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### (my) Destruction Within Your Mouth

by KL_Morgan

**Summary**

*He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life:*

*but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction. Proverbs 13:3*

Clarke loses: her head, her voice, her heart.

(Canon divergent from 1x03)
Way back when I was in full fathom five-style denial about how lost I am to this pairing, I bet myself I could write pages and pages of shamelessly indulgent Clexa fanfic on the sly and never feel the impulse to post or even finish it.

This is me losing that bet. (And updating alternate Mondays.)
Chapter 1

~*~

It shouldn’t have happened. She should have gone down into safety with the others, should have sucked it up and done what was responsible, expected, *Clarke*. But she had a moment of clarity -- insanity? -- poised to descend into the buried shelter, when she catches a glimpse of Wells’ face and thinks: *I want to kill him.* It terrifies her.

She freezes.

She’s been choking back this rage for too long, holding back white-knuckled. Now she looks at this small, dark space, the anguish on the face of her best friend, and some small voice whispers: *do it here, he might not even stop you.*

Clarke turns and runs.

It’s the craziest thing she’s ever done -- the alarm blaring in her ears, Finn and Wells both shouting after her like madmen. But between the terror sweeping toward them on the air, and the monster inside her clawing to get out, Clarke knows which ones frightens her most.

~*~

She survives.

Barely.
While running she stumbles and falls face-first into the ground, only to discover she tripped on a steel door embedded in the ground. When she gets back up onto her knees she glimpses old stones, just adjacent, in a roughly rectangular shape -- the outlines of the ancient foundations of a house. Her hands are tugging at the door handles before her brain can fully form the words *storm cellar*, the ancient and rusted lock dissolving with one good pull. She lowers herself into the darkness just as the virulent orange fog spills between the trees surrounding.

Clarke drops into darkness, landing badly on one leg. She shoves the pain to one side and drags herself deeper, letting the door fall shut behind her with a clang. She can hear -- things -- rustling in the pitch black of the cellar, curls in tight, and waits.

She makes herself count to two thousand, slowly, before she holds her breath and lifts the door up again.

The fog is gone.

But she’s completely lost.

~*~

At first, she keeps meticulous track of the days.

At first.

It takes her two days to find the river again, and when she does she plunges her hands into the cold, clear water and drinks. Screw contamination. Between dying of radiation or thirst, she’ll take the second head.

She lies on her back, reveling in the feeling of *not being thirsty* for long moments before dragging herself to her feet. So, she has no idea where she is, and no way to carry water with her. She’ll have to stick to the river. Eventually she’ll come back to where they found the seaweed -- this isn’t it, she doesn’t recognize any landmarks -- and eventually the others will come back there for supplies, or to look for her. Or maybe she can find her way back herself from there.
Fine. She’ll be fine. Humans can survive for weeks on only water, she remembers that from Earth Skills. She just needs to follow the river.

Of course, the river flows in two directions.

She wastes half the day debating; trying to remember the position of the sun of the sky when she was with Finn and Wells, the slope of the land, the direction of the current. But it’s all jangled together with the blare of the alarm, the slick of dark hatred in her heart.

She decides to follow the river east. She wraps her arms around herself, shivering as the sun begins to descend. It can’t be more than, well, okay, three days’ walk at the most. She can do that. She’ll be fine.

~*~

On the seventh day her wristband dies.

It’s been an ever-present hum against the veins in her wrist ever since she woke up on the dropship. Nothing she could hear, but the workings of the hardware inside -- measuring, evaluating, relating -- created a vibration that couldn’t quite be ignored. And then it just. Stops.

Clarke immediately sits down. She’s already weak from hunger (and fear and doubt and I must have been crazy and maybe I’m still crazy why else would I keep walking except maybe it’s just ahead of me), this takes her out at the knees.

She stares at the wristband, wasting precious moments of daylight waiting for it to blip back on, stutter back to life, the technological equivalent of a prank.

A sob rises up in her throat. She hasn’t allowed herself tears since she realized how stupid she’d been. She doesn’t have the time or water to waste. But she didn’t realize until now how much she relied on the wristband -- knowing somewhere above her head, her mom was listening to her heartbeat and monitoring each breath. She couldn’t really be lost, not if Abby could read her stats; somewhere inside her persisted the childish belief in her mother’s omnipotence, her refusal to let her only child actually die.

How had this happened? Was it the Ark, had something gone wrong up there? Or was it the
dropship -- another maneuver from Bellamy to separate them from the adults in the sky?

Oh. Now no one has any way of knowing she’s still alive.

(She has a gruesome thought: maybe it died because she did. Maybe she just hasn’t figured that out yet.)

Panic has her clawing at the dead metal like it could pass infection. She breaks it between two rocks - one fairly flat and embedded in the ground, another she pulled from the river the size of her fist. It comes away from her wrist with a sting like regret.

Clarke throws the pieces into the river. She spares a thought that, between her hunger and the nights spent shivering and in a state of half-wakefulness, her decision making might be affected. Adversely.

It doesn’t matter. She has to keep walking.

~*~

Clarke thinks obsessively of how to find food. She tracks the surface of the river looking for fish, or even evidence of a predator whose presence would mean fish. She’s not sure how she would catch anything, but finding them would be a start. She can’t bring herself to wander too far away from the sound of the river, but everything in earshot has been picked clean by the animals that must come to its banks to drink.

She thinks herself incredibly lucky when she sees a quick flash of movement deeper in the woods and discovers a family of non-mutated deer grazing on a kind of plant with thick, tuberous roots. They scatter as she shouts, and her hands shake as she digs up whatever was left uneaten. She makes a pouch of her shirt and takes them back to the river, which now cuts deeper into the earth, growing wider and wilder. The current is steady and strong at this point. All she has to do is keep a tight grip on each tuber as she lowers it below the surface, let the water wash away the dirt.

She eats them one by one sitting cross-legged by the river. She’s too hungry not to, and even a little afraid something else will step out of the trees and try to eat them first. Roots are good, she remembers: potatoes, carrots, they contain all kinds of vitamins and energy. These aren’t too difficult to eat raw. The flesh is firm but yielding beneath her teeth, the skins papery. The taste might leave something to be desired, but she doesn’t care -- the sensation of chewing, swallowing, of filling of her stomach is the most delicious thing in the world. She doesn’t even mind the slightly acidic flavor
of the juice, or how it leaves her tongue and lips feeling a bit tender.

She falls asleep after. It’s not a conscious decision, and afterwards she realizes she should have expected it: she’s put her body through unimaginable stress. She just sent new supplies to the metaphorical troops and they’re calling a time-out for redistribution and repairs. Fatigue presses her to the ground like an actual weight, and she has just enough presence of mind to shift to a defensive position behind one of the larger rocks, before sleep rises up to take her.

When she wakes up it’s almost night, the sky drenched in colors like a canvas. She feels impossibly good, and as she stands she stretches, giving up an unconscious groan of satisfaction.

Except she doesn’t.

She opens her mouth, and there’s nothing there.

~*~

She spends the rest of that night waiting for the other symptoms. She runs through the possibilities in her head -- nausea, vomiting, bloody bowels, fever -- and when she reaches the end of a list that’s exhaustive even for the daughter of a medical professional, she starts again at the top. She simply sits, watching her hands clench and unclench in the soft light of the endless stars, and thinks about how she might die.

But when light begins to filter in gold from the rising sun she’s still staring down at her own hands, and she’s still alive.

Also, she can hear something in the woods.

A few days ago she might have moved on, and quickly. Now, though, it’s hard to feel anything but disconnected -- there’s no immediacy to anything, no driving need. She’s in shock, she realizes, but it’s hard to care about that, either.

Maybe it’s another family of deer showing her something to eat. Maybe this time she’ll go blind. She laughs, silently.
Except -- as Clarke carelessly makes her way through the trees, uncaring of how the sounds of the river grow softer and softer -- it isn’t animals.

It’s children.

~*~

She thinks she might have been prepared for anything except this.

They’re young -- really young, barely old enough to be playing out here on their own. She freezes and drops down to the forest floor, creeps forward by inches until she has a good vantage point behind some particularly thick bushes. Here, she can stare and stare and stare until her eyes are dry and her heart is satisfied.

There are people on the ground.

And they look like people, or at least the young ones do: one head, two hands, no fangs or misshapen heads from where she’s crouched in the dirt. Maybe it hits them at puberty. (Maybe the people on the Ark have always been wrong, about everything.)

