Guilt for having pre-judged Klark’s feral warrior based on the words of an outsider. Leksa’s Johrum had only Fin’s separation anxiety with which to judge him.

“Labored?”

Klark forgot that the ways of Trikru were different - more civilized. And less service. More about nurturing the next generation and less about cutting down the weak before they could become a burden.

“Less mentor and more master,” Klark explained gently, “we must earn their favor and then do whatever we have to do to keep it, unless we want a short fight as a footsoldier on the frontline.”

The footsoldiers were the first to die in any battle. Those that face the inclement weather most directly. Nia lost more warriors to freezing to death than she has in battle.

“I have often wondered how the clans came to be this way,” Leksa mused, drawing Klark’s attention again. Klark’s gaze followed the long curve of Leksa’s jaw. Leksa leaned forward, her body angled in Klark’s direction. “How we can come from the same people yet be so different.”

“The environment is responsible, Heda,” Klark said, “snow falls only in Azgeda. Sankru need trade for fresh water. Desperation has a way of changing people.”

Leksa’s face cured at the hardship in Klark’s perspective.

“And Fin? He was changed by what happened to your village?”

Klark is taken in by the show of genuine feeling for Fin. To have a heart so pure in her position would be a painful thing, Klark imagined. And yet she bears the burden with grace and strength, no hint to suggest the suffering she inflicts on herself by keeping her heart open to the world. The more she knew of Leksa, the more Klark doubted it was a choice at all. Leksa was made of feeling, channeled into a desire to save all people and alleviation of all suffering.

“Not so much the attack as the aftermath,” Klark said hesitantly. Fin made some questionable choices before Nia got her hands on him, and only some of them could be contributed to mourning. “Bluecliff was blatant in their attack. They left clothes and weapons behind, including a flag fallen from the hands of a bannerman. Those that survived the attack presented this evidence to Nia and begged her to act. Nia did nothing.”

“Nia, so eager for war, turned down a chance to conquer Bluecliff?”
“Nia wages war to get something she wants. She was already getting her perfect trade deal with Bluecliff, so the rest was irrelevant.”

“The lives of her people are irrelevant?”

“You know this as well as I, Leksa,” Klark smirked, going for levity.

Klark watched Leksa’s reaction carefully. It was a sight to see Leksa’s expression go blank and her eyes turn to flint stones, the colorful kind Klark with pick up on the shoreline and turn into charms. Leksa could guess where Klark was going, which meant she believed Klark’s words to her honor guard at the feast.

“Nia’s refusal to act enraged Fin. He was always critical of the government he grew increasingly vocal with his disapproval and disdain for Nia’s leadership. He was a fierce warrior and a valuable assassin, much favored by the generals.” Klark sighed. It had been so long since she spoke of it, the memories almost seemed to come alive with newness. To remember the way Fin used to laugh, brighter and louder than one would think possible in the frigid North, where the only thing that kept the shivers at bay was sheer force of will and fine tuned muscle control. Klark held tight to the memory of the boy that stood before the Queen and commanded that she take him with her. The Ice Queen, so taken with the boy’s brave spirit, agreed.

“Eventually, the Ice Queen tolerated no more.”

“What did she do to him, exactly?”

“She cauterized his tongue and turned him into her pet,” Klark said lowly. Fin was chained to Nia’s throne by his neck. She forced him to wear shaggy old bear furs from head to toe and had a muzzle made after he bit a guard. The one thing she didn’t let him wear was boots. Fin was lucky his biggest toes survived. “She kept him in the same kennel as her dogs. It took me years to earn his freedom.”

Leksa’s eyes were lipid pools of sorrow and empathy. She searched the lines of Klarks body for visible signs of injury. The kind of wounds more than skin-deep and leaving the kind of damage that clings like a shadow. Almost real enough to touch. A question hid in Leksa’s gaze. Klark gave Leksa a slow blink of permission.

“How did you earn Fin’s freedom?”

It was a complicated question with a very simple answer.

“I gave something up,” Clarke explained, “something valuable. One cannot gain without sacrifice. The Ice Queen adores sacrifice. Nia wanted something from me that she valued equal to the value I placed on Fin’s life. It was something she wanted from me for a long time and I was willing to give it to her to save my friend.”

Leksa was too polite to ask but her eyes burned with the question.

“Nia rules my body,” Klark admitted. Leksa’s fast twisted in gruesome understanding. As difficult as it was to accept, as much as it pained Klark to see that truth as a dark light in Leksa’s eyes, the sudden sorrow that flooded Leksa’s frame and softened every part of her. Klark was frustrated to see the Commander brought so low -- on Klark’s behalf. For the sake of Klark’s history.

Love was the last thing Klark wanted and the only thing that mattered at that moment.

“But she has no power over my mind,” Klark choked on the unfamiliar words and painful chest
contractions, “nor my heart.”

Blue and green eyes met like two hands in a blizzard, blind to everything but each other and the immense forces trying to tear them apart. Time stretched into infinity, the lounge and walls, the two of them, separate from everything else and moving in a world meant only for two. Outside, they belong to others, here, they could be - together.

The sideway’s glances Klark felt on her neck when her back was turned invited Klark to stay. The searching, sidelong stare when they stood side by side urged Klark to act. Klark closed the distance between them and seized Leksa’s mouth with her own. Leksa’s lips were succulent and smooth and Klark drank deep from them as if Leksa were fresh water itself. Clarke craved Leksa more than she ever pined for the stuff of life. Nia could withhold food and drink indefinitely, but she could carve at Klark’s breast for eternity and never touch how Klark felt for Leksa.

Leksa did not pull away. Her hand was cool on Klark’s overheated cheek.

Klark retreated to draw a breath and experiment with a different angle —

“Klark.”

Klark stilled, lingering in Leksa’s space, sharing breath, intimacy, trust.

“Make your offer.”

“Soon.”

Leksa pulled away, leaving Klark precarious and overbalanced, prime to fall over herself.

Leksa turned left the balcony without further ceremony and retreated back into her audience chamber: the physical manifestation of her position of power. It was the place Leksa must feel most safe and she allowed Klark inside, invited her in, unattended.

Klark was closer to Leksa’s heart than she realized.

Klark has no intention of abusing the privilege.

Leksa’s carnal interest was a beautiful blossom for Klark to observe from within her own fully bloomed hunger. From Klark’s bygone affection, Leksa wanted Klark almost as much as Klark wanted Leksa. She pulled away only to keep from tumbling headfirst into the fall.

*I’ll admit, my courting isn’t what it once was.*

It was no lie and Klark would not have shared it easily. Klark did what she always did when among untrustworthy ears - she turned her greatest weaknesses into performances and taught them how to dance the skykick. She presented her desires with so false a face as to be unbelievable, and in so doing drew the attention of predators to anything other than her words. Hidden in plain sight, Klark was able to keep her secrets safe.

Klark would hold Leksa’s noble heart close to her own, frostbitten that it was.

The cavity search and chains were unexpectedly pleasant next to imprisonment or death. Klark half expected to die for killing the assassin, so every moment after was a boon -- a bonafide lottery and Klark gluttoned herself on Leksa’s presence. Leksa watched her men strip Klark bare and Klark reveled in every second, every small tell that gave Leksa away. Her eyes darted around the room,
drawn to Klark’s form and away as quickly. Leksa’s lashes fluttering in distraction, how hard she was trying to seem unaffected.

Klark knew better, for she held the key to Leksa’s trust: her mercy.

Leksa allowed Klark a chance to plead her case. It was a greater opportunity than Klark deserved and she seized it to the fullest. She could not waste Leksa’s gift, so she told Leksa everything she could in open company. It was double talk to prepare Leksa to receive Klark’s offer. She needed to show Leksa the truth - she was the kind of woman that needed to see it. Exposing the barest hint of her hand to keep Leksa from folding over frustration and doubt was well worth the risk of revealing too much. She gave enough to draw Leksa in closer without giving herself away before she was ready -- Leksa was halfway to doing it for them both.

Leksa dressed Klark in clothes of her household. In Polis, wearing Leksa’s clothes provided a shield for her dignity as she bowed before the throne of the Commander. In Azgeda, to don the garb of another would be an open mark of courtship - and not the first from the Commander.

Leksa spared Klark’s life when she should have cut Klark down in vengeance without a second thought. In doing so, she returned in kind Klark’s tribute of life-blood. With a reciprocated ritual sacrifice and a presentation of gifts, they had begun courtship in the tradition of Azgeda.

Leksa did not understand the meaning of Klark’s vow, but she would. She didn’t believe Karlk’s explanations, but she would.

Klark’s word was her bond. The vow of honesty she made to Leksa was true as the stain of blood on snow. Bonds were sacred in Azgeda. If Klark broke a vow made to the Bone Crown, she would fall out of Nia’s favor in a distinctly fatal manner.

Klark would tell Leksa more of her stories.

Klark would trust her with the truth of her mistakes. By the time she was finished, Leksa would realize that everything shared between them was true and that, if they followed Klark’s plan, they one people.

The assassin changed Klark’s plan. Leksa did not believe that the woman was an assassin. Klark did not expect her to believe, but it was a blow to her overall agenda nonetheless. Every count against Leksa’s absolute faith in Klár’s fidelity was unacceptable. Killing the assassin was a show of loyalty and survival, on the chance the Commander could not have saved herself.

The moment Leksa spared her life after killing the assassin, the Commander earned Klark’s faith. Any other leader would have cut Klark down that very moment, no care for motive, only result. Where others saw only a threat, Leksa recognized a woman. Leksa was unmoved when Klark announced the foiled assassination attempt, but doubt was the hallmark of any good leader. Klark was unable to present Leksa with proof beyond her word. Leksa had no reason to trust Klark’s word, even with her vow of verity. The Trikru thought differently of honor than those of Azgeda - the idea mattered more - which made Leksa’s actions all the more significant.

Leksa spared Klark against her moral values and the advice of her advisors. Against the virtues of common sense and laws of accumulating and maintaining power. Leksa’s mercy was a detriment in her position. To defy the oldest of traditions to save the life an enemy was anathema to the people of the Twelve Clans. To spare a killer of her people.

Klark was already in deeper than she expected.
To kill in the protection of Leksa’s life and for Leksa to reward Klark with her life in return. It was an act befitting the greatest of Azgeda’s offering to the Gods. An act of devotion before the witnesses of man, sun, and blood. A step of bonding that hurtled over the niceties and landed firmly in taken so highly, Klark would be within her rights to take the Commander to bed if they were in Troy.

It was a buzz like mushroom to walk the Tower knowing she walked in the shadow of the Commander. When the passing warriors stared at her, they would see Leksa’s power reflected back at them. Klark is a living example of Leksa’s magnanimity and love. Of her strength and her passion. All would see a new weakness bloomed at Leksa’s side in the form of the Ice Nation killer. It would weaken the Commander - and the Coalition. Now, it was Klark’s responsibility to shield the gap she created in Leksa’s armor. To ensure that their connection became a communion of equals rather than an act of warfare.

For only passion could drive a woman to her own ruination to save the enemy.

To value a life so highly to see it struck from the world.

Klark was waiting with open arms to embrace Leksa’s body and soul - mind and heart.

But first, she had to make sure they both survived, regardless of what Leksa thought of Klark.

“You are Ice Nation. Your truest loyalty will always be to Nia.”

Klark prepared to lay the groundwork of disproving Leksa’s notion during her walk with Leksa through the bazaar, but the assassin changed Klark’s plan. Klar had no expected Nia to act so soon. She hoped Leksa did not believe that the woman was an assassin. Klark did not expect her to believe, but it was a blow to her overall agenda nonetheless. Every count against Leksa’s absolute faith in Klark’s fidelity was unacceptable. Killing the assassin was a show of loyalty on the chance the Commander could not have saved herself. It was Klark’s failure in her underestimation of Leksa’s skill. She should have let the Commander take the fight. Klark’s reputation in Polis would be spotless and Leksa would likely have triumphed. She was Commander. Klark’s fear was unwarranted.

Nothing for it now.

Klark was going to end up in the dungeon if she couldn’t right the ship.

Leksa may not believe in Klark, but she would.

In the way of her people, Klark was declared for Leksa. There was no going back and Klark found that she did not want to.

The time started to count down in Klark’s mind - until Nia made her move.

Klark planned on spending that time with Leksa in any way the Commander would have her.

With that thought, Klark turned away from the splendorous view of Polis at Night and followed after Leksa as soldiers were meant to do for their leaders. As warriors did for their Commander. Klark walked the candle-lit reception hall to find Leksa sitting rigidly in her throne.

Towers of roman candles were mounted in each corner of the room. Smaller candelabra, holding dozens of pillar candles lined the stairs. The light cast on Leksa was soft molten gold as if illuminated by a fire large enough to burn a village down.
It was a warmth the like of which Klark had only felt at Nia’s annual pyre festival. But even with the dozens of bonfires, Azgeda air always regaining a lingering chill. Polis was warm and everything Klark was hesitant to believe it might be.

Klark moved to sit at Leksa’s feat, on the landing of her throne. Klark rested her legs on the steps and marveled at the view. Her hand rested inches from Leksa’s boot.

Leksa was lounging in her throne, now. Seemingly at ease. She leaned at a slant, twirling a blunt blade in her hand that Klark recognized as the razor from her cheek. Klark practiced speaking around the metal without slurring her words for months on end. Her mouth felt empty without the bitter bite of a metallic taste.

“Tell me about what happened the attack,” Leksa murmured, looking down at the knife in her hands, “Fin and your mother’s village.”

Klark sighed heavily. The fate of her village was a difficult subject and the words took longer to come. Somehow, the truth seemed a lighter weight in Leksa’s presence. To bare her soul to Leksa would be an unburdening, not a chore.

“As you’ve likely guessed, I wasn’t there,” Klark said. Leksa’s face remained unchanged — as Klark suspected. Leksa was perceptive and thoughtful. Her imagination would have previewed everything Klark was about to say and a thousand more possibilities. Klark had given her plenty to work with, from the raids to the assassin.

“I was already serving as seken to Nia,” Klark said, “with Fin.”

Leksa sat up straight, newly engaged. If Leksa wanted to hear the story - she wanted to believe it. The Commander was willing to entertain the possibility that Klark was actually telling the truth. It was a start. A small miracle and exactly the spark needed to rekindle Klark’s faith in the potential of her success.

“They came in the night,” Klark remembered Murfy’s words when he’d stumbled into Troy, blue from frostbite and wrapped in nothing but a long fur. “My mother’s hut was lit first. She was well known in the village, loved and respected and needed. The fire called everyone from their houses — to a slaughter.”

Leksa’s posture was stiff and her face grave.

“Every farmer in Azgeda need be a warrior just to survive, but they didn’t have their weapons when they went outside that night. They thought they knew who the enemy was, burning right before their eyes. They didn’t notice the hand that sparked the tinder or the sword wielded in the darkness.”

Klark licked her lips.

“Most of the young warriors on sentry post were the first to die. The rest were left to fight with burning logs. A hundred or so made it out. One of my delegation was a hunter and he knows the snow and how to disappear behind the sun’s glare. He led them to Troy.”

Leksa said nothing, watching Klark with her solemn, half-lidded stare.

“Ask me how many of those hundred are still living, Heda .”

It is the opposite of a taunt. It is an advocation.
“How many, Klark?”

“Two. My strategist and one other.”

“And the other?”

“Murfy would interest you more, Heda, mainly because he came with me to Polis as part of my delegation. He’s not much of a fighter but his tongue is sharper than any knife. Fox is no laughing matter, either, you should see her with a spear.” Klark distracted Leksa from inconvenient curiosities and angled her toward something that would help them both. Klark needed to get Murfy by her side and Ontari back in her sights. Without her people, she was fighting with one hand behind her back. She was going to need every advantage to stay ahead of Nia. To keep Leksa alive.

“Speaking of your attendants,” Leksa said, conversational and comfortable in Klark’s presence. “I want to hear about the prince.”

Klark resisted the urge to chuckle — Leksa had grown bold in their newfound intimacy. Klark was pleased to see that courtesy had no part in Leksa kom Trikru. Klark was not offended in the least. If anything, she was eager.

“I saved his life, actually.”

Leksa was genuinely surprised at that, her brow lifting inquisitively. Based on what Leksa had seen of Klark so far, magnanimity was not among her qualities. Leksa would have gleaned this about Klark after their first meeting - which meant the surprise was more like curiosity about what Klark got out of the rescue.

“Nia was going to execute him for something, I don’t remember what,” Klark said honestly, as she’d genuinely forgotten the reason. “Kill him or banish him, which was just another word for execution in Azgeda,” Klark’s voice was dry. Nia created laws to control her people and lend prestige to her vendettas. Any gona Nia viewed as misbehaving was subject to one of her hearings. The sentence was always blood, in one form or another. Nia made a sport of suffering and killing was her favorite past time.

“I offered to take him off her hands,” Klark told Leksa, “I gave up a few things I would have rather kept, but Roan doesn’t come without his rewards. You can’t underestimate the power of royal blood. Those pretty crescent moons have gotten me a fair few favors.”

Having Roan at the trading house meant the newest information free of charge. During raids, warriors fled from the marks, sparing themselves Klark’s ambivalent blade. At the border taverns, Klark and her cadre drank free of charge - after Roan beat the barkeep unconscious and got away with it.

“And a good deal more fights, I imagine,” Leksa smirked like she was entertained by a good brawl.

Of course, Heda,” Klack laughed gayly, “but that’s half the fun.”

Lexa’s humor was thin on the ground but she cracked a small smirk. For Klark, it was enough to elevate her macabre levity to something sweetly laughable, and Klark floating along with the feeling, watching Leksa’s face crease with happiness as Klark laughed the walls down.

Sometimes opposites balanced out and sometimes they clashed in an explosion of metal and death.

Klark prayed to the summer gods she and Leksa were the former.
“You will be expected to present Roan at the summit this evening,” Leksa said, face closed off, “As well as Nia’s response to the Coalition.”

Klark knew she was out of time in Polis. The summit was ending and Klark had no more time to stall. She only hoped Leksa would forgive her for what she had to do to keep her people safe.

“I can give you what you ask for, Commander, but I beg of you to remember where Ice Queen Nia ends as Klark kom Azgeda begins. After the summit.”

“You mean to remain?”

“Only if the Commander allows.”

Leksa nodded shallowly said nothing else for a long while. They sat together in comfortable silence. When Klark retired for the evening, she did not notice the burly warriors following in her footsteps. She was too busy fantasizing about bowing before the Commander.

Leksa allowed herself to indulge in Klark for a moment before the reminder of Azgeda’s agenda gave her the strength to pull away.

Klark was a good choice, on Nia’s part, for her role. Even if everything Klark told her about Fin and her mother’s village was a lie, Leksa gained valuable insight into Klark’s methods and her mindset. She was appealing to Leksa’s good nature in an effort to garner her empathy and mercy thereafter.

Leksa was impressed by how low Klark was willing to stoop.

On the same hand --

Klark’s agony seemed sincere. The battle in her eyes rang true. Nia was the kind of person to hold the idea of freedom over someone’s head. She was the leader that tortured and killed to secure loyalty. An authoritarian if there ever was one, cunning and ruthless and willing to stop at nothing to destroy Leksa in any way possible. If Leksa easily believed anything of Klark’s story, it was Nia’s willingness to spread hurt and misery. Killing Costia and putting her head in Leksa’s bed wasn’t enough for a blow - Nia needed to send Klark to break Leksa’s heart all over again.

The Coalition was gaining traction as Klark was just the kind of woman that could knock Leksa off course.

Perhaps Leksa was merely blinded by Klark appeal - her beauty, quick mind, and stubborn pride. She had shown Leksa weakness many times over in her short stay at Polis and she seemed to lose nothing by doing it. She held her head aloft in the same way and wore her usual enigmatic smile. Klark was the precise opposite of the Ambassadors before her and Leksa did not know what to make of her character but she needed to make a choice.

Klark was going to make Leksa an offer, and all she asked was that Leksa consider her response thoughtfully before acting. It was no more than Leksa did for any case brought before her throne. She swore on her name that she was telling the truth.

It was the last day of the summit. Klark had no choice but to present herself to the Commander and explain her unreasonably tardy appearance. The summit gathered with the Ambassadors of the Twelve Clans and their representatives. Every voice in the room was significant to a community under Leksa’s rule - wielded power that Leksa needed on the ground in order to maintain the fragile peace of the Coalition. What was said at the summit would spread to every corner of the
clan lands, and be known as the new truth as it was heard from the Commander’s court.

That morning, Leksa wanted to train the Natblida. Sparring with the children eased her troubled mind. They expected nothing from Leksa but what she could give them and they soaked up her lessons with eager attention.

Anya intercepted Leksa before she left the tower. Leksa motioned for her mentor to walk with her. Leksa, Anya, and Gustus took the lift to the ground floor.

“I am returning to Ton D.C. before the close of the summit,” Anya said, “to avoid galloping over twelve clan’s worth of horse droppings.”

“So everyone else can ride over yours?”

Anya gave Leksa a scathing deadpan stare.

“Of course, Commander.”

“You will return for the harvest festival,” Leksa said, both as a question and a request. Anya’s presence was stabilizing in light of Klark’s duplicity.

This time, Anya smiled.

“Of course, Commander.”

Leksa bid farewell to her mentor and did not watch Anya ride away.

Leksa turned to Gustus and address Johrum through his superior.

“Return the Ambassador’s belongings and release the Azgeda delegation into her care.”

“Commander?”

“Let none say that the Commander lacks hospitality.”

It is enough of an excuse not to draw Gustus’ disapproval, but plenty enough to earn his suspicion. If Leksa’s Trikru advisors had their way, she would show nothing but scorn and scraps to the Ice Nation. Such behavior was not befitting a wise leader and Leksa needed to be more delicate if she expected Azgeda to join the Coalition. Killing the previous Ambassadors was not as strong an arm as Leksa was willing to show. Leksa felt secure that she could meet any challenge of equal footing. The Commander need not cripple her opponents in order to win.

The Natblida were pleasantly surprised by Leksa’s impromptu visit and full of questions about the summit. They were all about the age Leksa was when she assumed the mantle of Commander and only Aden was remotely prepared to inherit the responsibilities. Leksa made a point to spar with him regularly. Aden thrived under Leksa’s attention and had grown confident enough to challenge Leksa openly.

“Why are you letting Azgeda join Coalition?”

Leksa was not angry. She saw the defiance for what it was - curiosity, not disrespect.

“What are the three rules of being Commander?”

The rest of the Natblida shrunk back, aware that this lesson was for Aden alone. It was the oldest lesson, and the most important.
“Wisdom, compassion, and strength.”

“It requires strength to invite a stranger into your home and tell them you are not afraid of what they can do. It takes compassion to look at a clan and see those without a voice, those that waste away under the enemy we see and hear and face in battle. Wisdom, above all, to see that peace is more valuable than war and lives saved a greater measure of power than lives destroyed.”

“Yes, Commander,” Aden said, taking her words to heart. Leksa dismissed Aden and the Natblida welcomed him back as one of their own. Aden did not smile but his eyes were not cold. The older he got the more he learned the hardest lesson. He would lose them all, as Leksa was doomed to lose anyone that got to close.

Leksa saw loyalty, resept, and love in the eyes of her most promising novitiate and it is enough to fulfill Leksa hopes for the future. Her legacy was in place and her inheritors would carry on the Coalition in the event of her death.

“Leksa,” said Titus, the Fleimkepa that cared for the Natblida and had cared for Leksa in her own childhood. Leksa allowed him certain liberties, so long as he did not abuse the privilege.

“Titus,” Leksa acknowledged, welcoming the man to speak his piece.

“I have heard stories of the new Azgeda Ambassador and I humbly ask your permission to attend the summit this evening.”

“Do you have a particular concern, Titus?”

“Stories say she is a witch like Wanheda and it wish to see the truth of it with my own eyes.”

Whatever else Leksa may believe Klark capable of, it was not magic. If Nia had magic she would have struck Leksa dead from a distance years ago. If Nia’s legendary Wanheda was truly the Commander of Death, Leksa would have met them long before now.

“Very well,” Leksa said.

The evening came quickly. Leksa donned her medallion and pauldron as the symbols of her power but left her face bare. She was not going into battle. The summit was a formal occasion meant to promote the armistice the Coalition represented. If Leksa arrived in warpaint, it would undermine her cause.

Leksa entered her hall in full fanfare with her accompaniment of Gustus and Johrum and the rest of her elite royal guard. A dozen in all that spread out to strategic points in the room, filling the extra space in the crowd. Titus stood off to the side, in the shadow cast by Leksa’s throne. The seated Ambassadors rose as the Commander walked down the aisle and rose to her seat of power. The twisted wood of her throne looked menacing in the light of the torches. Leksa turned and stood before it, facing her people as she did every day. The Ambassadors would remain standing as long as Leksa did.

Azgeda was absent. Klark’s chair of wrought metal, positioned at the foot of Leksa’s steps, was empty.

Leksa would remain standing until all of her people arrived.

“The Azgeda Ambassador, Heda,”

Gustus led in a group of six warriors, three men and three women. One of the women was leading
Leksa took one look at Klark and cursed Nia to the poisonous fog. Leksa’s suspicions and last night’s implications strode down Leksa’s carpet like a shadowcat of Azgeda, equal parts beautiful and deadly. She was striking, her bright hair shining after the thorough washing, nearly matching the colorless white fox pelts that made her coat. The pelts were shorter and finer than the coat she wore daily, more formal but no less Ice Nation. Tighter and nearly brushing the floor.

Lexa searched for Klark’s scars and found them. A large inverted triangle pointed down from her hairline, terminating just before her eyebrows, the same place of the Commander’s symbol of authority. The central scar was bracketed by two similar triangles, smaller half-points. The pair on either side of, yet smaller still. After speaking with the Floukru Ambassador, Leksa could see Klark’s forehead only as a crown of icicles. White warpaint was applied in two thick swathes under both eyes, casting the pale scar tissue into the dual likeness of a battle helm.

One of Klark’s shoulders was decorated with the skull of a shadowcat, fangs as long as a man’s hand. The skull was bleached and nestled amongst a bed of fur thicker and speckled with gray and black. The long pelt hung over Klark’s shoulder, draped down her back, and collected under her opposite arm. It took Leksa a moment to realize that the skull was from the same beast as the decorative pelt laid over the white coat. It was a hunting decoration - a shadowcat Klark must have slain with her own hands.

“You traveled from Azgeda for such a brief message?” Was all Leksa managed to say.

“I have also brought you a gift.”
Klark tossed the sack at Lexa’s feet but held onto the cloth. The contents of the sack were launched into the air and landed at the foot of Lexa’s receiving hall. It was a head - three of them. Two long-haired and one shorn bald. Lexa did not recognize any of them. The heads were fresh. The Azgeda delegated never escaped which meant someone currently attending the summit had done the killed and provided Klark with the heads. Lexa scanned the room as if she could identify the traitor by sight alone. Lexa’s security was worryingly lax. Either all of her soldiers were incompetent, or she was surrounded by more traitors than she realized.

“Care to make introductions, Ambassador?”

Lexa had a bead on Klark now. She would not be thrown on by any of her theatrics. Klark wanted Lexa to fixate on how she got the heads so Klark could conceal the true motive behind the murders.

“Spies, Heda”

“You have nothing else to say?”

Just more of the same line Klark tried to feed Lexa after the first civilian fell at her hands. As far as Lexa knew, the heads at her feet were as innocent as that merchant woman.

“No, Heda, Klark said.

“You’re not going to negotiate?”

“You have told me that negotiation would be futile.”

She thought of Klark’s mouth, the Coalition and questioned her wisdom is trying to bring the Ice Nation into the fold in the first place. Azgeda was consistent in one thing only and it was betrayal. It was portrayed as allowing, but Lexa had no choice but to tolerate Nia’s Ambassador in order to stave off war as long as possible, if not entirely. On the surface, it was magnanimous of Lexa to allow another insubordinate Ice Nation cur so close to the throne. Klark was toeing a dangerous line and Lexa was on her last nerve with the Ice Nation.

“The Ice Queen has an obligation to peace —

“You want to be the commander that brings down the mountain.”

Lexa cannot recall the last time someone had the nerve to interrupt her. Titus’s scandalized gasp was lost in the metal scrap of Gustus’s sword swinging from the sheath. Lexa’s loyal bodyguard made it to the bottom of the step before Lexa froze him with a snap of his name. She turned back to the bright ambassador to find the woman watching her with an intense, calculating gaze. Klark was smart, and patient enough to quell her northern urges until such as time as they served her interests best. The other Ambassadors would not soon forget the Mountain. They gathered in opposition to Nia and each other. If the Ambassadors thought that Lexa would use their warriors as sacrifices in an attempt to end the clans’ oldest enemy, it could overturn everything Lexa worked for. The clans barely trusted the Coalition as it was and the word of one such as Klark may be enough to sway some minds against Lexa. Klark seemed to speak true only at Lexa’s inconvenience.

“Gustus, escort the rest of the Ambassador’s party to their chambers.”

Lexa needed them gone before Klark could stir more doubt against Lexa - before she had no choice but to cut Klark down before the entirety of the summit. The Azgeda gone acted as though they had not heard the Commander speak, their eyes trained on Klark’s back nearly unblinkingly while Klark watched the Commander.
“Your Commander gave you an order.”

They did not move, or acknowledge the words. Klark stared Lexa down like a hunter - willing her to understand that those of Azgeda did not recognize the authority of the Commander. The Ambassador nodded without breaking eye contact and her soldiers moved to obey Lexa’s commands. It was an imitation of Lexa's power play with Fin on a grand scale. Lexa cursed herself for giving Klark any ideas. Lexa fought against the rage that threatened to build. She could not be seen as losing control of herself even if she lost the room.

Lexa would be more furious if she had not predicted that the queen would make her move at the summit. As Lexa suspected, Klark was no more than a piece in Nia's war games, sent to throw stones in Lexa's path and interrupt the Coalition's proceedings. Lexa wondered when simple assassination went out of style.

“Commander,” Ambassador Sagan said, stepping forward.

A single poisonous glance from Lexa silenced the imperious man.

A small display of anger, however, could serve her purposes.

“Remove her from my presence,” Lexa snarled, trying on Klark’s method of warfare. Lexa would be too furious with Klark’s impudence to render a verdict. Ambassador Sagan was confused and irritated and would leave unsatisfied. The crowd was disquieted. The energy in the room tilted on threads, everyone with a passionate opinion but none daring to break the silence, stake the certainty, and take responsibility for the consequences. Azgeda had as many enemies as friends, and the balance was able to hover in the middle and prevent the tensions from coming to a head. Lexa wondered how long it would last. Word would soon reach Nia and she would not what Klark had done.

“Now!”

Lexa was the Commander and her royal guard, stunned by the display, rushed to obey her. For the Sankru Ambassador Sagan, Lexa’s anger toward Klark was a benefit to his cause. For the family, the Commander seemed to share their grief for their mother and lover, and their loathing for the Ice Nation. To the crowd, the Commander’s decision swayed them.

For now.

Lexa knew the time was coming when her decisions would be questioned. Not just by the few outliers but by the many, organized. She sometimes wondered when it would happen. Who they would be, and if she’d deserve it.

Klark would spend the night in the prison.

By the time Lexa let her out, the Sankru Ambassador and his party would have left Polis and Lexa would have the freedom to retaliate at her leisure.

The Coalition was of utmost importance.

The last night of the summit was ruined by Nia’s plan. There was no point in trying to regain the room. Better to end it and allow the people to talk amongst themselves than try to hold court and fail. Lexa left the summit chamber without a further word before she could do something else she would regret.
After three weeks of writer's block I bring you this offering.

FYI the "skykick" is the can-can. The Ice Nation does it for comradery and warmth around their war bonfires because reasons.

Thanks for reading,

Shtare
The Warrior's Burden and the Idealist's Sacrifice

Chapter Summary

Klark makes her offer and Leksa makes a choice.

Enjoy,

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Leksa’s face spoke volumes of her betrayal as Klark and her delegation were forcefully escorted from the Commander’s audience chamber. Klark and her soldiers were frog-marched down Leksa’s winding spiral staircase and summarily thrown headfirst into the dungeons under the tower.

Klark expected as much, but it was heartbreaking for Klark to stand in the way of Leksa’s dreams. Klark planned to support the Coalition, but sometimes one had to take the long way around to get to their desired destination in one piece.

I had no choice.

I don’t want to hurt you

We need each other

Klark longed to present these words to Leksa in offering. She wanted to provide an explanation for the embarrassment she Commander in front of the Coalition. Klark could not protect Leksa’s reputation without exposing both of them to the mortal consequences of Nia’s retaliation. No matter Klark’s personal feelings, she could not justify making personal choices.

Klark feared that Nia was already one step ahead of her.

Klark’s survival left her exposed and anything she spoke of hereafter was more knowledge shared and more of Klark’s power lost. Klark was not so foolish to believe anything shared was shared in privacy. Nia would know how Klark walked with Leksa through the bazaar and if friends. Killing Nia’s assassin would have been dismissed hearsay if Leksa had not spared Klark’s life after the fact. Klark was grateful, undoubtedly, but Leksa’s mercy left Klark looking highly favored by the Commander. As a result, Klark’s loyalty to Nia would be questioned by every witness connected to Nia’s spy network. Anyone watching would have seen Klark chose the life of the Commander over the Ice Queen’s agent fulfilling her purpose.

After she learned of the assassination’s death, Nia would suspect Klark for a traitor.

Klark had no choice but to present for Nia at the summit. The formal declaration of loyalty to Nia may be enough to mitigate the effects of Nia’s suspicion. Proclaiming for Nia before the entirety of the summit left a bad taste in Klark’s mouth and a shadow over her heart. It was done for Klark and Leksa’s protection. To ease Nia’s suspicions. To buy more time before the Ice Army marches.

Condemning the Coalition was an affront to Leksa that may cost Klark dearly. The Commander’s
trust was on the line but Klark had no choice but to maintain a delicate balance between Leksa’s faith and Nia’s favor. Both took a potentially fatal blow.

Klark needed to tell Leksa everything, as soon as possible if she wanted a hope of salvaging their allyship nevertheless the tentative sprouts of their attraction. Klark chose Leksa to be her Commander and Klark needed to make her see it.

Leksa might think Klark a liar, but it was a level Klark was willing to stoop in order to prove the substance of her offer.

Throwing Nia a bone had been her only option if she wanted to live long enough to make her offer at all.

When it came to reporting Klark’s crime to Nia’s ear, it would come down to who possessed the fastest horse and most desperate need to curry Nia’s favor. Getting to Troy presented a challenge. Only five passable routes into Azgeda existed, trodden over generations of warriors, countless of whom died in the process. The routes were known only to those with Nia’s permission to travel. Any hapless journey meant certain death. The land was a maze of wastelands and mudslides and giant lakes of ice that appeared to be solid ground until the ice cracked and black water dragged you under. Mountains taller than the sky and mudslides that could wash you away like sand on the shore.