They aren’t speaking English. That’s one of the few things keeping Clarke convinced this is real, she’s really seeing this, this isn’t another symptom (hallucinations) or a final mental break before dying. Their clothes are another clue -- surely if this were a product of her own fevered brain she wouldn’t have dressed them in rags and scraps, layers making up for the obvious rips and holes. She wonders for a few minutes if they’re as lost as she is -- abandoned? -- but then she notices the details: too-long sleeves rolled up and tied carefully at their wrists, scarves and sashes wrapped just where they’re needed for warmth. She has a sudden memory of the way Abby would inspect her every morning before primary school: brushing momentary wrinkles out of the soft tunic that serves as a uniform for the younger kids. Clarke blinks back tears, puts a hand over her mouth to quiet the breathing that’s gone ragged.

The children don’t notice. They’re too wrapped up in their game. It straightforward: they’ve staked out a little area between a shallow cave in a rock face and a creek, the ground cleared of underbrush. One of the children comes out the cave, a ragged fur pelt draped around her shoulders, and the others greet her with upraised arms and a rhythmic chant. The first child takes this as her due, swaggering around the clearing, pointing and delivering what seems to be orders that the other rush to obey.
Then teams are negotiated and the group splits, convening on opposite sides of the clearing. The first child -- the leader? -- lets out a blood-curdling war cry, the apparent signal for the two groups to rush each other and begin play-fighting.

Wait, that’s not play-fighting at all.

They’re not fighting -- no blood, and it seems previously agreed that head shots are off limits -- but the rest of it looks very real. Very... competent. The children face off one on one, each in a fighter’s crouch, keeping their weight on the balls of their feet. They circle each other with looks of absolute seriousness. Their hands are quick when they aim their blows. Clarke watches pain flash across their faces when something lands but no one cries, and no one sits down in the dirt to demand a time out.

She feels a chill crawl up her spine. What kind of adults raise children like this?

There’s a signal she misses and it’s suddenly play again: half of the kids stagger, groan, clutch at their chests as they slowly fall to the ground, their victorious opponents cheering and jumping around in victory, eventually rejoining in their previous chant: “Heda! Heda! Heda!”

The whole thing takes less than ten minutes, and they start again from the top. The only change is the child wearing the moth-eaten mantle of leadership. The chosen leader also gets to daub mud on her face. Clarke missed that part of the costume change the first time around. They do it again, and again, and again.

Somewhere around the fifth reiteration of the game, Clarke realizes two things. One: she’s bored. That’s probably another sign this is really happening, she doesn’t think boredom features much in poisonous hallucinations. Two: the leader-child is always one of the girls.

One of the kids stops and shouts, pointing up at the sun where it dazzles through the trees. The rest of them fall to: re-tying loose ends of their clothing, rinsing faces and arms off in the creek, and carefully storing the fur back in the shallow cave. Then they’re off, whooping and shouting as they wend their way deeper into the woods.

Clarke makes herself count to three hundred before trusting that they won’t come back soon and crawling out from behind her bush.

She searches the cave, spurred by faint memories of playing with Wells on the Ark. There hadn’t
been too many places to hide things, but kids are ever eager for secrets. She has to stoop down low to crawl far enough inside. She finds a few rough-hewn knives, each small enough for a child’s hand, a pile of clothes even older and more ragged than the ones the children had been wearing, and a couple smaller furs. Rabbits, she thinks. They’re in good shape, if small.

And there’s food. It’s so well-hidden she nearly misses it, but there’s a string tied around one of the rocks piled in the corner of the cave. When she lifts up that rock, the string pulls up a soft bag from the loose earth underneath. Picking the knot free takes a moment, and inside she finds apples and strips of dried meat.

She moves outside the cave to sit and eat her spoils. Her body is still humming on the edge of exhaustion -- whatever she gained with her previous sleep was lost in the subsequent shocks -- and so she forces herself to relax, soaking up the warm sunshine. The meat is spiced oddly and her stomach cramps a little in apprehension, but she swallows it down. The bag she found the food in is a little odd. She turns it over and over in her hands. There’s a slickness to the surface that’s strange. It’s cotton or another natural fiber, she realizes, treated with something to make it waterproof.

The children might have caught the rabbits that gave up those small pelts, but they didn’t do this. And the meat is strong and gamey, probably venison. She doesn’t think children that young could take down a deer by themselves, however skilled they are at fighting.

When the children left, they acted like they were expected somewhere else. So somewhere in the woods, somewhere close by, is a village or encampment. Of people who have been living on the ground all this time.

She’s so deep in her own thoughts she doesn’t register the rustle of undergrowth until it’s too late, and she’s looking at wide eyes on the opposite side of the clearing.

The little girl turns and runs so quickly, so silently, that Clarke wonders for a second if she actually saw her -- but then realizes she doesn’t have time to debate her senses, she has to go now. She sweeps up the bag of food, the knives, even the rabbit pelts, heart racing, she doesn’t know if she has the strength or resources to make back the distance lost to get to the others but she has to try and --

She hears a single, pained shriek from deep in the trees, and then silence.

Clarke pauses.
It’s not her problem. She resumes walking, trying to find a speed that will give her the edge but not cut too clear a path. The little girl was running back to safety, and safety means grownups, and grownups means Clarke has other problems than --

None of the children cried out when they were punched or pushed down. How badly would the girl have to be hurt to make a sound like that?

No. She has her own people to think about. If they’re still alive. If the dead wristband wasn’t the symptom of a bigger issue. If she can make it back on three apples and two mouthfuls of dried meat.

This girl was so small. The youngest. When she played victorious leader the others carried her on their shoulders. She kicked her feet in glee as they cheered.

Clarke clenches her jaw so tight it aches. She marches over to the nearest low-hanging branch, tying the food bag out of the reach of animals. Stupid, she tells herself. Soft-hearted, she scolds as she throws the pelts over the branch as well. Bellamy’s right, you don’t have what it takes to stay alive, much less lead, as she sticks the small knives into her boots and belt.

Then she turns back.

~*~

The girl fell into a pit trap, most likely one set by her older friends to collect more rabbits. Clarke is surprised she hasn’t climbed out on her own until she spots the way the little girl clutches one arm to her chest. She’s obviously in pain, but the tears making their way down her thin cheeks are silent. The only sound she makes is a sharp inhale when Clarke steps into view.

Clarke spares a thought for her appearance after days of walking and sleeping on the ground -- well. It’s not like she has time for a quick dip in the creek. She crouches at the edge of the trap, shows her hands. She reaches slowly for the girl, who presses back and kicks. A whimper escapes her throat when the movement jostles her, and Clarke uses the moment of distraction from the pain to grab her uninjured arm at the wrist. The little girl freezes, and Clarke waits, letting her take in the situation -- see, I’m not pulling you anywhere, I’m just keeping you from hitting me, I don’t want to hurt you -- before holding out her other hand, palm up. Nods at the arm the girl keeps tucked against her chest.

The girl’s shoulders slump, and she stretches out her arm. Clarke pulls up her sleeve and runs a gentle pressure down the length of her forearm, and the girl hisses. It’s only a greenstick fracture, if
that. Clarke releases her other arm, again showing her open hands and slow movements as she reaches for one of the small knives. The girl tenses, but Clarke turns her body so she can see how Clarke is just cutting a small length from one of the thicker branches fallen to the ground, and then stripping the wood from one side to form a flatish surface. She puts the knife away and shows the girl how to hold the branch against her bad arm, securing it at the wrist. Clarke thankfully thought to bring the rags she found earlier in the cave, and now she tears them into long strips as she winds and ties, winds and ties, so that the arm is held straight by the splint. The girl grunts a couple times but doesn’t try to move away, dark eyes going from Clarke to her own arm and back again.

It’s a neat job, even if Clarke thinks so herself. When she’s done the girl’s sleeve slips to cover the whole thing. Clarke reaches down and the girl doesn’t jerk away, allowing herself to be hauled up by hands hooked under her armpits. The weight unbalances Clarke, who falls back onto the ground. By the time she hauls herself upright the girl has darted off into the trees.

~*~

And then Clarke doesn’t leave.

She’s not entirely sure why not.

Part of her can’t quite face tracking the river again, days spent simply retracing her own steps. Part of her protests leaving the first human beings -- even humans affected in who knows what ways by nuclear fallout -- she’s seen in days after so long on her own. Maybe, if the little girl brings adults, she’ll tell them Clarke helped her. Maybe they’ll want to help her back. Maybe she can take them back to the dropship, and these people who know how to store meat and waterproof fabric can help the hundred survive.

(Or how to craft and throw a spear, but she thinks that might not have been them, they’re so many days walk from there. Maybe they know who attacked them, and can help.)

But when she wakes with the rising sun and makes her way back to the clearing, careful to keep behind cover, it’s still empty. There’s only -- Clarke squints -- a small object placed in its center, wrapped in large green leaves.

Of course, of course she thinks it could be a trap. But curiosity itches at her until she can’t take it, and she tells herself: you wanted to stay behind and see what happened.
So she crosses into the open space. She picks up a branch to poke back the leaves. When they unwrap, it releases a scent into the air that makes Clarke’s mouth water, something sweet and nutty and good. She sits to peel away the rest, spying a small, round cake, dotted with seeds and is that sugar, the small crystals picking up the light?

She’s breaking off a piece to cram in her mouth before she can think. A part of her is asking isn’t this how we got in trouble before? but it’s drowned out by the rest of her screaming back shut up shut up it’s SO GOOD. It is incredibly good. After unknown days of water and walking, it’s the best thing she’s eaten in her life, and her eyes flutter shut with bliss.

When she opens them, seven pairs of eyes are staring back.

The oldest is the first to step closer. Clarke remembers her from the games, and how when she played leader her war cries were so convincing they made Clarke jump. She holds her head just as high, now, as she raises her voice to make an almost imperial demand.

Clarke, mouth full of cake, points to her throat and shakes her head.

It’s clear they understand. The children whisper among themselves until the oldest girl hisses something that makes them fall silent. But they appear to be at ends at what to do next.

Clarke swallows, holds up another piece of cake as an offering.

The leader steps forward, cautious, one step at a time. She comes just close enough to stretch out her hand and take the morsel between her fingertips. She sniffs it -- Clarke raises an eyebrow. Didn’t they bring it themselves? But maybe they think Clarke has transformed it somehow, changed it with her touch. The girl tastes it, chewing slowly.

She announces something to the others, never taking her eyes off Clarke. Whatever she says, the other children relax, shuffling forward. The little girl from yesterday barrels to the front, climbing into Clarke’s lap like she’s claiming the best seat. Clarke stiffens. She’s not used to younger kids, really, she only saw them when their parents brought them in for medical attention and they were scared and clinging to parents. But this little girl chatters away, unselfconscious as she rolls up her sleeve to show Clarke the makeshift splint from yesterday. It’s holding together well, and Clarke gives her a smile for it. The girl smiles back and then looks at the seed cake, expectant. Clarke hands over a piece and she sits back to eat in comfort.
The older children have more restraint. One by one they gently push any offer of cake back on Clarke, making encouraging motions as she eats. She imagines congratulating their parents: you’ve raised them to be fearsome fighters AND gracious hosts. They cluster closer, examining the ends of her hair, the treads on her boots, growing less cautious as they jostle each other for a better look. When Clarke finishes eating, they immediately notice as her eyes begin to drift shut. They herd her as a group into the cave, pushing and pulling at her clothes, ordering (she guesses) her to sleep inside. When she lies down they throw the ragged fur over her shoulders, and the oldest points at her, then the ground, repeating a word.

Okay, Clarke thinks, as she begins to drift off. I’ll stay.

~*~

Their names are, from biggest to smallest: Baya, Jeffer, Balti, Anka, Chesa, Largo, and Thesda. They’ve come up with a name for her as well, something liquid and gurgling that Clarke can’t quite follow. She’s doing her best to work out their language. It isn’t so far from English, she thinks. Almost like English run backwards and underwater, the syllables loose and disjointed. Sometimes, when she tilts her head back and tries not to think too hard, she can just about understand.

The children make that a lot easier, repeating things to her endlessly, speaking slow and clear. They don’t seem at all fazed at her lack of understanding and happily tell her the names of whatever she points at like they’re reciting a lesson for an approving teacher, each demanding a turn. She’s lucky in that respect, she guesses; adults would be more suspicious.

Adults probably wouldn’t make her into something of a pet, either. They bring her food in the mornings and late afternoon when the older ones can get away. Whatever chores or lessons keep them from the clearing don’t seem to apply to Thesda, who finds time at midday as well. Clarke might have found it in herself to creep away the day of the seed cake, when the others were away -- except Thesda returned just as she was about to go, and the look in the little girl’s eyes made Clarke drop her bundle with a sigh. She needs to rest up for a few days anyway, she tells herself, it can only help in the long run. She ignores the guilt whenever Thesda holds on a little too tightly, or walks backward out of the clearing as if Clarke will vanish in an eyeblink.

They bring her things besides food: blankets, and even clothing. None of it’s new or in good enough shape to be missed. They’re smart kids, she thinks with a grin, but she can only imagine how exciting it must be to have this kind of secret.

She feels a little better, and a little stronger, with each day. She manages to get the worst of the dirt off, courtesy of the creek, but her old clothes are a sour and sweat-stained lost cause. It turns out for
the best, since the clothes the kids sneak for her, though ragged, are so much warmer she’s surprised. They even find her a pair of mismatched boots. They’re too big, but they’re lined with fur. The nights get colder with each sundown, so this is good -- these are things Clarke will need when she finally starts to make her way back.

She keeps telling herself that -- she’s resting, she’s saving up food for the journey back, she’s learning their language and that will help (somehow) -- as the days pass.

Right up until she’s discovered.

~*~

(next chapter)

“Commander, this cannot stand. Their families think they are taking food to a wild animal.”

“It’s all too easy to track the girl’s eyes, stark against dark paint, as she looks up Clarke and down. “Are we so sure they are not?” she asks, dry.
Chapter 2

Thesda gives her a doll one day. She delights in bringing small objects to Clarke’s attention, the sort of things only a young child would find interesting, things she’s probably picked up around the forest. Thesda will present them with an air of self-conscious importance, and Clarke will try to transform them into something worthy of the little girl’s expectant attention. She weaves together large, orange-tinted leaves into a forest crown, draws pictures in the dirt with a straight and slender branch, and -- working it out as she goes from a memory of a book -- blows a sharp whistle on a blade of grass. Thesda observes all these feats with the same wide-eyed intensity, sitting on the ground and her chin resting on fisted hands.

The doll, however, is beyond Clarke’s ken. It’s ancient and stained, loved to the point where the scraps of fabric making up its floppy body have worn away at strategic weak points -- the doll’s head is only hanging on by the grace of a few threads. Clarke is trying to communicate sorry, kiddo, this one’s a goner with only her eyebrows when there’s a rustling in the nearby bushes.

Her first clue something is really wrong is when Thesda shoots to her feet, shouting -- “No! No! Go away!” -- and the next is the figure emerging from the surrounding vegetation like a bad dream.

He’s huge, covered and tattoos and scars, wielding a blade longer than her entire arm, and Clarke doesn’t even have time to kick herself for staying where someone like this could find her, because Thesda is rushing towards him and the wicked-looking edge to his weapon.

Clarke lunges, grabbing the back of the little girl’s shirt. The man in front of them growls, like literally growls as he raises his arm up high. Clarke only puts her back to him for the split second it takes to shove Thesda behind her, and then she’s facing him down herself.

He stops short, eyes narrowing. There’s a bad moment where he’s still, watching her, and Clarke wishes her hands weren’t already preoccupied with a small kid trying to squirm out from behind her so she could pick up a rock, a branch, anything. He seems to decide something, and steps forward.

“Gustus.”

A voice from the other side of the clearing -- surrounded, Clarke thinks -- makes her turn, but just enough so that the attackers are at either side and Thesda is still at her back.
And her jaw drops.

Because this one’s on a horse.

For a few seconds the horse is all she registers. It’s beautiful -- cream-colored and proud, standing with its head far above her and woah, were horses always this big? They didn’t seem that big in the pictures, is this another nuclear mutancy? How do you even climb on top of something that big? Her attention shifts to the rider.

The bottom falls out of her stomach at the too-familiar pattern of dark paint across the eyes and cheeks. Clarke always wondered why the kids were so particular aspect of their play, creating the same sweep and strokes every time -- now she knows. She also recognizes the imperious carriage they always tried to imitate as well, the way this girl (because she can’t be that much older than Clarke) holds herself like her head should be carrying a crown.

“Heda!” Thesda shrieks, and Clarke can’t hear anything but joy in her voice. The rest pours out in a stream of chatter too quick for Clarke to follow.