Klark knew a few handfuls of warriors, politicians, and generals who knew the paths. However long it took someone to find a guide and get to Nia was the amount of time Klark had to sway Leksa to her side wholeheartedly. For insurance, Klark used personal favors to seal off the mountain gorge and seashell shore paths. She was able to bribe the village head, guardian to the Bishop’s Gate that blocked off Azgeda’s wailing woods. Anyone intending on reported Klark’s treachery would be left to choose between skirting the alpine ridge and the long walk as Nia called it. The main route to Azgeda, which was a hard trudge through the shortest section of the wasteland. Without a war caravan, they would be forced to ride with nothing but clothes and water. Anything else, including food, would slow you down and the hip-deep snow needed no help as an impediment. If you lived to see to the other side, your horse was a goner.

Time was the most essential resource for survival in Azgeda. The wasteland bears the name for the harsh winds battering too fast for anything to grow, blowing away any good snow for building a shelter. Clothes were bare protection against air that could freeze the eyes out of someone's head in a blink. No matter how warmly dressed, your best chance was to leg it through as fast as you possibly could. Food could be scavenged and water melted, but skin could not be re-grown once the rot set in.

Because of Klark’s intervention, there were only two ways in and out of Troy for the next moon and both paths promised certain death.

Anyone that wanted to report to Nia would be half-dead by the time they reached the Ice Throne. For a little while, at least.

Klark was trying to save Leksa and her Coalition.

Someone would slip through and get to Nia, Klark was sure. The Ice Army would march soon. If Klark’s plans weren’t complete before then, everything was for nothing.

Klark was running short on time.

She needed to speak to Leksa.
Klark spent the night in the dungeons, along with the rest of her delegation, for defying the Commander during a summit session.

Each of them was chained to bolts in the stone wall that seemed carved for this very purpose. The bolts were an arm’s length apart and prisoners were afforded six or so feet of chain. A long narrow window ran along the top of the easternmost wall, letting in both fresh air and rain, along with animal waste and detritus from those passing on the road above. The floor was covered in molding hay. It was far and away more than Klark received from Nia’s dungeon.

The cell door closed and Fox slipped her bonds. It took moments for Fox to free the rest of them from their shackles. They left the shackles open for quick re-application. Klark didn’t want the guards to suspect them of any foul play.

Klark didn’t know if Leksa was responsible for Fin being chained beside Klark, within arm’s reach, but Klark was grateful. She told Leksa Fin’s story for that very purpose. It was hard enough for Fin to be functional in the day to day. Without Klark, he was trapped in a dark, painful place. Klark was Fin’s connection to the world. The only part of his life that he still remembered. Fin lay his head in her lap and Klark stroked his hair.

“Nia will be happy,” Murfy said, “you humiliated the Commander in front of the Coalition without lifting a finger.”

“I bet she lifted a lot more than a finger,” Ontari said, glaring at Klark with her usual unabashed hatred. “The Commander was undressing you with her eyes. She spared you more than once. You have an in - take her to bed and kill her!”

“It’s not that easy to kill the Commander,” Roan said, rolling his eyes and head with the force of his condescension.

“It is if you take her to bed,” Ontari said with a sneer. “You're never more vulnerable than the morning after. If I were in Klark's place, the Commander would already be finished and we would be on our way home.”

“If Klark was as stupid as you, we would all be dead,” Roan said.

Ontari would have killed Roan if Klark did not step in.

“Murfy,” Klark summoned his gaze, and everyone else's, “how well do you remember your time with the Priests of the Fallow Order?”

“Very well,” Murfy said, his eyes darkened, “why?”

“You know why.”

He infiltrated the order by seducing the Archdiocese.

The mission was one of his first assignments. Embed himself within the church and take it apart from the inside. Only Nia was permitted to indiscriminately tax the peasantry and the order was to be punished for their presumption. Murfy was meant to signal the army to initiate the final battle but Klark never saw the signal fire. She found him at the gate, bathed in blood and smoking an ornate ivory pipe Klark had never seen before.

He finished the church himself. Klark liked that kind of initiative. She bartered with Nia for him the same night. He stood before the ice throne unwashed and unbothered, soaked in the blood of a hundred monks. She won him cheaper than she was willing to pay. Nia had plenty of men capable
of slaughtering a whole way of life single-handed, and she did not see the insidious mind behind the skillful hands. The next five years were Klark, Fin, and Murfy alone. They took Nia’s ugliest missions and most indecent assassinations. Nia liked Klark vicious and Klark liked Nia’s favor. It was a painless existence, for the most part. Klark wanted more before she knew Leksa. Having met Leksa, Klark saw the future in her grasp. The infinite potential of their making.

“I thought you hated doing things this way,” Murphy mused, likely in reference to the many times Klark bitched to him about assassins with no talent for anything but seducing their victims and striking when their back was turned, “like a coward?”

“It’s not like that,” Klark said, less defending herself and more bringing her tactician up to speed. “Leksa is more than you know - or could possibly understand.”

Murfy snorted in derision, “we ditched that plan over a year ago because it’s suicide, regardless of what you think you know about the Commander.”

“But it’s not suicide if it’s real.”

“Klark --

“Murfy, she wants me and I intend to have her. I can have the life I dreamed of when Nia kept me in the dark for weeks and months on end. This plan can work. I can make it work. The offer as well - it can all come together perfectly but I need more time.”

“I was right there beside you in those dungeons,” Murfy said, “it will never work. We’re not talking about some soft Shallow Valley politicians, this is the Commander. It would be easier to issue a Challenge and kill her outright.”

“You were beside me then, so be beside me now,” Klark said, “Leksa must live and we must be for Leksa, here on out. In my absence, you will follow the Commander as you would follow me.”

“I’m going to regret agreeing to this,” Murfy said.

Murfy stared at Klark with his keen eyes and she knew he could see how much Klark wanted Leksa - outside of any mission or plan. He would follow her, Klark knew. Ontari hissed like a startled shadowcat, furious and ready to tear Klark’s face to ribbons with her fingernails. Roan snorted and chuckled lowly. Fox watched Klark silently. Fox hated cages. She nodded, agreeing to follow Klark’s lead, even when the path stretched out of her sight.

None of her people liked Klark’s plan, but they would not openly defy the Battlemaster on foreign soil. Azgeda only survived because of loyalty, even if it was bought with blood.

Fin turned over in Klark’s lap, looking up at her with a wounded expression that foreshadowed a deeper emotional breakdown. Klark wrapped her arms around Fin, both as a comfort to him and keep him from hurting himself when he started to scream and thrash in her arms. Murfy came up on her other side, like he always did, and took a scissor hold of Fin’s shoulders. Fox came into the embrace next, wrapping her arms around Fin’s head to keep him from beating his head against Klark’s skull. Between the three of them, they were able to restrain Fin until he regained awareness of his senses and control of his body.

Roan and Ontari crouched uncomfortably against the stone wall, on opposite sides of the cage instead of side by side. They could be a powerful team against Klark but they were too distracted by petty arguments over Nia’s favor to join forces and destroy the Battlemaster.

If they knew what she had planned for Nia, would they act?
A guard returned to the door. He fumbled with the latch, preoccupied long enough for the Azgeda delegation to slip back into their bonds.

“The Commander has summoned you.”

After closing the Summit, Leksa called a conference of her most loyal followers to deal with the Azgeda situation. The meeting was attended only by those that could be trusted with Leksa’s life as well as state secrets. Of Leksa’s people, only Gustus, Titus, and her royal guard were in attendance.

“Humiliation!” Titus roared to the sky in righteous anger, “Disrespect! She defies the Coalition in front of the clans!”

“I am well aware, Titus,” Leksa said through gritted teeth. Her arms were crossed and she sat stiffly in her throne. Leksa mind ran a mile a minute, trying to factor in all of Klark’s potential motives with her words and actions. Leksa should have known better than to believe she could sway Klark to her side with nothing but pretty words and selfless ideals. At the same time, Leksa sensed something deeper in Klark’s actions. Even if her heart was empty, Klark was too intelligent and cunning to kill for no reason.

“Leksa, you have offered this Ambassador chance after chance and still she spits on your honor - on your authority as Commander! The Ice Nation has shamed us too many times. *Jus drien jus daun!*”

“Silence, Titus,” Leksa said.

“You must kill her now!”

“There’s more going on here than you know.”

“I know more than you think, Leksa. I know of your fascination with this woman and her tricks. I’ve heard the soldiers speak of the way you favor her presence over that of your advisors. You tread a dangerous path, Leksa, a path that could destroy the Coalition.”

“Do not presume to lecture me on matters of state.”

“Leksa, I am begging you, preserve the Coalition before this Ice Nation branwada destroys everything you’ve built, and then you!”

“You think me so weak, Titus?”

“You are strong and wise, Leksa. I call on these higher qualities to make you see what is happening to you. Nia sent her here to destroy you. Do not allow it to happen, Heda. Klark kom Azgeda must die!”

Leksa ignored Titus in favor of Gustus, who knelt at the foot of Leksa’s throne examining the heads Klark and her delegation left behind. The stumps bled sluggishly onto the floor and were beginning to attract flies

“Were they ours?”

Leksa ignored Titus in favor of Gustus. The Commander appointed her personal guard as spymaster after Costia’s death. Leksa did not trust the innocence of her previous spymaster in her lover’s death and was unwilling to risk more of her people’s lives. He burned on the pyre with Costia and Gustus was appointed to his position. Grooming spies and watching Leksa’s back were great burdens, but Gustus was equal to the task. He would recognize the heads if they were Leksa’s
spies.

“No, Heda,” Gustus said. Leksa could hear the uncertainty in his voice, “but I recognize one from the auxiliary guard.”

The auxiliary guard were members of Leksa’s army, the elite. Only a single step in rank below Leksa’s royal guard. Any one member could have fought beside Leksa in battle, would have come from a local village and received supplies from the Commander stores during a lean winter.

“Fear tactics?” Klark could have easily selected warriors at random to claim as her spies. A sick way to make Leksa lose faith in her people. Leksa had no way of asking severed heads for their side of the story.

“Maybe,” Gustus said. The fact that he wasn’t jumping on any opportunity to condemn the Ice Nation conveyed the degree of his doubt.

“Gustus?”

“I sent riders to Sankru, to escort the family of the slain woman. They have not returned.”

“Bandits on the road?” Titus spoke of the summit. The more people on the road, the most bandits were attracted by their passing.

“Or Sankru has betrayed us,” Leksa said. If Klark was undermining the Coalition on Nia’s behalf, the Ambassador would not be the only one sent on that mission. Any good leader dealt in contingencies, including the kind that appeared unrelated to the outside observer. If Klark was on Leksa side, killing the enemies hidden in plain sight was the best first move. “An assassin indeed.”

“The spies of Azgeda are insidious, Commander,” Gustus said. Leksa could hear the unspoken. Her protector didn’t know whether or not the heads belonged to Azgeda spies.

“As any good spy must be,” Leksa said. “Or any assassin.”

Innocence depended on the view of the observer.

“Azgeda is different,” Gustus said. “Ice Nation spies are embedded in villages as children and grow inside their new clan’s culture and community as if born there. As adults, they have the esteem to welcome refugee children from other villages.”

“These children being spies as well?”

“Just so, Commander,” Gustus said.

“This woman from the market, so respected by her community, could have been one of these child plants. An assassin, rather than a spy. They trust her because they were children beside her. They do not question her roots because she is present in their earliest memories.”

“Commander, I didn’t mean --

“But you said. If all Azgeda spies start as children, anyone could be an Azgeda spy. Any child raised in any village, at any time.”

Gustus picked on Leksa’s thoughts - her entertainment of Klark’s goodwill.

“Then how would she have recognized this assassin?”
“The spy would need someone through which to funnel the information. Someone high ranking, that Nia would trust. Someone like a Battlemaster.”

Klark was likely a spy herself. A spy turned against their master was the greatest asset in war.

“Commander —

It was a reason to believe Klark when she said she was protecting Leksa from an assassin. She had so much to lose for killing a civilian. Klark played games with Leksa using the lives of her people, certainly, but those deaths were expected. A raiding party attacking TonDC was not news in Polis, so much as a part of life. One is not meant to kill in the middle of the street in the capital, however

Unless you are cutting down an enemy.

The Commander wondered, since the day of the square, what possible purpose killing a civilian would serve Klark. Why would Klark spare the boy with the rock but cut down a seemingly innocent woman a moment later? And now these heads, too unknown to Leksa to be a personal attack and too inconsequential to be a politically motivated blow - at least on the surface. Every action Klark has taken seemed to be that of any foolhardy, bloodthirsty Azgeda.

Unless Klark knew something Leksa did not know.

If there was one thing Klark was not, it was foolish.

Leksa considered what she would do in Klark’s position. A powerful warrior with a heart that served under an evil queen. Leksa would do anything to escape, were she in Klark’s position. Leksa would spend her life trying to destroy those who would destroy her people with war and famine. Privately, Klark expressed nothing but enmity for Nia and the Ice Queen’s rule. It was only during formal occasions, rife with listening ears, that Klark pushed Nia’s agenda. When Leksa and Klark were alone, the Azgeda Ambassador seemed like a completely different person.

It was up to Leksa to decide which, if either, was the true Klark.

“Bring the Ambassador to my audience chamber.”

Went to the chamber and waited for Klark.

Leksa allowed Gustus, Johrum, and the royal guard to remain.

Klark was brought forth and forced on her knees before the throne, bound, much as she was the first day she knelt in that place. Her effect was much different from that of their first encounter. Leksa expected a small, flirtatious smile and a shine in Klark’s eye like she had a secret. Leksa received a relaxed mouth and slightly downturned eyebrows. Klark was concerned, almost worried.

“I’m ready to make my offer, my Commander,” Klark said.

Lexa fought the urge to lean forward, into the ambassador’s space. The closer you are to someone, the more you can glean of their intentions. Nia sent her Ambassador late for maximum attention and effect. Leksa’s advisors would have her believe that Klark did not come to make peace, but to enact some plan of Nia’s to either kill the Coalition or supplant the Commander and take control of the coalition and the united army for Azgeda. Everything Azgeda did had a purpose. If they put a glass of water on the corner of the table, chances are, someone was getting sliced with glass at some point in the evening - amidst a brawl. Klark was trying to draw Lexa in with fealty.
But Lexa will not deny the trill up her spine at the Ambassador’s unique voice placing the possessive before her title. She wanted to hear her name in that low, resonating voice. Leksa could not ignore the instinct that said Klark was telling the truth.

Trust is earned.

Lexa wanted to trust this Ambassador - so much so that she briefly forgot her rage against Azgeda and the Ice Queen.

Her first duty was to her people. The best thing for her people was a Coalition of the Twelve Clans, including Azgeda.

“No,” Leksa said, deadly serious, “you will listen to me. I have given you countless opportunities to prove yourself a worthy ally to the Coalition. And yet you spurn by generosity at every turn.” Leksa gestured with her arms - raised her voice. “You have shown me nothing but disrespect at a crucial time in the Coalition, in front of the very people that could turn the tides of the Coalition’s survival.”

“You undermine me Klark,” Leksa said, “why should I hear your offer?”

“Because I want to earn your trust, and it’s the best option I have to make you believe me,” Klark said with a small shrug, like she could not help the truth she presented, but she was sorry all the same for testing Leksa’s faith in her so drastically.

“Why is this time better than any other?”

“Because now I don’t have to worry about Nia’s spies getting excited. I publicly declared for Nia, and now I can privately reveal my true plan to you.”

“You’re a spy, you could be gone into the trees tomorrow and we would never find you again. Why should I give you my trust,” Leksa said.

She was grasping at every suspicion clinging to her heart like barnacles. Anything to keep her feelings strong against Klark’s advances. Leksa was vulnerable to nothing so much as sincerity.

“I trust you, Leksa,” Klark said, her words an arrow in Leksa’s chest, “and you see me true, but you do not understand spies,” Klark said.

“We are not different from you, we merely train harder. To disappear into a forest is a much simpler task than vanishing on the wasteland, nothing but flat snow and ice all the way to the horizon. In the winter, the winds blow so hard and cold to freeze a man where he stands, but in the summer, it is clear and barren and the perfect place to train for stealth. I learned how to still my breath and silence my feet in the wasteland. How to hold my weight above the ground without moving the snow. How to step so quietly, the windless air remains undisturbed. When there is nothing else to see but me, I become nothing. But you and your lavish forests - contain everything. All the green left in the world. Everything. It’s all too easy, instinct, to be one of the faceless among many. A tree, in a jungle of trees.”

“Am I the tree beside you?”

The irrational question escaped Leksa on a shaky breath.

“No. Leksa, you are the jaguar. A ferocious, lethal beauty at home in the green. Come, rest under the shade of my branches.”
The Commander closed her eyes and surrendered to the possibility of her death at Klark’s hands.

When she opened her eyes again, Leksa could not ignore the way her chest pinched when she looked up into Klark’s face and saw overwhelming gratitude.

Leksa stood.

The royal guard shifted at the signal of the Commander’s departure. They would fall in after her and follow where she led them. She dare not believe otherwise, or the Coalition would fall apart tomorrow.

“If I am to die tomorrow, may I make one request of you, Commander?”

Leksa nodded.

“I can imagine no better death than to die by your hand, Leksa.”