The girl on the horse listens to all this carefully, head tilted to show her attention. Clarke is distinctly aware, however, of the remaining tension in both of the strangers, and the way they seem to follow every shift of Clarke’s weight.

Thesda says something which causes the man -- Gustus? -- to break out into a disbelieving laugh. The rider shoots him a glare cutting enough to make him swallow the rest, but Clarke hears him protest: “Heda --”

The glare grows even fiercer, and Clarke almost falls over when the man says, in English: “Commander. You don’t truly believe they have captured a wood witch.”

“I do not have to accept the premise to trust in her sincerity,” the girl says. She speaks almost as fluidly as if she grew up on the Ark, just another student Clarke would see in Earth Skills or on the way to Calculus. “They have shown ingenuity and courage, even if their campaign was slightly... flawed.”

Clarke realizes that they’re both talking with the attitude of adults around young children, as if speaking English was like spelling out words -- a way to communicate without being understood by smaller ears. They don’t think Thesda can follow this rapid speech. They don’t think Clarke can,
“Commander, this cannot stand. Their families think they are taking food to a wild animal.”

It’s all too easy to track the girl’s eyes, stark against dark paint, as she looks up Clarke and down. “Are we so sure they are not?” she asks, dry. Clarke has to bite down on the inside of her mouth to keep her reaction from her face.

“You sneaky little brat,” Clarke thinks. But it’s mixed in with more affection than she expected, considering -- what did she really expect from a bunch of warrior kids? Of course she wasn’t their pet, she was their prisoner.

The girl on the horse addresses Thesda in their own language. There are too many words Clarke hasn’t learned, but the gist is familiar: negotiation. Thesda is sulky and unresponsive at first, but the rider’s tone grows both coaxing and commanding, and Thesda starts to nod. Eventually she walks away from Clarke -- who almost follows, but the soft growl from Gustus stops her -- and over to the horse. The rider leans down to scoop Thesda up, long braids swinging, and lift her easily into the front of her saddle. She gives a soft click with her tongue and they’re off at a walk, the horse making its way with surprising ease through the undergrowth.

Clarke looks to Gustus, who looks back, hard and impassive. She sinks down to sit on the ground with a sigh.

She knows only a handful of minutes pass at most, but it feels like forever until the horse returns to the clearing with its riders. Thesda’s face is shining with happiness. When the rider sets her back on the ground the little girl’s eyes are practically dreamy.

The rider asks her a question and Thesda agrees. The rider shifts her attention to Clarke, who swallows hard when the expression in her eyes also shifts -- from fond indulgence to calculation. This close Clarke notices something new: a piece of metal like a medallion, low and center on her forehead.
“Your (word),” the rider says, slow and deliberate in their language, “comes with us. She will walk behind me and in front of Gustus. We do not have to tie her up, or use our weapons. She will not use weapons on us.”

It’s wonderful how much you can pick up of a new language just through the mock battles of ferocious children. Especially when it comes to veiled threats. Clarke nods, of course -- what else can she do? She just hopes their main concern is getting her away from the children, and they’ll drop her off somewhere and lose interest. She stands, brushing herself off.

Insult to injury, it’s Thesda who strips her of the small knives she’s carried since raiding their cache. Clarke holds still for it, feeling her face burn as the little girl goes unerringly for every place they’re hidden. (Or, where Clarke had thought they were hidden.) When she’s finished, Thesda stands in the center of the clearing as they depart in the procession specified, the rider first, Clarke behind, and an unsmiling Gustus bringing up the rear. Clarke watches Thesda over her shoulder for as long as the little girl is in sight, at the way she waves farewell over and over.

“Goodbye, (word),” she calls out, the same name she and the other children have used to address Clarke, the same word the rider used. Wood witch, Clarke remembers from Gustus’s English. “Goodbye, goodbye!”

~*_~

The horse is a lot less enchanting from this angle.

“Heda,” the man behind her says. Clarke has a moment to wonder: is it a name? Or a title? He also called her a commander, but a commander of what? The village? Her helplessness hits her afresh: it was one thing to be voiceless and surrounded by children. This is something else. As soon as she can find an opportunity, she needs to go.

The rider throws a look over her shoulder, and Gustus switches to English: “Commander. May this soldier seek to know your plans regarding your newest --” and Clarke can feel him looking at her as if from a great height, she wants to turn around and bare her teeth, “-- acquisition?”

“Are you questioning my decisions, Gustus?” The tone is crisp but there’s an undertone to it, slippery as a fish, which sounds a lot like affection.
“Never.” That doesn’t sound playful at all. That sounds real. “I would enjoy knowing whether she will be meal or mascot.”

Clarke has a moment of real, genuine fear -- who knows, it’s been ninety-seven years on a landscape of devastation, who knows what these people are capable of -- when the rider chuckles. It’s soft, and she doesn’t turn her head, but the sound itself eases the tension in Clarke. Their children fight like demons and they ride possibly-mutant horses like it’s nothing, but they also make jokes and laugh at them. Maybe not everything of these people is alien.

“I doubt there’s enough meat on her,” the rider says. “From what the child told me, she seems incapable of caring for herself as a warrior.”

“From the Dead Zone, then?”

Dead Zone. That sounds... not great. Clarke focuses on the sway of the horse’s rump, tries not to feel the unknown vastness of this world opening up before her.

“Possibly,” the rider says. “If she’s unable to talk... You know people can be overzealous in their attempts to keep the blood clean.”

“A zealousness of which the great Commander does not approve.” Clarke sneaks a quick look over her shoulder, but no, he’s not smiling, whatever it sounds like.

“Every able body will be necessary to win this war,” the rider says grimly.

War, Clarke thinks, stomach sinking. With who? How bad is it? She knows about previous Earth wars from history class, she remembers the lessons of phalanx and Viking raiders, which is probably the level of tech these people work with. Still, the primary image in her head of war is blinding white light, the delayed boom of a nuclear explosion, and then nothing.

How can people survive that, and still wage war?

“She’s a bit old to begin training,” Gustus rumbles.
“She fixed a splint for the youngest. Whoever kept her safe was probably a healer. If they have perished since, it would explain her wandering into these woods.” The rider sends a quick look over her shoulder, and Clarke meets that dark-painted gaze. “Perhaps a fostering in Polis will help others to understand the alternatives to such cases.”

“Polis?” Gustus’s voice edges the closest to doubtful yet. “This village could use another healer, especially with the refugees.”

“The refugees are exactly why I will take her to Polis. Anya would not appreciate the gift of yet another mouth to feed, especially in the midst of retaliations for the burned village.”

“She would not speak against her Commander.”

A true laugh this time, if brief, the rider’s head thrown back as the sound echoes among the rustling leaves.

“She would not speak against you publicly,” Gustus amends.

“True,” the rider says, voice rich with affection. “But she is already in a temper over my decision to visit the survivors while she deals with the invaders. It cannot hurt to transport our baggage a bit farther.”

“To Tondisi, then. Indra would not gainsay it.”

“No,” the rider muses. “She would not.” The smile she directs at her soldier is soft, and the slightest bit sad. “Threats everywhere, Gustus? Even from half-starved wood witches?”

“Your safety is my life, Heda.”

The smile slips from the rider’s face. “Tondisi. I will consider it.”

~*~
The walk to their camp isn’t far, but it’s far enough to leave Clarke shaky-kneed and ravenous. She knows she should expect it. She’s put her body through hell, and it will take more than sleep and whatever scraps children can sneak off into the woods to recover. Still, she can’t help but feel frustrated at her own weakness.

Clarke knows they’ve reached their destination even before it comes into view because she sees it in the rider. She straightens in the saddle -- and Clarke hadn’t even been aware she’d been relaxed until that moment, but there was a definite injection of starch into that spine, the shoulders squaring off and head lifting even higher. She was regal before but now she looks distant, untouchable. Gustus comes up to stand abreast of Clarke (who jumps) and he’s assumed the same air, if to a lesser degree. She hears the greetings of “Heda! Heda!” as Gustus puts his hand on her shoulder and leads her into another clearing.

She thinks she’s prepared.

She blinks away the sunlight as they leave the cover of the trees, and she’s not.

There are so many of them. The camp bustles with life: people at cook fires stirring pots as scents drift on the breeze, people crouched as they draw patterns in the dirt and gesture, even people sparring some distance away -- she can hear the shouts, see the flash of metal through the trees. Their heads snap to attention, locking in on the rider. Clarke remembers that look. She saw it on the Ark every time Thelonious Jaha walked into a room: the combination of respect, devotion, and the slightest bit of fear.