Leksa’s heart fell at once.

“Leave us,” Leksa said. The Commander was obeyed.

Leksa needed to speak with Klark alone. She was lingering on her doubts but she could not escape the truth of Klark’s words - the fervency of her beliefs.

Leksa would hear her offer.

“How will you attempt to sway me, I wonder,” Leksa said, genuinely curious. She walked a slow circle around Klark.

“No disrespect Heda, but you make the decisions. I reach only for your heart. Before I make my offer, I must tell you the message Nia wanted me to deliver before the summit. From the Ice Queen’s lips I heard, the Ice Nation will never accept your Coalition, your reign is ending, and your coalition will be dead in the cradle.”

Lexa turned away from Klarke to hide the way the words affected her. Leksa took a few steps before turning back.

“You traveled 500 miles to tell me this,” Leksa whispered, “broke bread and spoke words of trust, to say this?”

“No. I traveled 500 miles to make you an offer,” Klark swallowed, “the rest was for me, and me alone.”

“I tell you Nia’s words to show you the world Nia wants to build. The enemy she would make of you beyond animosity at a distance.”

Her eyes are beseeching like she is begging Lexa to see the woman that can only act on her personal feelings within the strict confines of her position.

“An offer from the Ice Queen or an offer from you, Klark kom Azgeda?”

“An offer from me alone, Commander. My people are innocent of it, and Nia has no knowledge of it. Speaking true, this will be the first time I have said the words aloud in all my years of planning.”

“Speak then, Klark.”
Klark took a kneel before Lexa’s feet. She raised her face to look Lexa in the eye. She was covered in the muck and indignity of the dungeon, yet all Lexa saw was the face of the most valuable ally she may ever have.

“Allow me to kill the Ice Queen for you and take the bone crown. I will join Azgeda with your Coalition of the Twelve Clans. I will take the brand and I will swear my fealty to the only queen worthy of her command.”

Leksa was not on her knees but she felt torn asunder.

“If what you say is true, you are a traitor to your Ice Queen. Why should I trust you?”

“Because you want Azgeda in your Coalition, and no matter what you think of me, you know I’m more trustworthy than Nia.”

Lexa did not respond, which was a tacit admission.

“This is not Nia’s move, Leksa.” Klark warned, “Its mine. She has something else I planned for you, beyond my knowledge. I promise only what I can deliver upon. I will kill the Ice Queen for you. I will take your brand and name you my Commander. I will fight for you on the field of battle until all of your enemies are dead or my fight has ended. I will guard your back like I do my own and I will always put your life before mine. I will obey any and all commands you give me and perform any task you call down with all the strength I have in me. I will be anything you need Leksa. I can be everything you need. Tell me truthfully, will you accept my offer? Will you take me under your protection?”

Nia would rather die than kneel. Klark was willing to give Lexa fealty, to kneel before the clans, in order to protect her people. It was a risk to act against Nia’s interests, but what a reward Klark would get in the bone crown.

Leksa saw in this, Klark’s true aim.

Power.

Klark sought the bone crown and was willing to endure the Coalition to get the throne.

“You just want the throne for yourself.”

“I do,” Klark admitted, “but not for the reasons you suspect.”

“Power is only sought for one reason,” Leksa said, “to have it.”

Klark smiled at Leksa like she hadn’t called Klark’s honor into question.

“That is not true, and you know it. You were chosen by the flame, not because you wanted power, but because you deserved it. I have seen the way you care for your people, how you suffer when they hurt and shine when they thrive. This Coalition could very well be the end of your fight but still, you persist because you love your people, as I love mine. Please, Commander,” Klark begged, “give me the strength to defend my people against a queen that will destroy us all.”

Klark’s impassioned speech thawed Leksa’s heart and quelled her doubts. If Klark was manipulating her, it was truly a master class in performance. Klark’s eyes gleamed crystalline with unshed tears as she searched Leksa’s face for an answer. Klark was down on her knees, brought so low as to beg, surrendering the pride that lined her shoulders. Klark was desperate, or as desperate as someone so controlled was able to be.
If Klark was true, she was Leksa’s best opportunity to bring the Ice Nation into the fold.

If Klark was true, Leksa was standing before her future.

“Please, Commander.”

Leksa removed Klark’s binds.

Klark, the Battlemaster of Azgeda, knelt before The Commander’s throne unbound. It was a freedom Klark didn’t expect. Leksa wanted to have a true conversation with Klark - equal to equal. It was enough for Klark, for the moment.

Leksa’s guards were gone and they had privacy. Leksa descended the steps to stand before Klark.

“You’ve killed many of my people,” Leksa said.

It is an opening. An offering for Klark to bring the conversation in any direction she desires - including the offer and Leksa’s reticent acceptance. Leksa wanted to see what Klark would do with her tentative trust and was willing to follow Klark’s lead. Leksa was inside the machinations of Klark’s grand plan and Klark felt disassociated from her body. Leksa’s mere presence and the continuous residence of Klark’s head on her neck told Klark that Leksa was willing to listen.

Klark would tell Leksa anything.

“Seventeen, so far. One for every hundred saved from the war.”

The war, Nia’s war. When the Ice Army marches and brings with it the deadly cold and crush of winter snow. Leksa stood on the precipice of the third winter war and she would do whatever was necessary to avoid leading her people to that death. Leksa was an opportunity, and so much more. Klark was at risk of losing sight of her goals, drifting into the sea of her feelings, and down in the depths of her desires.

“Easy for you to say - your people aren’t dying,” Leksa said.

“My people are dying - in droves, after Nia steals their winter stores and burns their homes to the ground,” Klark said.

“I have no power over Nia’s cruelty, without the Coalition.”

“Her people cry out against her,” Klark said, rising from her knees before the Commander, “they hunger for a just leader.”

Klark held her hands out in supplication, as she had seen others do in the square. A plea for the Commander’s blessing. Leksa rested her fingers in Klark’s outstretched hands.

“More soldiers defect than can be caught. The few Generals that do support her do so out of their own sick desires and the free reign she gives them over her subjects. All are hers to torment.”

“I know the evils of the ice queen! I know what she has done - what she is capable of -

“Then trust that I know those evils as well as you do and that I would see them ended! Trust that all under Nia’s boot are hurt equally, from those attacked in her raiding parties to those that live in her cities! Believe that she treats her people no better than any other clan - worse because she is entitled to it. Let me kill the Ice Queen for you. Let me save Azgeda from ruin and all the clans from unnecessary violence and death. Help me save all of our people and I will join your Coalition.
Ask me whatever you will and I will speak the truth. I only seek to serve the Coalition and the Commander."

What more could a subject say to earn their leader’s aid?

Leksa licked her lips and Klark was a stroke from undone.

“If I trust you, tell me, what can we do to stop this war?”

“Nothing. War is what Nia wants.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I don’t want war and I have a way to stop it,” Klark said, breathing deeply. “If you extend the summit I will accept the Coalition before the Ambassadors of the clans. Nia will become so enraged she won’t wait for the army to muster. She will come to Polis alone. Once she is here, I issue the Challenge, win, and the reign of the white witch is ended.”

“No,” Leksa said, rejecting the perfect solution Klark offered on a silver platter. She cursed herself for it, but she was vulnerable to Klark as the Ambassador spoke the words she longed to hear. She thought they - their conversations were about more than just gaining power and Leksa’s better self had so wished it were not so. For Klark to be a liar was much easier than the ramifications of the truth. Klark was giving herself over to Leksa and promising devotion to the Commander and her ideals. It was everything Leksa needed and now, she could not allow it to happen.

“I cannot allow you to endanger yourself,” Leksa said. The Coalition now rested on Klark’s shoulders. Leksa could not bear the idea of Klark being harmed. She was a singular woman in every way possible and Leksa was weak for her, impossibly so.

“It will be enough to stop the war,” Klark said, emphatic and almost irritated that Leksa did not see her reason. Klark’s expression was one she had seen on another beloved face, so many years ago.

“No. You said yourself, Klark, that what Nia wants,” Leksa said, asking Klark to believe. Klark needed to be shielded from Nia’s rage, not surrendered to it. “And we will fight together. This means that I must be by your side when she comes for us. When you do not return after the summit and the word of your death does not reach her, she will become suspicious. Maybe enough to send her armies. If not, maybe enough to come alone.”

“She doesn’t always travel with the army,” Klark said, reemphasizing the point, “she may not leave Troy at all.”

Leksa would give Nia the proper motivation without risking Klark’s life.

“She will if the thinks her Battlebaster has betrayed her for the Commander,” Leksa said.

“Everything I’ve done has been to avoid that fact,” Klark said, “to buy as much time as possible --

“If she is watching as close as you believe, She will come to Polis and make her move. We will stop her, together.”

“Together?”

“Unless you have somewhere to be?”

“Nowhere,” Klark said, her eyes riveted in Leksa’s face, her intense energy directed solely at the
Commander. “And after that, peace?”

“Is that what you want Clarke? Peace?”

“Everything I fought for, every life I’ve taken, has been for the possibility of peace in my lifetime. Leksa. We can fight for that peace together, ” Klark said as if she wanted nothing more in the world than for Leksa to say yes.

Klark held out her arm.

Leksa’s heart was full and her eyes threatened to follow. Klark seemed illuminated from within with the blazing inferno of her passion. Klark believed that Leksa was capable of anything and that faith radiated from her. Klark understood the value of the Coalition and wanted her people to be a part of it. She recognized Leksa’s goals and wanted the same things. She felt Leksa’s touch and desired more --

Leksa clasped Leksa’s forearm in a tight grip.

“And we will,” Leksa swore, the heady rush emotions threatening to sweep her away. Leksa needed to focus on what was most important - survival.

“Nia is not the only threat to that peace,” Leksa said.

“Yes,” Klark said, “many do not understand the purpose Coalition. We are besieged on all sides.”

“Some threats are more pressing than others,” Leksa said.

“The Mountain,” Klark said, following Leksa’s stream of thought with the skill of a lifelong Mariner. “The true reason you joined the clans together in a single army. Nia believes you wish to destroy her, but then again, she thinks everything is about her,” Klark laughed and Leksa was happy.

Leksa liked the way her eyes shined, how frequent her smiles and laughter. She was always on the edge of some joke, whether it be shared or in her own mind. Leksa wanted to delve deep into the very substance of Klark and learn everything there was to know about her.

“I do want to destroy the mountain. It is an even greater threat to my people than the Ice Queen. We cannot continue to live in the shadow of the Mountain’s fear. With Azgeda and the Ice Army joined with the Coalition, we will fall on the Mountain and it will be crushed underneath our weight.”

“We can beat them without Nia. Anything Nia has, I can give to you.”

“Except thousands of warriors -

Their conversation led them back to Leksa’s chamber. Leksa opened the door and ushered Klark inside. Klark kept her back turned while Leksa changed her clothes, shedding her armor for a more vulnerable nightdress. It was more than Klark expected, deserved, and she basked in Leksa’s trust.

“If I take the brand, those who are loyal to me will know to act. I can flip Troy for you in an afternoon without Nia there to keep control. Why won’t you let me give you what you want?”

“Because I cannot allow Azgeda’s throne to ascend at Polis,” Leksa said as she sat at a low table and began to unbind her hair, “those loyal to Nia may stay behind at Troy. You would be uncertain
of your welcome and vulnerable to ambush. You must challenge Nia in Troy, where all of Azgeda was watch her fall and see you rise.”

“And then no more people will die for greed,” Klark said as if her words to bring their shared dream into reality just by speaking them aloud.

“Did you hear that?”

Klark turned away from Leksa, moving in the direction of the breeze.

“What?” Leksa surveyed the room.

The lit candles bobbed in a slight breeze.

Leksa’s windows were curtainless, to best enjoy the view of Polis.

Leksa’s profile was sharp and distinctive in the dark light.

“Leksa --

Klark’s body collided with the Commander’s with enough force to send Leksa to the ground. Klark shielded the Commander with her body. A dagger embedded into the stone wall behind where Leksa was sitting a moment earlier. Klark turned from Leksa to the shadow she saw move by the window --

Klark was fighting - with a spindly thin warrior slathered in white and black paint. He carried a knife in each hand and dodged in and out of Klark’s reach with every step, frightening fast on his feet. Klark was almost as fast. She ducked and spun and backflipped to avoid a knife to the neck or chest. He was well trained and wearing the paint burnished only by Nia’s personal assassin corps. This man would impale himself on a spear if it meant reaching his target. Klark watched one of Nia’s walk across a bed of coals without getting burned.

Klark kept on the defensive until she noticed a weakness in his fighting style. It was Nia’s style, and Klark knew it very well. He lifted his left elbow before a strike when he should have tucked it down to protect his rubs and vulnerable kidneys. One good blow and Klark could rupture the organ. With her weighted gloves, which Leksa returned with the rest of her belongings, Klark could shatter his ribcage with one blow.

The assassin was trying to get around Klark. He moved left and right, too far over for one on one and too low to be a feint. His eyes kept darting away from Klark and back at his true prize: Leksa. Klark would never let it happen.

Klark refused to give ground, warding him off without exposing Leksa. Klark acquired some long, shallow gashes on her face and hands from strikes where dodging would have meant exposing Leksa to attack.

The next time he went from a left-handed slice, Klark dove ducked under his arm and delivered a punishing punch to his side - broke every rib on the left side and probably punctured a lung. The wind went out of the assassin and he fell to his knees. Klark wound up and punched him on the side of the head, at a downward angle.

Klark heard a sharp crack of bone breaking and saw the shiny sheen of brain matter.

Klark’s knives were a front for her most dangerous skill - hand to hand combat. Klark was able to
crush a skull with a single punch.

Klark killed another Ice Nation assassin in defense of Leksa, this one much more obviously an assassin. It was validating, to say the least. If Leksa was going to believe Klark to be true, saving her from yet another assassin was the perfect action to back up her words.

“Klark!”

The Azgeda Battlemaster turned at Leksa’s call and got shot with an arrow. At such close range, the arrow bored right through Klark’s chest and out the other side. Klark coughed a spray of blood.

Over Leksa’s shoulder, Klark saw another body on the window ledge, lowering a bow bereft of an arrow - Klark knew where the arrow was. The arrow was inside of her, embedded in her chest. Klark tried to get her mind to process the information, to force through the shock so she could still fight - so she could ensure Leksa’s survival before her fight ended.

Leksa roared, seizing the knife left over from the last night's meal and throwing it at the assassin. The blade flipped end over end and found a home in the invader's chest. The force of the blow sent him flying into the open air. Leksa’s room was at the top of the tower. He would not survive the fall.

Klark stepped back until she found the wall, then slowly eased herself down until she was sitting. She didn’t stretch out her legs, using the pressure to push her back - and the wound - up against the wall. It was so painful Klark’s vision blacked out. She was dazed and lucid, but not for long.

“Klark,” Leksa said. She ripped her nightgown up the side, to her hip. She popped the seam and tore a wide strip out of the fabric. Leksa bundled the fabric around the base of the arrow and pressed her hands on either side of the shaft. She interlocked a few fingers to get full coverage of Klark’s wound. “Klark?”

Klark’s arm, her powerful weapon, raised to grasp Leksa’s bicep. If she could move the other hand, it would be a gesture of friends reunited and deals well struck.

“Leksa,” Klark whispered, “do it.”

Leksa applied her full strength to the wound. Pressure was the only known way to stop bleeding. Klark imagined that Leksa would have done this for many soldiers on many battlefields, staying with them until they were either transported to a healer’s care or their fight ended with the Commander at their side. Klark’s whole body seized with the pain. Klark bit off a scream, cut short. Her grip of Leksa’s shoulder became bone-rending. Leksa would be bruised.

“Gustus!”

Gustus, Johrum, and the night guardsmen exploded into Leksa’s chamber.

“Summon Nyko,” Leksa said, “bring him here, Now!”

Klark watched Leksa try to save her life and it made her chest warm despite the cold setting in at her extremities. Leksa didn’t move from where she kept the pressure on Klark’s wound.

“Klark, look at me,” Leksa said. “I believe you, Klark. I believe in you. As your Commander, you are not allowed to die.”

Klark gave Leksa a bright, bloody-toothed smile.
The Commander gave her everything she wanted - Klark can live for that.

“*Sha, ai Heda,*”

The darkness descended and Klark knew no more.

“*Klark!*”

Johrum returned with Nyko right after Klark fell unconscious.

“I want three guards on Klark at all times,” Leksa said to Johrum, knowing Gustus was barely containing himself from letting Klark bleed out. Leksa bypassed him and give orders directly to his lieutenant. Then, she rounded on Nyko, where he crouched over Klark’s prone form.

“Don’t let her die!”

She was the Commander, all must obey her will.

Klark must live.

For a moment, Leksa allowed reality to cement. Klark had been telling the truth from the beginning. She felt more than the icy, excitable facade she showed. She cared more than Azgeda had any right to.

Leksa could see the truth in her - in her eyes - Klark took no joy in being Nia’s blunt tool, nor her sharp knife in Leksa’s back if Leksa was not careful with her trust. Character was made apparent through more than the words one speaks. The silences they leave. The place where their stare lingers. The words they do not say but could. The words they should not say but must.

Leksa did not expect the softness of Klark’s eyes - the concerned pinch of her mouth, even as she lay dying. A hardened heart burdened with too much responsibility. Leksa’s perspective shifted again, with a deeper understanding of Klark, a piece that made them the same. Equal.

The air around them was charged after that, the kind of intimacy that grows in the dark, open spaces and impossibly stunning views. Leksa felt each breath suffuse her body - every part of her vibrating with the intimacy thickening between them.

In truth, Klark’s quiet, calm radiated a deep and festering pain. The Commander recognized the face of someone that has done too much killing for one lifetime. Leksa saw the heart of a good woman taken advantage of by her leader. By rumor, Nia selected children from among her villages - the strong, the talented, the ones she liked, and raised them under her tutelage. Denied of all choice and devoted to Nia’s loyalty as a man was to the cross that bore him. Klark may be one of these unfortunate souls. As Nia’s apprentice, she would be a trustworthy ambassador.

Leksa would see Klark healing and free from suffering, if it were in her power to do so.

Inexplicably, Leksa considered how to mould her influence into the shape of Klark’s needs.

Klark would live and they would rule, together.

Chapter End Notes
My eternal gratitude to everyone reading this fic, especially those who leave comments and kudos, you make my life.

The climax of the first arc has arrived! Clarke has made her offer and Lexa has accepted. Things are going to pick up speed from here. This is definitely not a slow burn.

The perspectives switch back and forth to demonstrate how Clarke and Lexa are finally on the same page. They are openly communicating but their struggles are far from over --

Thank you,

Shtare
The great stone of Leksa’s tower was the last remnant of the great empire of Bekka Pramheida. Legend tells of her vast kingdom, in a time before clans. Shining and plentiful and spanning the whole of the world as all rejoiced under her leadership.

The men of the mountain killed the first Commander - burned her at the stake for the generosity of her leadership. It was that action which revealed the true nature of the Mountain and established the mountain men as the true enemy of the clans.

Bekka Pramheda’s death was the birth of blood must have blood. The blood of Bekka Pramheda must be returned in full by mountain blood spilled. Like cowards, they withdrew into their mountain fortress, out of reach.

An attack was launched by the second Commander. It was the last time the clans ought together for a cause instead of fighting each other for resources. As the largest landmass, the Ice Nation provided the bulk of the army.

The mountain deployed a missile that obliterated the army and left a hole in the earth too wide to see across. Those that escaped were choked to death by poisonous fog and torn apart by the first reapers.

The few survivors of the war came together and withdrew from the forming clans. They walked a long pilgrimage across the land, bypassing every village that offered them sanctuary.

The story says that they walked for a hundred days and nights. They walked until they hit the great blue and could walk no further.

With nowhere else to go, they walked into the water and kept walking.

For a generation, they were believed to be dead until the first boats arrived on the shore. The new arrivals named themselves Floukru, and told tales of a land of peace within the sea, free from the gruesome reality of the shore.

Titus taught Leksa that Floukru were weak, incapable of fighting for themselves so they hid to avoid an honorable death in battle.

They welcome all who feared death and pain and war to join them in their home among the waves.

At first, none came. Floukru was spat upon on the rare excursions to the steadily growing Polis. They were the subject of scorn and mistrust.

Then, the Ice Nation waged the first winter war and an entire generation of young warriors perished in the bloody battles. Countless Trikru villages were leveled. Four Commanders fell over
the course of years.

Those who survived were fundamentally changed. They no longer heard the glory of victory from
the blare of the war horns. For them, the idea of battle held no promise, only death.

Leksa began to understand the ideology of Floukru after the Conclave. For years, Leksa battled
with the idea that being chosen for the Commander meant killing her friends - ending the fight of
her only family.

Leksa decided that some sacrifice was necessary in pursuit of greatness. The spirit of the
Commander demanded blood and Leksa could claim no exception for herself.

She had been resolved, and maybe a little eager, the night before the Conclave. Their Commander,
Watal, was killed during an ambush by an Azgeda raiding party. It took two days to negotiate for
the return of his body.

The moment the Ascension horn blew and the red smoke rose, Leksa understood fear for the first
time.

It wasn’t enough to deter her.

Leksa didn’t sleep that night. She wandered the halls of the tower, thinking to spend some time in
the training grove. It would be her last time to stand in that place an a novitiate - as Leksa kom
Trikru. After tomorrow, her fight would be over or she would be a novitiate no longer.

The path was stony and Leksa hadn’t worn shoes. The stones were sharp against her bare feet.
Leksa ignored the pain.

The Commander felt no weakness.

Leksa rested the lip of the grove. Somebody was already there. Leksa recognized Luna’s spiral
curls and the set of her strong shoulders in the moonlight.

Luna was Leksa’s greatest competition in the Conclave. She was older, larger, and more
experienced in combat than the rest of the novitiates. She came from Bluecliff, where they trained
small children in the ways of war from the time they could walk. Bluecliff had a graduation ritual
much like the Conclave. By the time they reach adulthood, the surviving Bluecliff warriors are
nigh unkillable. Their mountain fortress had never been breached by an enemy and any who dared
to try died a quick death.

Luna’s back was turned and Leksa noticed a pack slung over her shoulder. A knife was strapped to
her hip and she was wearing boots on her feet.

Weapons were banned in Polis outside of an officially sanctioned Challenge - or Conclave.

“Leksa,” Luna acknowledged, having heard Leksa descend into the clearing.

“Luna,” Leksa said, “what are you doing here?”

If Leksa didn’t know any better, she would think that Luna was leaving.

“Stargazing,” Luna said. She turned to face Leksa. Her expression was remote - thoughtful.

“Have you ever wondered the reason for the Conclave?” Luna asked Leksa.

“The Commander must be the strongest,” Leksa said.
“True,” Luna replied in a musing tone, “but to defeat another proves strength. Why make us kill each other?”

Leksa didn’t have an answer. To kill means to take the strength of another into oneself. The greatest killers possessed the most power. The novitiates have been training in cloistered quarters all their lives. Leksa and her family had no great battle power to steal through a kill. Leksa could think of no other reason than that she was told.

As if sensing her indecision, Luna threw a knife at Leksa feet with such precision that the tip caught and the knife stood upright in the dirt.

“I’m running away,” Luna said, “so kill me. Titus would want you to. If you want to be Commander, you’ll have to do it tomorrow anyway.”

Leksa looked down at the knife, a simple dagger, the kind kept for cutting line and carving wood rather than rending flesh.

Luna waited for Leksa to make her decision with a serene expression.

“Where will you go?” Leksa asked. Luna was a friend to Leksa - aloof and competitive, but a friend nonetheless. If she was leaving, the only thing for Leksa to do was watch. Leksa could call Titus, sound the alarm, but that would only mean an execution in the morning instead of a Conclave.

Luna didn’t deserve to die on a blade because she didn’t want to kill with one.

“Floukru. I think I could be happy there,” Luna said. “I hope victory makes you happy, Leksa. You will be a worthy Commander.”

“Goodbye, Luna.”

Leksa couldn’t wish her well. Luna was turning her back on her people and all she was meant to believe in.

Luna smiled in understanding. She nodded once to Leksa, retrieved her fallen knife, and disappeared into the night-dark forest.

In the morning, the Natblidas were gathered by the Flamkeipa in preparation. They were brought into the square. The biggest place in Polis for the greatest visibility.

Leksa killed her friends, one after the other.

When it was over, Leksa thought of Luna and her choices. The sticky black blood of her family stained Leksa’s hands in a way she could never wash off. Luna was weak for refusing to do her duty but she was not a coward for refusing to kill.

The mantle of the Commander was a weight that threatened to crush her in those early years.

“Ambassador Kora, Heda.” Gustus stepped to the side and revealed the Floukru Ambassador.

“Ambassador,” Ambassador Kora said, “you summoned me?”

Kora moved like flowing water, her long skirts moving around her like a river bends around the rocks. Her eyes were respectfully lowered, her hands clasped together in front of her. Once, Leksa thought her reticence was a shy weakness, but Leksa soon recognized the stillness of the lake’s surface is no indication of the life teeming within.
“Walk with me,” Leksa said.

The Commander had not set foot in the marketplace since the Klark decapitated a woman in the middle of Polis. The previous evening weighed heavily at the back of Leksa’s mind as she and Kora departed the tower for the streets. Klark stepped in and fought for Leksa when she was vulnerable. Saved the Commander’s life in a clear and present way. Having Klark as an ally changed the context of their every interaction. The raid was a means to an end, a way to test Leksa’s reserve. The woman in the square didn’t look like an assassin because she didn’t get close enough to make an attempt.

Of everyone Leksa interacted with, Kora was the only one who supported Klark’s innocence. Leksa wondered in the Klark knew she had such friends in unlikely places.

Kora was silent as they walked, waiting for Leksa to volunteer the reason for her summons.

“You have expressed doubts about Klark’s guilt,” Leksa said, “tell me more.”

“There isn’t much more to tell. We receive the refugees and give them a safe home. It is not Floukru’s way to pry into where they came from,” Kora paused, seeming hesitant to continue, “However, Azgeda has only a short stretch of beach. The perfect place to trap an enemy and drive them into the sea. I would expect more refugees to die in the effort. Other clans kill any who try to leave. So far, we’ve found mostly warm bodies on that beach,” Kora said.

“You believe Klark is saving them,” Leksa said.

“Those that we find there are not many, but they are frequent,” Kora said. “Too frequent to be truly secretive.”

“I’ve heard nothing about Azgeda refugees,” Leksa said. Word traveled between the clans as quick as words and wings. Messenger birds were common among Trikru, but could not survive the barren lands of Azgeda. The information that came out of the Ice Nation was primarily trafficked by spies, of which Leksa had many. The idea that none of them picked up on Klark's agenda was troubling.

“Battlemaster is no small title. Refugees from the Ice Nation have been flowing in steadily for over a year. The borders of the Ice Nation are dangerous and well-patrolled. How else could they escape under Nia’s nose if not with the help of her second-in-command?”

Leksa heard the belief in Kora’s voice. She trusted Klark though they’d never formally met.

“She saved my life last night, from assassins, and was gravely wounded in the process,” Leksa said, looking staunchly ahead.

“People show their hearts in the way they know how.”

Words to ponder. The implications sent a ripple effect across the surface of Leksa’s mind, much like every word that uttered from Klark’s mouth. She seemed an impossible woman, equal parts vicious and compassionate. A flower grown in spite of the ice and snow of her home.

“Will she live?”

“Yes,” Leksa said, refusing to believe otherwise. “Excuse me.”

Leksa was not there when Klark awakened.
Fin was - his back was pressed to the foot of the cot, his head bent forward, slumped like he was unconscious - or dead.

Klark felt a brief stab of anxiety, a concern that someone had gone after Fin in her absence and left his body for her to find.

Klark heard the telltale wheeze of Fin’s breathing.

The relief was the hard rain that made way for the flood of pain.

The last thing Klark remembered was getting shot in the heart and bleeding out under Leksa’s hands. All she could think was that is was a saint’s cursed shame that she was going to die then, before she and Leksa were able to do what they were destined for.

Klark knew it now, certain as the stars and sure as the sea.

She and Leksa were meant to find each other.

Klark came to Polis to stop the next war. Leksa was the only one that could help Klark accomplish that goal. Together, they would save what was left of their dying people. The assassins were proof that Klark was making the right choice. It was too soon for Nia to have heard whispers of Klark’s backdoor dealings, so she must have planned the assassination in advance, knowing that Klark would be at Polis, primed to take the fall.

Nia betrayed Klark.

Nia wanted Leksa to kill Klark. Nia wanted to be handed a valid reason to launch as assault. Nia’s advisors must be chomping at the bit for bloodshed. Tormenting those who fell out of favor was only so satisfying to those who craved violence. The most evil among the Ice Nation longed for nothing more than bloodletting.

Klark survived the attack, which meant Nia would step up her game.

Klark needed to be ready for Nia's next move.

Nyko’s healing tent was a stone’s throw from the tower, and an easy detour to Leksa to justify. Johrum stood guard by the wooden posts. He gave the Commander a nod as she slipped through the hide hanging from the entrance of Nyko’s tent. Gustus was a silent sentry at Leksa’s back, refusing to leave her alone at any time, nevertheless with the Azgeda warriors.

The tent was unchanged from Leksa’s last visit.

Leksa waited at Klark’s bedside through the night. She remained vigilant, on guard for any movement in the tent, any shadow off the canvas. Any further attempts by Nia to end her life, or Klark’s.

Leksa was among those that held Klark down as Nyko pulled the shaft through her shoulder and out of her back, into the direction of the shot. The arrow was notched for ultimate pain, making the shaft impossible to remove by the individual shot unless they wanted to bring their insides out with the arrow. Klark was delirious with pain, unaware, her eyes pinched tightly closed as she thrashed against the pain. Nyko managed to pull the shaft out by pulling it through. Klark screamed. Pieces of the shaft were missing. The pain became too much when Nyko started fishing in the would for shards of the shaft.
The sun rose on Klark asleep and at peace, her shoulder wrapped up under a few layers of cotton soaked in alcohol. It was the first time Leksa saw her face relaxed as opposed to hiding behind a hundred different masks. Klark’s starfallen beauty never ceased to amaze Leksa.

Nyko was grinding herbs in the corner, watching Klark out of the corner of his unblinking eyes. Klark’s warriors were spread around the tent, sentries of their own, watching over their commander with constant supervision after Leksa notified them of Klark’s condition.

The bodies of the assassins, or what was left of them, were laid out on the cots beside Klark, hidden under tarps for dignity’s sake.

Klark was pale and feverish, breathing shallowly under a thin blanket.

Leksa’s mind was caught in the middle distance.

Klark’s Fin knelt at her feet, his hands wrapped around her ankles and eyes closed in seeming repose.

Her strategist was examining the intact body, holding the tarp carefully pinched between two fingers. His other hand probed over the body and came back tipped in the white battle paint singular to Azgeda, meant blend them with the snow in the moment of attack. Murfy rubbed the paint between his fingers and brought the substance up to smell.

Fox stood on the other side of the tent, peering through her curtain of dark hair to watch Nyko’s movements over his shoulder. She swayed too close and into Nyko’s space. He jerked away and turned back to glare at her. Fix pulled away and idled at a respectful distance. As soon as Nyko returned his attention to his work, Fox introduced on his personal space once again and he returned her attention with a scathing look. The two of them repeated this dance again and again.

The wayward price and the irksome brat whispered in the corner, watching Klark’s unconscious form like she was risen from the dead, equal parts disgust and awe. Roan’s expression was critical and calculating but the girl, Ontari, was exclusively loathing.

They were a difficult bunch and without Klark to keep them in line, they could become dangerous. Leksa was beginning to grow concerned as to their unpredictability. The group was docile for now, but they may not remain that way when Leksa asked them to leave - or if Klark faded in the night.

Murfy stood and met Leksa’s eye. He approached slowly, watching Leksa as though she were a wild animal of some kind and he needed to watch for a tell of violence.

“Heda,” Murfy said without deference.

Gustus inserted himself between Leksa and Murfy, distrusting of the Azgeda warrior’s motive. Murfy glanced around Gustus as if he were no more than an inanimate support beam.

“This is not an Azgeda assassin,” Murfy said.

Leksa was surprised to say the least, both by Murfy’s assertion and his willingness to address to the Commander directly. His face was a picture of solemn certainty, much unlike his usual sardonic smile. All of Klark’s warrior had been unusually subdued in the time since her fall and subsequent unconsciousness.

“How do you know this?” Leksa said. She made the decision to trust Klark and that means trusting in the loyalty of her chosen warriors. Leksa will give nothing away to Murfy, but it didn’t hurt to entertain his theories, especially if Leksa could potentially gain from it, glean some of her enemies’
“The paint is wrong,” Murfy said, holding up two fingers streaked with white, “Azgeda assassins mark themselves so their spirit will be recognized by the ancestors in death. These markings are unknown to me. They are not of Azgeda, no matter how precisely someone tried to make it seem so.”

Leksa was intrigued, to say the least.

“Gyon op, Gustus.”

Her loyal guard scoffed but obeyed, as always, and stepped aside. Leksa took a single step toward Murfy to indicate her willingness to listen.

“Do you suspect a culprit?”

“Ouskejonkru. They know of our ways.”

“Bluecliff has nothing to gain from killing the Commander,” Gustus growled.

“So you think. What clan is young Aden originally from? I hear he is a very talented Natblida and much favored by the Commander to be her successor,” Murfy said. Voice heavy with insinuation.

Aden was former Bluecliff. He arrived in Polis when he was six years old, older than most of her novitiates at the time. Natblidas were meant to come to Polis as small babies and remained in the care of the Flamkeipa until they were old enough to learn combat. Aden was one of the children hidden away by his parents whenever the roaming Flamkeipas came looking for children with nightblood. Parents were meant to give their nightblood children over to the Commander with pride and honor, not hide them selfishly away like a shameful secret. Aden’s parents were put to death when he was discovered and the six-year-old was placed under Leksa protection and tutelage. It took him no time at all to catch up with his peers and rise to the top of the novitiate pile. Leksa had been eyeing him for a few years now. Azgeda spies were reliable.

“He holds no allegiance to them,” Leksa said.

“Children are easily manipulated, especially after a traumatic event.”

“Traumatic event?”

“The Conclave? Unless you think killing your friends was easy,” Murfy said.

To react emotionally would be an act of weakness. Leksa refused to prove the Azgeda right.

“Their actions would mean war,” Gustus said, “Bluecliff has nothing to gain from war.”

“What wouldn’t they gain? Regardless of Leksa’s survival, they have an opportunity to squeeze the Commander for favors in return for moving their troops against Nia -- and they would keep whatever Nia promised them in the process. They are the next most prolific clan after Azgeda. They have a surplus of young soldiers desperate to fall on enemy swords.”