But Thelonious was the Chancellor. Thelonious had the power of life and death -- he rarely used it, but everyone knew his was the final word. Clarke watches as the rider swing off her horse and onto the ground. For all her heavy armor and the obvious ceremony in her carriage, she’s barely taller than Clarke, who thinks: Who are you?

The rider wouldn’t answer the question even if Clarke was capable of voicing it. She’s busy handing the reins of her horse over to a warrior (because that’s what these people are, with scars and bruises and split lips), exchanging greetings with the few who dare approach her. One of them gestures at Clarke and the end of their statement going up to make a question. The rider doesn’t smile, not exactly, but the way she holds her mouth makes it clear how terribly amusing she finds it all. She answers in a brief spate of words Clarke can’t follow.

Except, again: wood witch.

Some of the warriors laugh. Some of them roll their eyes. Some of them look at Clarke, curious, but
with a hint of something darker beneath. Clarke thinks of the older stories of Earth, and shivers.

When Gustus tugs to lead her away, she doesn’t resist.

~*~

“Commander” is commander of an army, she decides.

Large or small, though, she’s still not sure. There are roughly fifty bodies at this encampment, but the whole thing is clearly designed to be temporary. The mess tent where Gustus dropped her off, with a barely-perceptible look of relief, is supported by rough-hewn trunks still sticky with sap. Even the food is the kind that’s carried on long journeys, nothing fresh, not even things they might have foraged from the forest. Another mouth to feed, she remembers the rider saying. They must be trying to avoid draining the area resources.

They leave her alone, mostly. She watches as the whispers about her presence spread, rippling outwards like she’s a rock dropped into still water. Every new pair of eyes on her makes her feel colder until she’s almost shivering in the shadow of the tent. They have to sleep sometime, she tells herself. She’ll find a way to sneak off then. The river can’t be too far judging from the barrels of fresh water she can spot stationed around the camp. She only eats half of what they give her -- something that tastes of both meat and fruit, pounded into a flat cake -- and hides the rest in the baggy folds of her borrowed clothes. The she goes back with empty hands and pleading eyes several times until they ultimately frown and turn her away.

When Gustus comes stomping back around again she huddles by one of the cook fires and tries to look helpless. He starts talking to a few other warriors and from the low, tense tones she’s pretty sure it’s an argument. Her stomach sinks when a couple of them gesture at her. Repeatedly.

Gustus only gets scowlier. He grabs and lifts her from the ground as if she were baggage, pulling her along by the arm. The make their way deeper into camp until they reach an even larger tent with soldiers standing on guard at either side of the entrance. Gustus doesn’t spare them a grunt before walking inside and taking Clarke with him.

The rider -- the girl -- is inside. Her face has been wiped clean of paint and the metal ornament removed. It changes the lines of her face, making it a little rounder, and Clarke knocks another few years off the guess at her age. She’s leaning over a table with some kind of model on it. Large pieces of parchment are laid across the table as well, their curling edges held down with weights that have been polished to a dull shine, picking up the light from the braziers of coals that line the edges of the space. When her focus switches to them irritation washes over and then out of her expression, and
she snaps something at Gustus.

The warrior speaks quickly, punctuating it by giving Clarke a small shake every now and then. She grits her teeth at the treatment but doesn’t resist -- she has too much food secreted away to start a wrestling match. She catches a few words: *sleep, night, danger.*

The girl sighs, addressing him in English. “Speak plainly.”

“Commander,” he rumbles. “You know that many of your warriors come from villages like this one. Even in Polis there are many who believe the stories.” He hesitates. “Her presence in the barracks could have consequences.”

They don’t want her to know this. They don’t want her to know she might be in danger because of their little joke.

*How considerate,* she thinks sourly.

The girl’s face darkens. “I said that she was in my care. They would act against my wishes?”

“No,” he says. “But, Commander -- they think she may do them harm. You know how bad luck and ill omens can affect a regiment.” His grip tightens on Clarke, and she fights back a wince. “I myself can take her to Tondisi, tonight. No one need know how or where she was found besides Indra.”

The Commander crosses her arms and raises an eyebrow. “I said that I would decide on her fate at a later time. Are you trying to force my hand?”

Gustus’s head ducks down. “No, Commander.”

“Are you *certain*?” she asks, low and deadly, and Clarke feels a flicker of the same fear she saw in the others.

Gustus goes to his knees in one fluid motion, the hand on Clarke’s arm bringing her down with him. Only she’s not expecting it, and just manages to catch herself on her palms before planting face-first. The force of the landing nearly winds her -- and knocks every single stored ration loose to tumble
free and across the heavy rugs at their feet. One of them actually rolls on its edge to knock against the the Commander’s boot.

The look on the other girl’s face would be funny, if Clarke weren’t so very busted.

The Commander crouches down until she’s level with them both, waiting until Clarke raises her eyes to ask a question. Almost an accusation. Clarke doesn’t catch all of it, but she does know the word escape.

Clarke and Wells -- ironically -- hadn’t gotten into a lot of trouble, because they hadn’t been those kinds of kids. But they had still been kids. So Clarke drags out her best (if dusty) “that power coupling was broken way before we got into the crawlspace” expression and shakes her head, mining astonishment at the very idea that she would stuff her clothes full of food and make a run for it.

The girl snorts her disbelief, rising back up to her feet. She barks something out, and one of the guards steps into the tent to listen as she relays what sounds like orders. Her gaze flickers back and forth between Clarke and guard, meaningfully, and Clarke is careful to keep her eyes wide and guileless.

Gustus is still kneeling with his head nearly pressed to the ground when the guard returns to his post. “Satisfied?” the girl asks him, returning to English. “She will bother no one while in my tent. And she,” with a dark look in Clarke’s direction, “shall remain where I put her.”

“Shall I watch her during the next meal as well, Commander?”

“No, let her stay in here. Clearly she has enough food to tide her over until the morning.” She looks down at him. “You may rise, Gustus.”

He does. He has almost a full foot on this girl in height, Clarke estimates, and he’s twice as broad. But he bends and sways in response to her moods like a reed.

She keeps her eyes down and thinks: Commander. Commander of what?

“And you may rest easy,” the girl continues speaking to her pet warrior. “She can be Indra’s problem after tonight.”
He bows his head low again. “Thank you, Commander.”

She places a hand on his arm for a moment before lifting it away. She spares a glance for Clarke, still sitting on the floor, and says something brief as she gestures to the corner. Then she sweeps away without a second look, Gustus hard at her heels.

~*~

Of course the first thing Clarke does is look for a way out. But there’s no other opening in the tent besides the guarded entrance, and her not-so-stealthy attempts to pull up where the sides are tacked to the ground bring her jailers inside within minutes, jabbing at her with the hilts of their spears to send their point home. In the end she resigns herself to picking up the dropped rations and eating them in a sulk, close to the warmth of one of the braziers.

Her thoughts go around and around in circles -- have to get back to the river, how much farther is “Tondisi,” she can slip past their notice before then, how many days has it been now -- until her eyelids begin to slip shut. The corner the girl indicated has a pile of woven blankets, the colors only slightly faded. Clarke pulls every one of them around her in a bundle but still ends up shivering. It was actually warmer in her shallow cave.

Cranky and cold, she gets up. She walks over to a bed piled high with furs that she first glimpsed in the back when she searched for another exit. She’s tempted to take all of them over into her little corner in a fit of pique. Then she remembers the speed with which Gustus knelt, and only sneaks off the top layer. The addition makes her blissfully warm and she’s finally able to curl up in the shadows of the tent, near the red glow of embers, and drift to sleep.

It’s not a deep sleep. She doesn’t think she’s slept well since the Ark, or before... before. She rouses a bit when voices drift closer to the tent and someone enters, the confident stride letting Clarke know who it is without opening her eyes. She hears the shift of fabric as the curtain leading to the bed is pushed aside -- then she hears it again, and she can feel the other girl’s affronted stare boring into her back.

Clarke holds her breath. I’m asleep, I’m asleep, she chants inside her head. Taking it back is beneath your great Commander-whatever-ness, because I’m cold and hungry and abandoned, and it’s not worth the trouble of waking me up, because I’m asleep.

She hears a huff of annoyance and the rustle of the curtain falling back into place.
Clarke lets out a sigh and burrows deeper into her little nest, allowing sleep to wash over her again.