“You believe Nia purchased the loyalty of Bluecliff? What with?”

“Furs, mostly. Clan leader Esta has a preference for river otter. Nia has hunted the animal to near extinction in the last few years, keeping up with her bribes and debts,” Murfy said.

“And I should trust your word, spy?” Admittedly, Leksa was intrigued by any inclination of
weakness on Nia’s part.

Murfy’s affect lifted somewhat, his brows raising as his mouth downt urned.

“I am not your enemy, Heda, and neither is Klark.”

“Speak plainly.”

“Klark left orders,” Murfy said, “in the event of her death. I made a vow to her that I must now uphold with you.”

“Klark is not dead,” Leksa said because it was true, and no other reason. “You made a commitment to serve her and you come to advise me on matters of state while she lay mortally wounded,” Leksa said with utmost disapproval.

“Klark has treated me well. I owe her. Someone must represent Klark’s interests in her absence.”

“You owe your leader for treating you with decency?”

Yes,” Murfy said.

Gustus thought he was lying. Leksa could tell from the tension permeating his body. A week ago, Leksa would have thought Murfy was lying as well. Leksa knew enough to Klark now to know that she would not have a man as dangerous as Murfy around her person unless she could guarantee his loyalty.

“I am not your enemy, Heda, and neither is Klark.”

Leksa ignored him in favor of Nyko. She addressed the healer directly, with all the power of her station and all the depth of her voice.

“How is she?”

“You could just ask me,” a raspy voice cracked across the words. All eyes turned to Clarke. Her narrowed with strain, her body stiffened up in pain. She was deathly pale and uncommonly lovely and Leksa was completely taken in by the quality aura. Even in illness, Clarke seemed lit from within.

Fin jumped onto Klark’s cot in a single leap, straddling her legs with obvious excitement, his eyes riveted on her face. Klark smiled at him and then looked at Leksa.

“Klark,”

Leksa held out her hand and clasped palms with the warrior. From the outside, it would be seen as a political gesture, if not one of comfort. Leksa just wanted to hold Klark’s hand, to feel her pulse and know that her newest ally’s fight is not over yet.

“You didn’t intervene,” Klark said, her voice strong though her body trembled with fatigue. There was weakness in her grip. Frailty was not a word Leksa associated with Klark.

“It was your fight,” Leksa said.

Leksa remained by Klark’s side for the better part of the morning.

“Gods,” Klark groaned, “why do I feel so weak?”
“Nyko gave you something for the pain, to encourage healing.”

Klark stuck her fingers into her own wound and before Leksa could protest, plopped the fingers in her mouth.

“Fool,” Klark said, “Murfy get my --

Murfy placed a pack on the bed beside Klark.

“No wonder you lose half your rank after every battle,” Klark mumbled, almost to herself as she rifled through the bag with one hand. She didn’t lean forward and wasn’t looking inside the bag, she searched by feel, certain of every item she came across with nothing but the impression in her hand. Her nimble hand emerged holding a brown bottle with a cork stopper. She rested the bottle in her lap and broke eye contact with Leksa to glance at Nyko. Clarke’s clear blue eyes turned back to Leksa before long, Leksa stared with all the gratitude due to Klark’s reawakening.

“First I have to rise out whatever foul concoction your man slathered on it.”

Leksa ordered a bucket of water to be drawn. Klark turned up her nose at the offering.

“Do you have any alcohol? No? Any root vegetables, an airtight container, and three months to spare?”

“The vegetables would sour the water,” Gustus said. He was a picture of imposing obstinence.

“That’s the idea. You wonder why so many Azgeda warriors are covered in scars? Because they survive their battle wounds. My clan has passed down this technique for generations. Remind me to trade for some potatoes, Fin,” Klark said. Fin nodded in the closest approximation of communication Leksa had seen out of him yet. His head bobbed for far longer than necessary but his intent was clear.

“Check Roan’s bags, he probably has some tucked away.”

Across the tent, Klark’s warrior heard his name invoked and reacted with a scowl. He plodded his way over to Klark like a man headed for the gallows.

“What are we stealing from me today, Battlemaster?”

“Alcohol. Fetch it,” Klark said. Roan was unmoving for a long moment, clearly on the verge of fighting Klark’s order. After a staredown from Klark, he huffed and left the tent. Ontari and Fox followed after him. Nyko took the opportunity to return to his elixirs and potions. He seemed unaffected by Klark’s slander but Leksa knew she would be hearing an earful at her next open forum.

Roan returned with the alcohol, which looked remarkably like water. Klark took a drink from the jar before pouring the rest over her wound.

“Will you help me?”

Klark held the jar out to Leksa and leaned forward to expose her back. Leksa poured the substance over the wound. The line of Klark’s bar went stiff but she didn’t shy away.

Klark held up the bottle she pulled from her bag next.

“Now the salve.”
Leksa took the bottle in hand, pulled the stopper and dipped two fingers into the neck. She came back with a thick paste that stuck to her fingers. Leksa smeared a liberal coat of the save to Klark’s exit and entry wounds. Leksa added a gentle layer to the gashes littering Klark’s face and arms. There was an intimacy to the action that flushed Leksa’s skin.

Apparently the rest of them agreed because Leksa looked up to find that she and Klark were relatively alone. Gustus was pouting in the corner. Nyko returned to his work.

Finn was asleep at the foot of Klark’s cot. Klark’s strategist didn’t leave her side. He watched them with keen eyes that made Leksa distinctly uncomfortable. She was suspicious about what Murfy thought he saw between Klark and Leksa. Leksa wondered what Klark told him.

Murfy waited until Klark had rewrapped her arm to speak.

“I checked the bodies,” Murfy said, “ Ouskejonkru.”

“Are you certain?”

Murfy nodded.

Clarke sighed, “we cannot afford to act preemptively.”

“The Ambassador left yesterday but some of his men stayed behind,” Murfy said idly, as though he came by the information innocently.

“Make sure you’re not seen,” Klark said.

Murfy ducked out of the tent before Leksa could muster a response. Whatever Klark’s man was doing, Leksa doubted she would approve.

“Where, exactly, is he going?”

“To find out who tried to kill you, ai Heda. Bluecliff is not the only possibility.”

Leksa lapsed into silence.

“You’re not going to ask more questions?”

“He made a persuasive argument,” Leksa said.

Klark smiled at Leksa and it was enough to make her happy.
TW: Torture, cannibalism, rape mention

Murfy gets to the bottom of things, and Leksa and Klark prove that actions have consequences.

Enjoy,

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Murfy got the information he wanted because he always did. He learned from a young age to engineer solutions. Desperation was his teacher on the streets of Troy, where failure meant death by exposure or starvation. Necessity gave Murfy an education in manipulating people for his own gains. Turning the conversation around and around until they came to his conclusions on their own.

In Murfy’s experience, everything in life is a negotiation of one form or another. The trick was getting what you want without giving anything essential away. The best way to get what he wanted was by becoming what his marks needed. One of Nia’s politicians needs an ear? Murfy is all too happy to listen to them gripe the night away. The archdiocese of the Fallow Order needs to get laid? Murfy is more than happy to oblige in exchange for an open door and a chance to rebuild his life under the auspices of the church.

Nia sought to use his skills to break her enemies before ending them with the cruelest stroke. Murfy preferred quicker, more expedient methods. The difference was enjoying the kill.

He was ill at ease with Nia’s methods but he knew better than to let it show.

Murfy was nearly content in his role as spy and assassin. He lost no pride bowing to one such as Nia for the preservation of his own skin.

Klark first came to him during one of Nia’s banquets. He knew of her by reputation, a prestige so generously cultivated by the Ice Queen. Royalty was nothing about followers, and Nia preferred her’s of the highest quality. Murfy toiled in shadows of the throne, out of Nia’s sight while Klark worked in the light, under Nia’s constant scrutiny. They were each possessed of their own private hell.

Murfy knew Klark beyond the halls of Nia’s palace. They were born in the same village on the eastern border. They hunted the same trails and weathered the same storms. Klark’s mother took him in when he lost his father to the winter’s sickness and his mother to Nia’s second Winter War. He owed Abbi - failed Abbi - and that was the only reason he didn’t walk away when Klark first approached him.

“A spy so secret, you have not even a name,” Klark said by way of introduction as she sidled up to him, her curves pressed into him.
“Some of us prefer to work without the glare of fame in our eyes,” Murfy drolled, feigning disinterest while he wondered what drove Klark to break the silence that lived between them from the day he collapsed at Nia’s feet with words of death and betrayal. Klark had been Nia’s seken for years, the pride of the village, unmoved as he described her mother’s death at the hands of raiders. These days she wore a perpetual smile that reeked of savage glee, her eyes holding the vague hint of madness that could either be brilliance or insanity.

“Yes, you work from the shadows, don’t you,” Klark replied, a spark of mischief in her eye, “it must be dark in Nia’s pocket.”

“Pitch black,” Murfy said casually, “but I have a good view of her coin purse.”

It’s a figure of speech. Nia has her own currency, doling out payment in the form of personal favors. Troy’s base currency was fluid, the few transactions acted out in trade over services rendered. Murfy had a stack of IOUs and his life, for the moment, and not much else.

“And a good view of her dungeon, I bet,” Klark said, all chipper and upbeat, almost enthusiastic. A sacrilegious way to talk about Nia’s greatest weapon and severest punishment. Anyone that moved in Nia’s circle had seen it once or twice. Everyone knew better than to talk about it in anything other than a hushed whisper. Klark had always been reckless when they were children. The first to run into danger on the chance of a glorious adventure. Whatever her current agenda, Murfy had a feeling that she would ask for more than he was willing to give. Klark didn’t do anything halfway.

“Among other things,” Murfy said as he overturned his glass at Klark’s feet and walked away before she could say something they would both regret.

Murfy spent more than his fair share of time in Nia’s dungeon. The Ice Queen wasn’t hesitant in doling out capital punishment and the closer you were to the throne, the more likely you said or did something Nia considered worthy of time in the pit. Murfy was locked in the deep dark for a gambling debt once upon a time. He remembered it well. It was a place devoid of light, hope, and the will to live on. Murfy remembered laying on a bare, cold stone floor for months on end, curled into himself. The shackle around his wrist was attached to the wall by a very short chain, so much so, his arm was perpetually suspended; the limp, broken wing of a half-dead bird. There were other bodies, but you wouldn’t know by the abject silence that felt as real as a living thing. It was impossible to measure the passage of time and it didn’t matter if your eyes were open or closed, you saw the same thing - the eternal black of death.

Murfy spiraled down into the miasma of memory and failed to notice Klark following him.

“I have a plan for you,” Klark said, matching his pace as he walked the length of Nia’s bare banquet table, toward the entrance of the main hall. He needed to go outside - to see the stars and know he wasn’t six feet under again.

“The best-laid plans of gods and women,” Murfy trails off, throwing Klark a pithy, one-fingered salute, letting her know exactly what he thought about her plan. Murfy was used to be a pawn in greater games and the last thing he needed was two hands yanking on his leash. “I’m going to forget this conversation ever happened.”

“I can give you everything you’ve always dreamed of,” Klark promised with a sinful smile, “and more.”

Oh the great and terrible wonder of his dreams. Klark had no idea how far his imagination can go. She would not be the first warlord to try and press-gang him to their cause. He followed Nia out of necessity, he wasn’t going to volunteer to destabilize his position with the ice queen for some
fantasy of freedom.

“I was eleven the first time Nia sent me down,” Klark said, “I had only been her seken for a few weeks. I spoke out during an audience with the Rockline Ambassador. I don’t remember how long I was down there for. Fin says it was more than a year. How long does it take for someone to forget the warmth of sunlight on their face?”

“Probably a year,” Murfy couldn’t help but smirk. He hazarded to guess because he doesn’t like rhetorical questions - nothing more than probing for openings to manipulate.

Then, Klark did the strangest thing - she laughed.

It was the beginning of something.

They didn’t speak again after that. A year later, Murfy stood before the Ice Queen’s throne prepared to face punishment for eliminating the Fallow Order before Nia could give the order. He was prepared to be sent to the dungeon. Instead, Klark came forward and spoke for him. Offered her own skin in exchange for his freedom. She spent a month in the dungeon, and when she emerged, Murfy was waiting for her command.

From then on it was Klark, Murfy, and Fin. The three of them possessed the skills and wherewithal to take on Nia’s most dangerous missions. Since then, Klark saved his life more than once, both with her mind and her fists. She earned his loyalty ten times over. And she needed him if she was going to make it to tomorrow.

Klark cared. It was foolish, but he admired her for it. He tried to show his gratitude through lives taken. He had a feeling she understood.

When she sent him after the Bluecliff assassins, he didn’t hesitate.

He changed into a pair of Trikru leathers he pilfered from Ton D.C. and made his way into the town. He was used to wearing the skins of other clans, being anyone but himself as he moved through the crowd. The streets of Polis were packed with people, more than the Sankru Markets or the Delphi ports. Overrun was a thought, but he found that he liked the ease of slipping by unnoticed so effortlessly.

He followed the current of bodies and the rough-trodden roads to the local gambling den, close to the tower for the convenience of elite clientele. The building was made of wood and sealed with pitch, a powder keg waiting for a well-placed spark to ignite. It was one of the few structures in the town that had two stories, a marvel of engineering than even Nia’s Troy with her diamond palace and underground passages could not claim.

Murfy passed a man getting thrown from the establishment and flitched the bag of coins at his waist. You need to pay to play. Money got tongues moving in more ways than one.

Two dancing girl flanked the threshold, both passing palms over Murfy’s chest and back. Murfy admired them but did not engage their services. He had no need to start a tab.

He scanned the room, taking in the assortment of round tables and the warriors, spies, assassins gathered around them in a camaraderie of the competitive kind. The noise was telling - a jaunty piano and pounding drums.

Murfy couldn’t help but grin at his luck.

Games of chance were his specialty. Card tricks earned him a living on the barren streets of Troy.
There’s not much to look in the snow - a child with carefully practiced yet seemingly effortless sleight of hand was prime entertainment.

Gambling was designed to take money from the gambler and Murfy is all too glad to collect.

Most of the tables dealt in cards. A few were running a spinning wheel full of carved acorns. Participants called out numbers and an acorn was dispensed, to the player’s disappointment or elation. Something like roulette, though they played with a knife in Azgeda.

Murfy took an open seat at the table furthest from the door. He did his best work out of sight, blending in with the environment. It was easy in Polis, where people of all clans came together to mingle. No one would question the sudden appearance of an unrecognizable face slipping into the mix. The sheer number of bodies moving through the streets was almost nauseating to someone used to staring at miles and miles of open snow.

They were already talking about the Commander. His job was getting too easy.

“The Commander showed favor to the Ice Nation Ambassador over that of Lord Sagan. She should have been killed when she arrived, and still she walks free, primed to kill again.”

“The Ambassador, what do they call her?”

The momentary pause had weight, and they all burst into laughter in the fashion of an existing joke.

“Battlemaster!” Multiple voices shouted, sloshing their drinks together. Two men began jibing back and forth

“I could break her in half with my thumb,” grunted a stout man wearing the characteristic beige clothes of Sankru. He had a tightly trimmed beard and his head was shaved bald.

“She’s younger than my daughter!” Shouted a young buck, fresh from the dulcet fields and plains of the Ingranrona, bare-chested above a leather-wrapped skirt.

“She’s a witch of the wastes,” cut in a serious tone, “Bluecliff rejects dark magicks.” He spat on the ground, narrowly avoiding Murfy’s boot. He distinguished himself under Murfy’s eye with his characteristic dour attitude and his fur coat. Bluecliff, lieutenant no less, going by his wolftail.

The hand ended and the dealer dealt Murfy in on the next trick without prompting. A dancing girl came over to sit on his lap. Murfy rested a hand on her hip and let her touch him. He could pay whatever fee she charged for the affection.

The establishment catered to a diverse clientele going by the shirtless men among the house’s working girls.

The conversation quickly returned to the woman in everyone’s mind. The summit was over but the city was still full of attendants and dignitaries. The Commander was at the core of government for the clans and remained the ultimate deciding factor in all political negotiations. It opened her up for a good deal of criticism. It was impossible to please the masses, but that didn’t stop Leksa from trying. Murfy wondered if it was exhausting for her, balancing all those spinning plates at once.

“And they nearly got her. Azgeda intervened. One of their own getting in the way of Nia’s assassins --

“Ice Nation is insidious. They will do whatever it takes to seize control. Sankru borders can barely
Hold them back. Nia is desperate for more land,” said the Bluecliff lieutenant with his shiny metal breastplate.

“Sankru borders? Speak for your own incompetent defenses! Nia broke your line seasons ago,” said the Sankru warrior.

“The Commander should have crushed Azgeda already, what is she waiting for? The Coalition can serve no other purpose,” Murfy interceded.

He liked to throw some bait into the water to see who was willing to fight over it. In truth, Murfy suspected Leksa’s goals to be a little more lofty than the bone crown. A little nobler than a grab at power. Nothing so easy to peg on sight as a bleeding heart and the Commander was gushing. He couldn’t say that he saw the appeal, but he certainly knew what Klark saw in their radiant Heda and it wasn’t a throne.

“One does not defeat the winter. One endures it’s cold and longs for spring,” said the dealer, having completed the first trick. Her long fingers shuffled the remaining deck in an intricate, fast-moving spiral. She wore leather and a headscarf, but not in the Loada Kliron style. No jewelry, no hair decorations, no sigils. The only thing to mark her was an indistinguishable facial tattoo. Murfy didn’t know where she was from. Polis born and bred in all likelihood, which meant developing an identity independent of any one clan.

How poetic a representation for her generational fear. Nia would be proud.

“Bid!” Shouted the Bluecliff Lieutenant, impatient.

Each player added a coin to the pool, a move preceding the game, declaring intention to play.

Murfy looked at his cards. Snake eyes and a red five. Better than a house hand. He would bid if called, but he wouldn’t raise.

“Bid.” said the dealer, as was her right.

One by one the players determined the worth of their hand and made the decision to bid or fold, and bow out of the trick. Most folded. The Bluecliff lieutenant and the Sankru warrior did not. Murfy bid and the two of them did the same.

The dealer dealt two more cards to each player.

Ace and an eye.

Ace and three eyes.

A winning hand. It may be the winning hand depending on what everyone else is holding.

“Call.”

The cards went down and Murfy won the pot against the Sankru’s bluff and Bluecliff’s ace and single pair. Murfy pulled the money to him and pocketed it. Best not to advertise the contents of your wallet.

A few more hands go by without major upset. Murfy wins more than his fair share and it causes more than a few grumbles.

“The Council of the Clans, if they worked together, could overthrow the Commander,” Murfy said, pushing his luck. If anything he’s said would gain a useful reaction, it was such.
An uncomfortable silence descended over the table. The dealer paused for a moment, almost imperceptibly, before continuing the trick. The different clan representatives at the table looked to each other, feeling out what their tentative allies would say, none wanting to be the first to speak on such a divisive concept. The Commander’s power was sacrosanct - the only religion held in the clans.

“The Council answers to the Commander in all things,” said the Bluecliff lieutenant, more subdued than gruff as he had been.

“Not necessarily Leksa,” Murfy said, drying the line between the woman and the position. The line that many refused to see and most didn't believe existed at all.

“What are you trying to say, branwada? ?

“The assassination attempt, if successful, would have given the council significantly more power,” Murfy said, “some more than others.”

“I head Bluecliff was involved,” Murfy said

In reality, Bluecliff would lose the most without Leksa’s protection. Nia was a murder away from overtaking the land completely. They had more to lose than anyone if the Coalition was destroyed, so why would then make an attempt on Leksa’s life, other than to make her believe that the Ice Nation was making moves against her, leaving Bluecliff to hope that the Commander will send the Coalition against Nia and end the Ice Nation for good. It that way, faking an Ice Nation assassination was their best move, politically.

“Speak that slander again, branwada, and I will show you the power of Bluecliff.”

Murfy won the hand through bluffing. The table erupted in outrage, half a dozen voices speaking over each other, venting their personal misfortune. The next hand is dealt.

Murfy participates and listens for anything potentially useful. A few choices snatches of conversation stick out in Murfy’s ears from among the din. He couldn’t identify who said what in the dark, crowded room, but he would remember how it was said and the reaction it garnered.

“It would take more power than the Commander has to overthrow the Council of the Clans.”

“Bluecliff won the annual footrace again - and the wrestling and swordplay.

“Her warriors are already on the knifes edge of diplomacy, one wrong move and Nia will be annexing Polis.

“Do you think they’ve heard about it yet? The Commander,” the voice spoke under their breath, nearly a whisper. The way you spoke when conveying a secret. Murfy’s interest was piqued.

“Heard about what? “

“A star fell from the sky and destroyed Talltree.”

Murfy was about the dismiss the passing interaction as the ramblings of an artist or higher thinker. Stars weren’t the only things that burned on contact. Nia had begun designing a new war engine for the next winter war, and by what Murfy has heard of it, it could kill a lot more than obliterating a village.

Leads gathered and plan laid, Murfy made his move.
Murfy gathered the last of his winnings and left the gambling den. He tipped the matron with a handful on his way out.

They were following him right from the moment he stepped into the street, Bluecliff, and Rockline. But not the ones he played cards with. Murfy walked aimlessly, letting them enact whatever plan they made. They would need an isolated place to beat his bloody and rob him blind. It worked out well for Murfy, actually. He hadn’t had time to find such a place during his confinement in the tower, so wherever they brought, he could turn to his own purposes.

They came up behind him loud and clumsy, pushing other people out of their way forcefully as they made their move on Murfy. Bystanders caught unawares cry out in shock at the attack and pain when they hit the ground. To the person being pursued, it would be an obvious cue to start running. Not tonight. Tonight, they brought everything to him and made his job considerably easier.

Murfy didn’t resist when the arms grabbed him and pulled him into the ramshackle alleyway between the market stalls. They pulled him along through a series of narrow winding spaces that form between the backs of the market stalls. Hanging cloth gives way to wood and the path abruptly ends against a stone wall. The two men throw Murft down at the base of the wall. Murfy lands hard on his hands and knees in the dirt - where they will be in a moment.

The Bluecliff and Rockline are laughing at how easy it was to pull over a Trikru branwada how much fun they would have beating him to death and robbing him blind.

A decent plan, if not to Murfy’s preferences.

Now that they had some privacy, Murfy was free to act.

Bluecliff wound up for a right hook. Murfy lunged forward and punched him in the gut before he could land his punch. The air went out of the attacker. Murfy used the gasping pause to grab the man by the neck and punch him in the face - over and over again. It wouldn’t be the first time Murfy beat someone bloody.

Murfy was distracted by the attackers’ pending unconsciousness. He didn’t notice the other one come in behind him until an arm was viced around his throat, hauling him to his feet. Murfy struggled against the chokehold. He was losing oxygen fast, his vision starting to blur —

The pressure eased up and Murfy fell forward and rolled to the side on instinct - to avoid the body that fell after him. Another was crouched on the body’s back, mouth locked around the dead rockline warrior’s neck.

Fin. Murfy borrowed him from Klark for this little reconnaissance mission. The feral cur was perfect for moments such as these when Murfy preferred not to get his hands dirty.

The one Murfy beat down was Bluecliff, not a lieutenant but close enough, Sargeant. Murfy dragged him forward and propped him up on the corpse of his Rockine accomplice. Fin followed close at Murfy’s heel, well behaved at the prospect of further violence.

“You should start talking soon, if you want to get out of this with all of your fingers,” Murfy said. “Eat crow, Azgeda,” the Bluecliff spit in Murfy’s face.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Murfy said. He crooked two fingers over his shoulder. Fin came to heel, his mouth and ragged hair stained with blood from his last kill. Murfy appreciated Klark’s plan, if only because he was free to do what he did best - get answers.
“Fin,” Mufry beckoned.

Klark’s once perfect warrior leveled his hollowed-out stare on Murfy, blinking underneath long matted locks. Seemingly vacant and unseeing, staring into some middle space while he crouched there, unmoving. This was why Murfy didn’t like Fin. The definition of unpredictable. Murfy didn’t know if he was going to lick his fingers or bite his hand clean off.

Murfy grabbed the Bluecliff by the wrist and pulled his hand forward, right under Fin’s nose.

“Fin? Are you hungry?”

Fin eased forward to sniff at the appendage. He inched closer, gave a cursory glance, and chomped the man’s index finger clean off with a single bite. The screams were intense but neither ice nation warrior reacted, their instincts too finely honed to be affected by the pain of others. Soon, the tears turned into sobs, and only barely discernible begging.

“Your men told me the truth,” Murfy said, pulling Bluecliff’s hair back to make sure they met eye to eye. “The way you smuggled the assassin into the city, and how you planned the strike in accordance with the last day of the Coalition summit.” Murfy had heard no such thing but that was beside the point.

“My men would never talk!”

“Fin?” Bluecliff lost another finger. Fin gnawed on it but ultimately spat it out instead of swallowing.

“They would if they were afraid they were going to die, which they were. It was easy to get the rest talking after the first drowned in his own blood.”

“You bastard!” cracking, blood, screaming.

“If you want to keep your thumb you can tell me what you know or direct me toward someone more important than you. You have this one last shot,” Murft held up his fingerless hand, pointing to the thumb, “to tell me exactly what else you’re planning.”

“We sent our best climbers, like she asked,” he cried and he spoke, “there are more attacks - I don’t know what but they’re coming,” Bluecliff breathes deeply, like revealing the truth relieved him, “they’re coming.”

Klark was moved to her chamber in the Tower for the remains of her recovery. She was monitored at all times by Leksa’s warriors, particularly her man, Gustus. He seemed to be in charge of the Commander’s security in reality if not in name. He hated Azgeda with the usual self-righteous fervor of the Trikru, and watched her every move like he was waiting for her to turn her hands to deadly purpose. He particularly loathed returning her knives, on Leksa’s orders. Klark earned her way into the Commander’s good graces and now she reaped the rewards, which also manifested in her people. They were afforded some small measure of freedom. Hardly permission to wander, but they could relieve themselves in private, and were allotted rooms to share on Klark’s level.

Leksa visited when she was able, almost once a day. Klark could tell how unusual this behavior was gong by Gustus’ near visceral reaction every time the Commander stepped into Klark’s chamber. Every time Leksa sat beside Klark and regaled her with the banalities of the day. Highly critical of the way they talked and laughed together. Eyeballing how close their hands were to touching, the distance between them when they sat together for tea. The eyes Klark felt on her when she kissed Leksa’s hand at their parting.
Klark could sense a badly contained fury coming from Leksa’s Gustus and she had a feeling that it would spill over sooner rather than later.

Klark was proven right one evening, well into her healing.

“Why did you do it?” He’d asked, backlit by the sunset through the concrete windowpane. He had just supervised the delivery of Klark’s evening meal. He lingered in the room where he would have left. It was he and Klark alone in this hour. Murfy needed to borrow Fin for something or other, so he and Klark were alone in this hour.

“Is it so hard to believe that I am on her side in the same way you are?”

Klark had long since given up on lying about Leksa. The woman was as true as they came and it would be a betrayal to give her anything less than the same truth.

“You are Azgeda, you will say anything to lower her guard.”

“If you believe nothing else, believe this. The Clans have never known a woman like her and probably never will again. I think I’ve proven my willingness to give my life for hers. To die by her side. The only question is, will you be standing in my way or will you tolerate standing beside me as equals?”

Gustus seemed put oiff if not irritated. Klark stood her ground, regardless of her ability to keep it in her condition. She was healing, but it was slow going and her dominant arm was weak.

“I will never call Azeda ally. Anything can be staged, you’ve taught me that, Battlemaster. The raid, the woman in the streets. These new castle-climbers. All to ingratiate yourself to the Commander.”

“Yes, killing her people really got me on Leksa’s good side,” Klark drolled condescendingly, “I have nothing to gain from killing indiscriminately, or do you really believe I planned two such ham-fisted, poor excuses for assassination attempts?”

“I believe what the commander believes.”

“Excellent, we’re in agreement then,” Klark clapped to seal the deal and smiled as her new ally, whether he accepted it or not. Leksa valued his judgment, so Klark must put his perspective into consideration. She didn’t like it any more than he did, but she had bigger concerns than petty rivalries. “The sooner she understands that everyone is trying to kill her, the better chance she has of seeing tomorrow.”

“Everyone except you,” Gustus said, doubt lacing his words.

“And you,” Klark assured him. Klark clapped Gustus on the shoulder with a smile and departed the healing tent with a kick in her step.

Gustus followed like she knew he would.

“Where is our Heda?”

“High Council. She sent me to fetch you.”

“Wonderful! Let’s find my people.”

With the Summit completed, Leksa's political schedule was back to normal, which included her...
weekly high council meetings.

Now, she was waiting for the High Council members to trickle out of Leksa’s audience chamber while her people removed the seats and table brought in for the purpose of their meeting. The most important people from across Polis had met under Lekxas auspices to hammer out the needs of the day. The leader of the iron guilds, president of the merchant’s guild, the captain of the gate guard, and the head Fleimkepa.

“They found her in your chambers,” Titus said, lingering as the others departed, blood vessels breaking under the strain of emphasis. “Her fight was nearly ended and you ordered Nyko to save her - why would you do such a thing?”

“Klark is special,” Leksa said, “she is the key to bringing down the Ice Queen.”

“She is playing you, Leksa! She is just waiting for the perfect opportunity to kill you!”

“Perhaps,” Leksa admitted, “but maybe not. I am willing to take that chance.”

Leksa was not entirely confident in her ability to defeat Klark in a face to face battle. Leksa was not so naive as to think Klark wouldn’t have some clever trick planned to secure her victory. A voice at the back of Leksa’s mind needled, reminding her of the raids and insisting the assassination was more of the same elaborately staged lies. Lie indeed, but whose lies were they? If Bluecliff were truly responsible for the assassins, they would be doing so at Nia’s behest, surely? If they meant to cause an incident and have blame cast on the Ice Nation, anyone could be behind the poorly painted assassin. Whether one wanted war for its own sake or war for a blood feud, the majority of Leksa’s people were looking forward to the third winter war.

With Klark by her side, Leksa had far greater confidence in her ability to win. Nia’s sword in the dark had become the ace up Leksa’s sleeve.

“I beg you to see reason, Heda, stop yourself before you go too far down this path to turn back,” Titus said, emphatic and severe as he was in his teachings.

“Enough Titus, be silent,” Leksa said, growing impatient with his constant fear-mongering about Klark and the Ice Queen.

Leksa couldn’t allow Klark’s life to be endangered. Not now. Neither with words spoken against her or weapons freely brandished. Klark and Leksa were allies in every way. Leksa gave Klark her back and the Ice Nation warrior protected it with her life. Leksa accepted Klark’s offer, which would see them both rise higher - to equal peaks of majesty amongst the mountains. A way to bring the clans into harmony - a unified force that will bring the mountain down with ease. And Klark, by her side while they conquer.

Klark had given Leksa the truth with which to betray her, trusting wholeheartedly that Leksa would bear it quietly and keep it safe from exploitation. They had met each other on every level, down to the nuances of their dreams.

That was why Leksa called for her most trusted friend to save the life of a true-hearted woman Klark, Battlemaster of Azgeda, turning against everything she knows for Leksa’s sake. Because she thought Leksa was worth it.

The bond between a fers and seken was no small thing. A warrior’s mentor provided the foundation upon which they would fight all future battles. The building blocks given to the fers when they themselves were a seken at the heel of an accomplished warrior. To serve as seken to
Nia would bring Klark closer to the queen’s evil than any other. To turn against a *fers* is nigh unheard of. For Klark to turn against such a bond for Leksa spoke to the depth of Nia’s cruelty and the depth of Klark’s love for her country. Willing to turn against her people in order to provide them with a better future.

Leksa sat in her throne and imagined a brighter future, with everything set right and Klark by her side.

Leksa put away Klark’s ambassadorial seat. It was conspicuous to have Klark beside her as it was. Azgeda couldn’t be considered an ally, yet Leksa sought the counsel of an Azgeda warrior. None could know of Klark’s turned cloak, or the outrage would grow. Her warriors already saw Leksa’s interest in Klark as a betrayal. Adding a seat of power to the mix would be to invite a challenge to her leadership. Leksa would not allow the blind prejudices of her people to determine her relationship with Klark. Klark was not only a friend, but she was also Leksa’s most valuable resource in the fight against Nia.

Klark would prove her worth in time.

Leksa needed no convincing. In her mind, Klark was tantamount to perfection, as much as Leksa loathed to believe it. An otherworldly being brought to earth. The brightness of her complexion, the depth of her goodness and the strength of her spirit were least among her better qualities. She sacrificed her life, and her reputation, to help Leksa’s cause.

As if summoned by her thoughts, Klark appeared, the first to cross Lexa’s threshold. Gustus followed behind her, along with the rest of her people and their Trikru guards.

Klark’s attendants were released from the brig on the condition that they touch nothing and harm no one. Fin stuck close to Klark’s side, leaning over her injured shoulder like a living shield for Klark’s temporary weakness. The greasy-haired weasel man Klark named her tactician, Murfy. A dangerous intelligence glinted in the man’s eyes, he merited watching closely. A silent woman with a curtain of dark hair stood at Klark's back, if off to the side. A further distance away, as if to be disassociated, was a young woman with fresh, elaborate scars and the banished prince. It was a blatant display of dislike for Klark, as they could not be mistaken for other than Azgeda, yet stood apart from their people. A dangerous schism to reveal in enemy territory.

Klark was not the only Ambassador to remain in Polis after the close of the summit. Ambassador Sagan of Sankru attended every public hearing in Leksa’s audience chamber, standing in the same shadowed corner, surrounded by his sycophantic attendants. He reacted to every decree with disapproval, shaking his head at anyone who looked at him.

Leksa felt his eyes on her now as she summoned Klark to her side with a hand.

Klark’s inquisitive brow lead her feet up Leksa’s steps. Klark did not kneel before the throne, as a Trikru devotee would have, but Leksa was not offended. From her place at the top of the steps, and Leksa’s upon her throne, Klark and Leksa were eye to eye, as they seemed to be in all things. Leksa’s greatest hesitation remained one of the heart. Her inability to believe that someone like Klark truly existed at all.

It would be so much easier if it were all an elaborate ruse.

“You and your people are welcome to attend my open forums or return to their chambers at their leisure. They will be monitored but not individually followed. Fair?”

At this, Klark sank to her knees, bowing her head and easing down onto her hip. She sat down on
Leksa’s top step and stretched her legs out with a groan that suggested she had much healing left to do. Klark tucked her legs back underneath her and turned her elegant gaze to Leksa. Klark was a luminous being, bearing the full force of her attention was like looking at the sun. Leksa wanted to burn.