~*~

She winces when the blankets fall to floor as she stands. She’s lucky -- the assassin doesn’t turn. As adrenaline eats up the last vestiges of her sleep, she notices the beads of sweat trailing down his skin, his face never turning from the curtained-off area in the back. He’s too terrified of the girl in that bed -- even as he comes to kill her -- to pay attention to anything else in the room.

Good, Clarke thinks, and kicks over a brazier of still-glowing coals.
Clarke wakes up knowing there’s a third person in the tent.

It’s the same instinct she developed over time in her cell, letting her know that someone had come in to wash away her drawings before she’d even opened her eyes. She keeps them closed now, tries to keep her breathing even, and listens.

Slow, deliberate steps, each too careful and spaced apart to speak of anything but stealth. She waits until whoever it is has passed her -- they don’t expect her to be here, no one does -- to open her eyes just enough to peek beneath her lashes.

In the relative darkness of the tent this person is just a shadow moving among shadows. Until the banked light of the dying embers catches on the edge the blade, naked in their hand.

She has a split second to consider just letting things happen -- except that’s never been her, never. And maybe Clarke doesn’t want to be here, but she remembers the look on the other girl’s face when she placed Thesda on the horse. The Commander might be high-handed. That doesn’t mean she’s someone who deserves to be murdered in her sleep. Or Clarke hopes that’s the case.

She winces when the blankets fall to floor as she stands. She’s lucky, and the assassin doesn’t turn. As adrenaline eats up the last vestiges of her sleep, she notices the beads of sweat trailing down his skin, his face never turning from the curtained-off area in the back. He’s too terrified of the girl in that bed -- even as he comes to kill her -- to pay attention to anything else in the room.

*Good*, Clarke thinks, and kicks over a brazier of still-glowing coals.

The crash, even softened by the rugs covering the ground, makes the assassin jump. He freezes, head swinging wildly between the toppled container and his intended destination, tension making his body so rigid the hand with the knife shakes. It takes him long, precious moments to think to look around the room, and by then Clarke has picked up a heavy weight from the map table to smash against one of his temples.
He drops like a stone.

Clarke stands there, fingers spasming around the makeshift weapon in her hand and staring down at the motionless body on the floor. Someone barrels into her from behind and she’s going down as well.

For a second she thinks she missed the second assassin, until she feels the softness of long braids brushing against her face and the slenderness of the hands pinning her wrists. The Commander is snarling something, a knife at Clarke’s throat, when she pauses. She sits up -- she has Clarke on her back, knees braced on either side of her hips -- and brings the hand that was holding both of Clarke’s closer to her face. There’s something there that catches the light, and Clarke recognizes the familiar, viscous slipperiness when she rubs her own fingers together: blood.

The other girl stares at her hand for a beat too long. Her breathing is ragged, and Clarke can just about make out the obscene dilation of her pupils in the low light. She’s been drugged. If the guards have been, too, that explains how the assassin managed to get inside the tent. For the first time, Clarke registers the unnatural stillness of the night outside, the quiet of the encampment. Something in the last meal of the day, maybe, the one Clarke hadn’t been allowed to join. Probably something gentle and slow-acting enough to go unnoticed. Not enough to kill anyone, but just enough to incapacitate.

Except this girl, drugged to the gills, still managed to get up unnoticed from her bed and tackle Clarke to the ground. The blade she still holds at Clarke’s throat never wavers.

*No wonder he was afraid of you*, Clarke thinks, as the Commander draws a deep breath to shout: “Gustus!”

She rolls off Clarke and lies on her back with a sigh, taking the knife with her. Clarke decides the better part of valor is staying down. She lets her eyes fall shut, heart hammering away in her chest, and listens to the two of them breathing in the near-darkness.

Gustus staggers into the tent a few moments later as he bellows at the guards stationed outside. He doesn’t kneel so much as *fall*, his movements clumsy and uncoordinated. “Heda,” he croaks out, and his anxiety is almost palpable.

The Commander doesn’t get up but raises a hand to wave away his concern, responding to him in their language. Clarke rolls over onto her stomach and pushes up onto her knees -- Gustus growls,
but she’s not worried, he can barely keep upright -- and scoots over to the assassin to check his pulse.

He’s dead. Of course he is. She’s a doctor’s daughter, she knew exactly where to aim that weight, where the human skull thins out and becomes most vulnerable. She felt it when she hit him: liquid warmth where the skin split and the subtle, almost mushy give of splintering bone.

*Maybe they were right to lock you up*, she thinks, and is abruptly sick over the half-burned and smoking carpets.

None of them have the decency to go back to sleep. On the one hand, Clarke understands: if someone had drugged her, she’d be the one ordering pitchers of steaming drinks that stink up the tent with the smell of herbs, and pacing back and forth in an attempt to work the last vestiges of whatever-it-is out of her system.

On the other hand, no one did drug her. Her burst of energy has long since drained away, and she’s just killed someone. She aches with the desire to lie down and forget about all of it, even just for a few hours. Only she can’t when new people insist on coming into the tent to grovel before the Commander, and then shout as they look at the dead assassin, and shout some more as they look at her.

Clarke resorts to pulling her nest of blankets over her head to shield her eyes from the brightness inside the now-lighted tent. She turns over to face the wall, her back to the interior in what she hopes is a clear message, and settles down for an uneasy rest.

A few seconds later someone nudges her shoulder. She shifts away. They nudge again, harder.

Clarke jerks out of her makeshift cocoon to glare up at the Commander, who raises an eyebrow. *I just saved your life*, Clarke fumes, ignoring her own certainty that the other girl probably would have handled things without help.

The Commander reaches down to pull a reluctant Clarke to her feet, only to turn her around and use a hand at the small of her back to push her toward the bed at the other end of the tent.

Clarke stares, but she doesn’t need to be told twice. She almost cries when the Commander catches
her by the arm halfway to her destination, but the other girl only says a single word and taps her boot against the side of Clarke’s borrowed ones. Clarke doesn’t bother to nod, just shucks them where she stands and pads the rest of the way barefoot. She *leaps* into that bed -- it’s been ages since she slept on anything but the hard ground, and before that it was a year on a narrow cot in solitary. Nothing like this: soft and giving under her weight, still warm with residual heat, and oh, oh, are those *pillows*? She burrows under the covers with a sigh she can’t give voice to. She doesn’t even care about the light that filters into this section of the tent as the Commander ties back the curtain. Or about the look on the other girl’s face as she does so: eyes tracking Clarke’s every movement.

Clarke doesn’t care. Instead, she sleeps, and it is amazing.

Sunlight and sounds of the camp are what wake her. Or maybe it’s that phrase that seems to grow more and more relevant to her life: *wood witch*.

She opens her eyes to see the Commander holding yet another audience, but this time it’s not one of her warriors. This woman is older than anyone Clarke has seen at the camp so far, her hair the color of bone and twisted around the crown of her head. There’s someone hiding behind her legs -- Clarke recognizes Jeffer’s tangled curls seconds before he peeks out at her with a wave. She crooks her fingers at him in return.

She’s aware of the Commander’s eyes on her, the other girl having noticed the exchange. “She’s awake,” she says in English, probably to Gustus as he looms at her side. She then switches to that other language to communicate what sounds like a dismissal to the older woman. She and Jeffer both bow deeply, and the Commander inclines her head. It’s slight, but it’s a deference Clarke hasn’t seen her give to any of the soldiers at the camp.

“Interesting, don’t you think,” the Commander switches back as she watched the two leave the tent, “how the story changed as it passed from hand to hand.”

It’s easier for Clarke to pretend she has no idea what’s being said if she’s actually doing something. She sits up -- everything around her, the clothing and weapons she spotted during her earlier inspection of this part of the tent, has been taken away. The rest of the tent is similarly stripped, all the rugs and tables gone. The only thing left is the bed, and Clarke in it.

They’re getting ready to move on.

“On your command,” Gustus says, “I can dispatch messengers to tell the true version of events. She has acted with some courage,” and oh, doesn’t he sound reluctant to to admit it, “but that’s all it was. Not *magic*.” He almost spits the word.
Someone has placed her mismatched boots against the edge of the bed. Clarke swings her legs over the side and reaches for them, keeping her head down as she slips them on.

“Is it such a bad thing, to have a story like that told?”

Clarke taps her feet even deeper into her boots, aware of the Commander’s attention in her peripheral vision. If they’re packing up, there’s bound to be a lot of hustle and bustle just outside the tent. Just the kind of confusion she can get lost in, use to slip back into the forest. A little late to lie low, she snarks at herself -- but really, nighttime assassins can throw a wrench in anyone’s plans.

“To have them think I have a witch bound to my service, protecting me from attacks?” the Commander continues.

Clarke is smoothing out the blankets on the bed, and her hands nearly still at that. She sneaks a glance: the other girl is wearing her paint and medallion again, and the effect is almost otherworldly. Clarke wonders what it’d be like to see a face like that emerge from the trees without warning.

“Commander, please,” Gustus says, sounding pained. “You said you would -- you were considering leaving her with Indra.”

“You heard the village leader, same as I,” the Commander says. “She was...” She tilts her head back a bit, considering. “Impressed.”

“You do not need to charm witches to command loyalty.”

“She was always loyal. This was something more.” Her eyes narrow. “Something of use, I think.”

“She is an old woman,” Gustus says. “Who has spent her entire life among the trees. Her beliefs are strange.”

“And you have just told me how many people there are like her, even in Polis.” A short nod, a decision made. “Nyko will have space for her.”
“You would put her with the other apprentices?”

“Why not?”

“But, within the tower? Commander, we still do not know for certain where she comes from,” he says, frustration evident in every line of his body as he stands at perfect attention behind her. “Last night’s events could be part of some larger scheme, intended to bring her as close to you as possible - -”

“To what purpose?” she drawls, finally deigning to cast him a glance over one shoulder. “To steal my bedding, one piece at a time? Gustus,” and her voice takes on another tone entirely, “I don’t believe she knows who I am.”

Disbelief etches itself into the man’s features. “Is that possible?”

“In the Dead Zone, perhaps,” with a shrug.

Maybe she can just walk past them. They’re standing in her way, but they’re barely paying attention to her. Clarke squares her shoulders. Maybe she can just... leave. If she can get out of the tent, she’s halfway home.

They’re still talking when she attempts it, something about sand and isolation. She makes it as far as the main area before she’s snagged like a fish on a hook -- she looks down and sees the Commander’s hand wrapped around her arm, just above the elbow. She tugs against it, but the grip only tightens. She looks up into eyes that, this close, she can see contain all the shifting hues of the forest.

“No,” the other girl says quietly. “I bargained for a wood witch, and I’ll keep her.”

*Oh, float me,* Clarke thinks.

~*~
They leave soon after. Dismantling the bed and tent takes a matter of minutes, and Clarke watches with a little bit of awe at the regimented organization on display. And then, with a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach, thinks of the chaos back at the dropship.

*Please*, she sends up a prayer, even if she’s not sure to who. *Let them be safe. Give them as much time as possible before these people find them.*

*Let me find my way back before it’s too late.*

Gustus doesn’t let her out of his sight. She makes a few half-hearted attempts to slip away, but every time she turns around he’s there, glowering like her own personal storm cloud. She slumps when she sees them bring out the horses and Gustus beckons her over.

*Pay attention,* she tells herself. *You can find your way back if you figure out enough landmarks.* *Don’t give up.*

The horses are still huge. Did they always have this many teeth? Or that smell? It’s not terrible, but it’s definitely... potent. Clarke scrunches up her nose and shrinks back from the pitch-black mount, which hoof at the ground as if in answer.

Gustus is seated atop and reaching down to lift her up when a voice cuts through the thrum of preparation. The Commander’s own pale horse picks its way through the crowd, the Commander saddled and stately. Clarke wonders if she had anyone help her on -- she’s wearing a long coat today that drapes and falls over the horse’s flanks like it was arranged. *Probably not,* Clarke thinks dourly, watching how the other girl guides her horse between bodies and carts, hands steady on the reins.

The Commander says something. Gustus’s expression shuts down so quickly Clarke might have missed it if she hadn’t been looking at him. Whatever this is about he doesn’t like it, but he won’t let that show.

Just from that Clarke half-guesses what’s about to happen, even before two other warriors flank her on either side and lift her up. The Commander reaches out to grab her ankle and guide it over the withers, and then Clarke is sitting on her first horse.

She is *up high.* That’s the first thing she notices, looking past the horse’s head to the ground way, way below her feet. There are no stirrups for her feet. She kicks out unthinkingly and probably would have slid sideways and right off, but the Commander reaches to steady her, arms on either
side as she holds the reins. She’s a solid weight at Clarke’s back, almost reassuring -- especially when the horse starts forward and Clarke nearly slips off again. The Commander says something, but when Clarke doesn’t respond she gives a short sigh, startlingly close to Clarke’s ear, and shifts the reins to one hand. She takes Clarke’s hands in her free one and tangles their fingers in the horse’s mane. Clarke’s heart jumps when she sees the scrap metal shaped into small bones and secured onto the fingers of the other girl’s gloves. She squeezes Clarke’s hand closed as if to say: hold on.

They ride like that for hours as the sun arcs across the sky. The pace is gentle, but Clarke begins to tire early on. Keeping steady on the horse’s back requires more effort than she would have guessed, and by the time the sun is directly overhead she feels the strain in her legs and back. She must shift too often or hunch a little too much, because an arm reaches around to pull her firmly back against the Commander’s front. Buckles and buttons dig into her when she leans against the other girl, but it’s still more comfortable than grappling with her own inexperience.

She wonders that it’s allowed, though. Obviously, the Commander strives to keep a certain aura about herself -- Clarke hasn’t seen her relax, or banter, since that brief interlude on their way to camp. It makes sense if she’s some kind of leader (though Clarke’s still not sure to what extent that leadership extends). When she was young -- really young -- Chancellor Jaha would come to dinner and chase Clarke around the Griffin quarters, throwing her over his shoulder if he caught her. But the first time she’d run up to him outside those familiar confines and lifted her arms, wanting to be picked up, he’d pushed her away. He’d been gentle, and he smiled when he did it, but it had sent her running back behind her father’s legs halfway worked up to a good cry. Her mother had been the one to explain, though: He can be a friend when it’s just us, Clarke, but outside, he has to be Chancellor.

Leaders cannot have favorites. Leaders have to remain apart. They cannot serve judgement on the people if they live just like the people. But the way the Commander is treating Clarke -- sharing the horse, coaxing her to relax against the steadily upright presence -- feels like the kind of personal attention that gets leaders in trouble.

Clarke realizes she’s got it wrong again when the sunlight turns golden, and they start hitting clusters of farms. The forest gives way to sloping fields and open pastures, and Clarke catches her breath at the site of animals they’d learned about from pictures, a classroom chorus reciting pigs, cows, goats, sheep. It’s all the same. The bombs didn’t kill everyone, and they didn’t remake the earth. Not entirely. It’s been here all along.

Figures working the fields straighten when they pass, waving. A few walk closer, climbing onto the fences that set off the fields from the road. They wait until the horse carrying Clarke and the Commander is closest before raising their hands in that familiar salute, calling out “Heda!” or some other string of syllables. The Commander raises her hand in response, languid, as she takes their obeisance as her due. Again, Clarke wonders just how far her influence reaches -- but if she commands an army, these farms probably depend on her protection. It would make sense these people would know and recognize her.
Then they see Clarke.

Some of them are curious, wide-eyed and whispering, and she hunches her shoulders. She knows she looks strange with her borrowed clothes and matted hair. She watches as others fill them in -- bending and talking with mouths close to ears, until comprehension fills their expressions. When they turn back, they look at the Commander with something like awe.

“Rumor travels fast,” Gustus says, in English. He sounds a little sour. The Commander only laughs low in her throat, too quiet for anyone but Clarke to hear.

Which is when Clarke gets it. The arm slung across her waist to hold her in place, the way the Commander’s body shifts to bracket her own -- it isn’t personal. It’s possessive. She’s a prisoner still.

She makes an involuntary shift like she would throw herself off the horse this minute, but the arm around her only tightens.

Clarke bites down so hard on the inside of one cheek she tastes blood.

It doesn’t matter. It’s -- it’s humiliating, but it doesn’t matter. She needs to concentrate on getting back to the dropship, not whatever personal myth-building the Commander indulges in. She’s been paying attention as they ride, and she thinks, she’s almost certain, that she can remember how to get back to their previous camp site. And then the clearing. And then the river.

She can. She has to. She sets her jaw and resolves not to waste any more attention on the spectators gathering along the edges of the roads.