“More than fair, Heda, you are wise and just. Be careful, or I may begin to think too highly of you. I’m waiting for you to make the wrong choice and I’m growing worryingly convinced it won’t happen.”

“Keep waiting,” Leksa said airily, “what comes will come. I’m sure you’ll be there to clean up my mess when the day finally arrives.”

“I will be my pleasure, Leksa,” Klark said, like mopping up blood was her favorite thing to do.

Leksa and Klark shared a silent moment between them, their eyes locked, half-formed smiles on their faces and their energies resonated and the universe around them seemed suspended as if to preserve the moment in eternity.

“Step forward,” Gustus called to the first petitioner to come to her open forum. “Declare yourself!”

“Saffron of Louwoda Kliron begs for the justice of the Commander!” A woman’s voice, broken by tears and raised by hysteria, her clothes were torn and smeared in blood and dirt, “I have come from a place of violence - I came directly here - I beg you. I speak true, Heda and I beg for your judgement. I am a jam peddler, my booth is next to a gambling hall. A man came outside, he was so angry, he came outside and destroyed my stall. A season’s worth of jam, everything my family had, gone in an instant. And then he -- Heda he forced himself on me.”

Conversation erupts in the various corners of Leksa’s audience hall. Ambassador Sagan stands in his usual corner, every watchful, while his slew of attendants flurried around him like bees to a hive. For once, he is not shaking his head. Instead, he stares at Leksa with an unparalleled intensity, his expression stern, bearing still and closed off. Something about this case was distancing him from his usual political dissidence. These were the moments that determined Leksa’s future as Commander. Sagan was watching her as a man and a leader, and he is waiting to see what she will decide. What Leksa chooses to do will change the way he thinks about her. If it's for the positive, he might stop blackballing everything the attempts to accomplish legislatively. If it's for the negative, it'll drive Sankru closer to Nia. Leksa has to make this choice based on her own truth. If her people are to follow her,

“Where is this man now?”

“Probably back at the gambling hall,” Saffon said more softly, with a croak. Her face was deathly pale and clammy, her hands cold and blue. Blood ran down her leg.

“Gustus,” Leksa called her enforcer to her, “learn his name and bring him before me.”

Before Leksa could offer safe harbor for the girl, Klark was rising from her seat beside Leksa and making her way down the stairs. He goes to Saffron, who trembles with shock and fear. Of Klark or what happened to her, it was impossible to know. Klark reached out and stroked Saffron’s bruised cheek, brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. Klark was speaking to her quietly, too quiet for Leksa to hear, but she saw the way Saffron started at Klark, like the words she was saying offered insight into some hidden world. Klark eased closer to Saffron, bringing her hands up to rest against the battered girl’s forearms. Just as Klark’s hand wrapped around the girl’s elbow, Saffron’s legs went out from underneath her. Klark managed to grab biceps and lower her gently to the floor. Klark removed her coat and laid it over the girl, protecting her modesty. Klark
barked at Johrum to help her. He looked to Leksa for approval, which she gave with an edge of impatience. Johrum would bring her to Nyko, who would take care of her injuries.

Klark returned to Leksa side and resumed her seat on the stairs, legs propped up on the landing.

When Gustus returns, he comes bearing gifts and a parade. Leksa heard distant shouts from beyond her doors, steadily growing louder.

Feeling Klark’s eyes on her, Leksa looked down -- and met an attentive, almost accusatory stare. Leksa took a moment to admire the way Polis’s midday sun reflected off of Klark’s hair and brightened her eyes. All things aside, Klark was the most beautiful thing Leksa had ever seen. The weight of Klark’s full attention was like the warm sun on a chilly day, though the intensity of her gaze was like looking the sun straight on, uncomfortable and potentially blinding under the right circumstances.

“What will you do?”

“Deliver justice worthy of the crime,” Leksa said automatically, “what would you do, Klark?”

“To rape without a permit from the queen is death, Commander. Still, the queen loves raiding in all its forms. If I were you, I would kill him,” Klark said with all the certainty of one who had been similarly treated.

“My punishment for rape is a hundred lashes. Once you join the coalition, your people will be my people, and my justice their justice. Come, Klark, let me show you.”

The grand doors of Leksa’s audience chamber opened.

Gustus and Johrum lead the way, carrying a battered and bloodied body hoisted between them, the tips of whose boots dragged across the stones. Behind them, was a legion of screaming harpies - the women of an entire village come out to argue over the fate of this man. The noise was near deafening as the warring factions hissed and spat at each other. They formed a small mob with Gustus, Johrum and the boy at the center, the line of delineation between believers of vastly different circumstances. The women consumed the room, spreading out to every corner and making use of any available place to sit or lean. Some came forward to sit on the stairs like Klark, but they were quick to back away when they got too close, and they scurried off, cowed. Leksa would have allowed it, and going my Klark’s fat cat satisfied face, they found another deterrent. Leksa didn’t know what to think of Klark’s minor display of possession and the power exerted in the process. It was a conversation for a later time.

Now, Leksa was watching the Shallow Valley clan unfold in her audience chamber.

Groups of women set up weaving stations where multiple people worked with string to create a roped canvas. It was a work of art, part of their trade. Women bring in their work so they don’t have to miss the judgment. Young women moved about the room in groups of three, handing out food from wood places of oranges, mangoes, and assorted nuts. Older women sit and talk amongst themselves, gesticulating wildly at the women on the other side of the audience chamber. Leksa would not deny finding humor in the way the women shoved Ambassador Sagan and his people into the back corner, walking over him without a second thought. Klark’s ice warriors were given a wide berth.

Over the course of the commotion, multiple women felt it necessary to approach Leksa in supplication.
“Heda,” said a matron with two small children behind her skirts, “my son was tricked! You see how she wears nothing for clothes Heda, how can he be punished for the choices this girl has made?”

“Heda,” said a young woman standing alone, “my sister is a good girl, she does her work at the market and comes home. This was an inexplicable attack. I don’t know this man or his history but I know my sister and she speaks true.”

Leksa turned her attention to the man in the middle of the commotion. Gustus sensed Leksa’s return to attention and called the session to order.

“Kruñnas son of Kruñles of the Rockline Clan, Heda.

Gustus’ booming voice brought the room to settle, everyone going quiet to hear the Commander’s verdict.

“You have been accused of forcing yourself on a woman. Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

“I love her Heda I thought she felt the same.”

“And when it became clear she did not feel the same, why did you not stop?”

“She was enjoying it! I swear Heda it was --

“That’s enough,” Leksa intoned, “you have admitted to the crime of rape. The punishment is a hundred lashes. Tear him open, as he did her. Jus drein Jus daun.

Leksa’s people took up the call. “Jus drein jus daun!”

Leksa caught Ambassador Sagan’s eye and the man nodded, slow and distinguishable approval.

“Take him to the square,” Leksa commanded.

Leksa stood, and all recognized their signal to follow through on her command. Bodies slowly funneled out of the room. Until Klark, Leksa, and their attendants were the only ones left.

“Attend me?” Leksa held out a hand, an invitation for Klark to take her hand and rise in station, to ascend to the side of the Commander in form and function. To attend the Commander was the highest honor and one any of her soldiers would fight for. Klark swore not to take advantage of the privilege, for everything she did from here on out would be a reflection of Leksa’s power and control. Klark couldn’t allow any to believe that Leksa was weakened by her fondness for Klark.

For that’s what it was, a fondness. Softness in the Commander’s gaze that went beyond that satisfaction of a bond well-struck. A sweetness to her quiet reserve in the spare moments where they managed to be alone. Klark felt in the air between them, a latent charge that seemed to grow with their proximity. She felt drawn to Leksa in a way she had never felt before, such an immediate, close connection to a person. A sense of eagerness doused with anticipation and the fervid flame of desire.

“On my very soul,” Klark said whisper-quiet but so sure, clasping hands with Leksa and letting the Commander pull her to her feet. Their hands lingered, the barest touch of skin on skin that arrested them both. They exit the audience chamber side by side, sleeves brushing together. Leksa opted to forgo the political implications of who gets to use the lift and decided to lead Klark down the stairs.
By Leksa’s side rather than the heels of her captors, Klark was better able to appreciate the ingenious architecture and the astounding views they afforded.

The square was prepared for a whipping by the time Leksa and Klark arrived.

Kruk纳斯 was lashed to post. Gustus prepared the whip, as the Commander’s sword at arms, the weapon wielded in Leksa’s stead.

Leksa ascended the raised platform built at the front of the tower for precisely this purpose, for people of importance to watch the newest spectacle from an elevated view. One seat was relegated for each of the clan’s representatives. Klark was surprised to find the carved bones of the Ice Nation’s seat position beside the Commander’s throne, a place of undisputed privilege. Klark stood before the chair, ignoring Sagan’s glare as he passed her to get to the Sankru seat.

Klark followed Leksa’s lead, careful to remain in Leksa’s shadow, potential unseen as unimportant behind the eye-catching splendor of the Commander in full battle-dress.

Leksa watched the riotous crowd, standing still and observant. Voices fell as more began to notice the Commander in their midst. Eventually, they all fell silent. Only then did Leksa speak.

“Kruk纳斯 of Rockline, you have been sentenced to a hundred lashes,” Leksa proclaims, the strength of her voice lending to the power behind it. This is Leksa in her element. She took no joy from the dispensing of justice but she would not let

The crowd has gathered. Gustus looked for Leksa’s signal.

“Begin.”

Gustus wielded the whip and the crowd roared for blood. The first lash fell to resounding cheers. Leksa’s townspeople did not know what he had done or why he was being punished, but they were more than happy to enjoy the consequences. It seemed entertainment was no different in Polis than it was in Troy.

Leksa showed Klark a pageant of blood and pain.

Nia would think a hundred lashes as childish games but to Klark, it seemed to be a fate of equal suffering to death. It leaves the criminal alive to labor for atonement, in physical suffering. If Gustus was not precisely careful with each blow he could hit ligament and leave the man crippled. If he survived, the man would be scarred for life, as his victim was. Suitable punishment, in Klark’s opinion.

Klark was hit with blood splatter off the crack of the whip. It was warm and wet and so full of promise.

When it was over, the streets ran red like water runoff after rain. Gustus cut the man from his binds and left him where he fell for the people of Rockline to collect or abandon at their leisure.

Klark descended the platform and prepared to follow Leksa back to the tower when she saw something in the corner of her eye. A dark shape lurked in the shadow of the tower, just far enough from the square to be unnoticed by the guards stationed at the front of the tower. Behind him, a figure crouched.

Klark seamlessly stepped away from Leksa’s retinue and met her people in the shadow of the tower. Fin was happy to see her, immediately wrapping himself around her leg. Murfy looked unsatisfied. Klark could tell that something was off about Murfy, something disquieting about
what he discovered.

“Before you ask,” Murfy said, “I did everything you would have done.”

“And it didn’t work?”

“It did, but you’re not gonna like it. The attack was Bluecliff, sponsored by an ominous she. As far as I can tell, Nia has Bluecliff under her control, on top of Rockline and Sankru. Expect further attacks, which could come from any direction. We’re hanging out in the breeze here, Klark.”

Nothing Klark didn’t know. The balance of power was delicate between the clans and the Commander, and Klark’s strategic steps could easily tip the scales in an unfortunate direction. Nia has been shoring up support for her regime for years, from before Leksa became Commander. They were starting from a disadvantage in what was already an uphill battle. Leksa needed every advantage she could get and Klark was swiftly burning through options.

“What did you do with the informant?”

“Slit his throat and left him there. Emptied his pockets so it would look like a mugging. Going by the place I left them, no one will look twice.”

“And no indication of where the next attack will come from?” Klark is confident in her ability to act on her feet but a little intelligence could go a long way.

“No. If I’m right, they’re keeping that information close to the chest,” Murfy said, “only those directly involved will know beforehand. I don’t like this Klark. We spent too much time trying to go unnoticed and now we’re in the middle of an inter-clan cold war that’s on the verge of boiling over.”

“We were going to get involved regardless,” Klark said, “we cannot survive the coming fight without choosing a side.”

“I hope you chose the right one,” Murfy said, the doubt injected into his voice tell Klark exactly what he thought of Leksa’s chances.

“I did,” Klark said. Her faith in Leksa was unwavering. Untested, but true. “Watch Fin for me.”

Klark left her people then, and returned to the tower. Her blood was still up from the lashing and she hunted Leksa like the best on the prowl. It was all too easy to slip past the guards stationed at Leksa door. One suggestion that the Sankru Ambassador was helping himself to Leksa’s throne and they ran off like they were fleeing from the Ice Army.

Klark slipped into Leksa’s chambers and found the Commander in the midst of stripping off her paint.

Leksa met her gaze in the reflection of her mirrored glass. Klark took measured steps to bring her next to Leksa. The Commander rose to her feet.

Klark recognized that half-lidded look. The barest moments when the Commander felt - and exposed - vulnerability. Clarke is humbled and awed by the gift.

She wants to wrap Lexa in furs and carry her all the way to the winter storm tunnels. Warm hugs of rock deep into stone and lit by natural breaks in the mountain. The stalactites - and the underground waterfall. The howling canyon and the swoops of hollowed-out stone that ran with water fast enough to carry a body on buoyancy. She wanted to show Leksa the gleaming plains of the
northern reaches and the treacherous bog of the summer flats. She wanted to show Leksa the beauty of the Ice Nation. The bliss of being wrapped in layers of fur with nothing between you and the one you wanted more than anything else.

At Polis, she can only close her eyes and lean in close.

Lexa captured her lips, fierce not forceful. Incessant, but soft.

Klark has been with men since she started under Nia. She doesn’t know how to love a woman. But maybe - how Klark would have wanted to be loved?

Clarke kisses back in a gentle, even stroke, tentative and eager all at once. Explorative.

Leksa pulls back as they stare at each other, the heat of the sun simmering between them.

Leksa comes to her again and Clarke is ready for her - presses the full of her lips against Lexa’s kiss. Klark can almost see the sigh of relief that leaves Lexa along with the fear of Klark’s rejection. Leksa explored Clarke with soft, probing kisses. Klark was so wrapped up in Leksa. It felt like a force drawing her to Lexa - lip to lip, hand to hand, mind to mind.

Heart to heart.

Leksa kisses her full on the mouth, slow and lingering. They stand there together, even closer, and bask in the beauty of it. Leksa breathes a deep, centering sigh. A usually contemplative sound that stressed Clarke out. This sigh was a weight lifted, a secret gifted, an emotion beyond description.

They pulled apart to breathe and smiled at each other, the bliss of younger women with fewer responsibilities breaking through, bouy ing their hearts and drawing laughter to their lips.

"Heda!"

Gustus barges into Leksa’s chamber and Klark is inordinately glad not to be caught in the act. She didn’t trust Gustus not to run her through if given the opportunity.

They turned at the sentry’s call and were greeted by a messenger. The young man was exhausted, having run from the forest outpost. Leksa ordered her sentry to give him some water to ease his announcement. Klark was interested in the number of possibilities and hoped beyond hope that this wasn’t the start of an all-out war.

“Heda, a message from Ton D.C. Indra rides for Polis with all haste. There’s been an attack. 300 dead at Talltree.”

“Ice Nation?” Leksa’s knee jerk reaction still existed despite her newly formed trust with Klark. Klark knew better than to be wounded. The woman deserted her Queen in favor of Leksa. If the Ice Nation attacked now, Klark wouldn’t be a part of it. Nia was acting alone, and the Ice Queen was fully capable of a massacre.

“No, Heda. A new enemy,” he said fearfully, “it burned them with fire from the sky,”

Chapter End Notes

This monster of a chapter got away from me. This chapter was meant to be something
very different but I took on a life of its own. Half of what was going to happen in this chapter got pushed to the next. This chapter is now an interlude to the next chapter, which is an interlude to the next arc of the story. You still with me? Lol.

At this point, there are multiple factions working against each other, actively plotting their next move. Bluecliff, Rockline, and Sankru are on Nia's side with the ever terrifying Ice Army, and Lexa can only safely claim Trikru and Clarks as allies. Another opponent has dropped into this world already rife with political intrigue, how will Clarke and Lexa cope?

Nextime, Clarke visits the Natblidas and Indra arrives with news that will change everything.

Thank you to everyone taking time out of their life to read this. I love you all and you make posting worthwhile. Drop a comment or a kudo if you feel like making my day.

Thanks,

Shtare

End Notes

I'm among the many that stopped watching the 100 when Lexa was killed. The event was spoiled on social media so I was able to avoid the episode. Denise, the lesbian character from the Walking Dead was killed that same week, and suffice to say, I was a little traumatized.

Online screencaps of season five, specifically, Madi reciting Lexa's words to Clarke verbatim, caught my attention. Against my will, my interest was piqued.

I watched the most recent episode, in which Clarke memories are depicted as a collage of drawings on the wall of her cell on the Ark. I analyzed them meticulously, and straight up, Lexa's face appears on Clarke's memory wall at least seven (7) times. More than any other face by a significant amount. There's also a small Bellarke nod when the camera shows a corner of the room with two same-size full-body portraits of Lexa and Bellamy opposite each other.

Josephine Lightbourne, in Clarke's subconscious, monologues about traumas that go too deep to ever be healed. She says, "and that's why you cry whenever you think of Lexa." Clarke proceeds to sit down on Lexa's throne and fucking sob in an approximation of the Trikru woods.

Depicting Clarke's mourning in this way softened me to the show again and inspired me to read fic, find Azgeda!Clarke, and write my own.

I wrote Clarke as Klark and Lexa as Leksa for the authenticity of the AU.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!