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Her heart nearly stops when the city comes into view.

She should be used to the shocks by now. Every since she stumbled onto the children in the clearing, she’s been proven wrong again, and again, and again in what she’s always been taught about the
The city is like a jewel in a setting, flanked on different sides by fields and orchards. She catches the ripple of water just beyond, and she wonders if it’s her river grown fat and content, its banks stretching out further than she can see. The city’s walls and structures are often built from the same mottled stone, the kind with small reflecting fragments throughout that make it almost shimmer in the light. *Limestone*, she remembers, and thinks of the pieces preserved on the Ark as they’d passed from hand to hand during a lesson. From this close distance she can see the streets teeming with movement and life.

She tries to do calculations in her head as they draw closer to the gates, square miles and the footage necessary for a single person. How many people could be living in there? Hundreds? Thousands? *More?*

She can get lost in a city like this. She could still slip away and disappear. All she needs is a chance.

There’s a stream of people once they join the main road -- smaller caravans and people travelling on foot, wagons full of goods pulled by stolid-looking ponies. But once the Commander’s forces come into view they shift aside as easy as breathing. There’s no reluctance or resentment. On the contrary - - people smile, wave, try to catch the Commander’s eye as she passes. As the crowd of people thickens the energy the Commander inspires grows with it, a hum of whispers and excitement. Even the oddity of Clarke’s presence is lost in the wave of their interest. The chant starts up near the gates even before they come into view: *Heda, Heda, Heda.*

It’s being led by more warriors. Men and women alike, tattoos spiraling down their faces and along their arms, scars scattered over their skin like constellations. They’re at the base of the gates and beyond it, standing atop the high walls at sentry points. They’re everywhere. There are more of them, Clarke realizes, than civilians. And the way they’re looking at the Commander -- teeth bared, muscles bunched and ready, eyes alight with anticipation. Like she’s the hand holding the leash, the fingertip against the trigger of a starting gun.

*Commander*, Clarke thinks. She turns the term over and over in her head as if it were a physical object she could examine on all sides, a fragment of rock to analyze and identify. And then: *Princess.*

It’d been a tease back on the Ark. Daughter of a councilwoman and a senior engineer, family connected to the Chancellor, best friends with the Chancellor’s son. She wasn’t a leader, but she was set apart all the same.

But it’s an outmoded form of address. A reminder that maybe you’re close to them, maybe it gets
you special treatment, but you’re not really one of them. There are no more princesses.

Commander. Military rank.

“Where did all the princesses go?” she asked her dad, once.

He shook his head at her. “They didn’t go anywhere. We changed how we talk about power and who it belongs to, that’s all.”

“We have a Chancellor instead.”

“Exactly,” his warm smile like a reward. “Someone to preside over an elected council and deliver a ruling when the people cannot come to an agreement on their own.”

Not absolute power, but finality. The one head to stand above the crowd. A judge in a society -- the society of the Ark -- that defined itself by dozens upon dozens of careful rules.

And for a society of warriors? Where there are more fighters than farmers, and even children’s mock battles are performed with uncanny skill?

Commander.

Clarke sucks in a breath and twists in the saddle, eyes widening as she looks at the girl seated behind her. Not just a leader. The leader. Of everyone in this sprawling city.

Maybe beyond.

The Commander catches her look. Something in Clarke’s face makes the corner of her mouth lift. “Now you know who I am,” she murmurs, satisfied.

And now Clarke knows just how much trouble she’s in.
It’s too late to play innocent now, so Clarke just lets it all show in her face: her fear and rage and helplessness, the way the past days have stripped her of everything. First her home, then her friends, then her voice, and now she can’t even leave this tower. The Commander wasn’t around for most of that, but it’s so satisfying to look at her and think: This is all because of you.

She doesn’t even care about the hot tears slipping down her cheeks as she does it.

Chapter End Notes

Some housekeeping:

1. I really hope no one’s reading this story for botanical accuracy.

But if you’re curious: a long, long time ago I read about *dieffenbachia*, or “dumb cane,” which can actually cause temporary vocal paralysis, and it left an impression. For this story I searched for other, edible plants that contain raphides, waved the magic wand of Nuclear Fallout Means DIY Worldbuilding, carried over the paralytic effect and made it longer-lasting, and there you go.

2. There didn’t seem to be any kind of city walls for Polis according to the show. However, as much as I enjoy cleaving to canon as a “use the difficulty” approach, every single instinct cultivated by two decades of playing Civilization screams you absolutely must have city walls or the barbarians take your capital in like, three turns.

3. Actually, this is where I’ll start to take more and more liberties with worldbuilding. Both because we’re nowhere near where I thought we’d be by now in canon exploring the world outside Arkadia, and just... because. So, heads up if that’s the kind of thing you care about.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

My theme song appears to be “I’m sorry I can’t keep to the update schedule, but this chapter went long so hopefully it works out?” This one’s almost twice as long, because worldbuilding, but I figure that’s no reason to make you wait for the good stuff.

Speaking of -- listen. *Listen*. I said “shamelessly indulgent” right at the top.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Getting off the horse might be the worst bit so far.

Again, it takes two people to help -- they don’t look like warriors, though, they’re dressed more simply and don’t have the bold tattoos -- and the moment her feet hit the ground her legs buckle. Her muscles are screaming, and she only just has time to put her hands out before she falls to her knees in the hard-packed dirt.

At least she’s spared too many witnesses. Most of the warriors travelling with them had broken off, one by one or in groups, as they made their way through the city. Only a handful are left when they arrive at the foot of this massive tower, a structure that seems to just go up and up forever.

Which leaves the Commander herself. She looks at Clarke, huddled on the ground, before pulling her coat to one side and dismounting from the horse in one long sweep of her leg, with all the ease of descending a staircase. She hands the reins to someone and walks off without a second glance.

*Yeah, well,* Clarke thinks at her back. *My people circled the earth in a self-sustaining spaceship for almost a hundred years. Beat that.*

But it’s a relief to watch her walk away. The Commander carries an energy with her that puts everyone else... not on edge, but on alert: heads held higher, eyes quicker to catch any errant movement. As soon as she rounds the corner Clarke can almost see the rest of them begin to ease
into themselves, bodies looser, arms swinging a little wider. Clarke gives it a few minutes, surreptitiously pressing a fist into her leg muscles to wake them up. Just as she’s about to stand and let herself drift back into the marketplace, the cheerful bustling of life just behind them, Gustus appears and yanks her to her feet.

_Wonderful_, she thinks as he marches her inside the tower. _This again._

He takes her into an ancient elevator, giving an order to the group that controls it which sends them up, and up, and up. Every now and again the corroded metal gives a screech that sends Clarke’s heart into her throat.

Eventually they shudder to a halt, the doors are opened for them, and Gustus leads her down a hallway and through a pair of open double doors.

It’s some kind of dormitory. Well, no, that’s _exactly_ what it is -- almost an entire floor of young people, none of them seemingly too far removed from her own age. She can see where cement walls have been roughly knocked out to open up the space, though thankfully it looks like they knew well enough to leave the load-bearing pillars alone. It’s crammed tight with beds piled two and three on top of each other. _Bunk beds._ She remembers the term from old Earth books, the kinds about families that were allowed more than one child, or sent them away during the summer months to what sounded like a ritual testing of their Earth Skills before entering adolescence.

There are a lot more beds than people, but Clarke doesn’t think that’s always the case given the small collections of knick knacks, clothes, and other possessions strewn about over blankets, and sometimes the floor. The few people that are there group together in close circles, looking familiar and close. They all turn to look at her when Gustus brings her through the entrance.

Gustus chooses one of them, asks a question -- Clarke knows she should be able to follow, maybe could if she concentrated, but her head is too full and her body is too tired -- and the young man points. Gustus leads her in that direction to a grouping of beds, one of them nakedly empty. He points.

Clarke looks at him, looks at the unoccupied bed. Gingerly, she sits.

Clarke suspects the beds themselves were scavenged from Before. They’re of sturdily hinged metal that has to have been made in a factory but cared for so well she can’t find a speck of rust. The pallets to sleep on are newer, at least. Actually, they’re nicer than what she had to sleep on in solitary, giving beneath her weight.
Gustus, she realizes, has been talking to her for some time. Again, her brain is incapable of sorting through it, though she catches *heda* a few times. He pauses every now and again to look at her, questioningly, so she nods. It does very little to lighten his scowl.

One of the younger people approaches him from behind, looking timid. When Gustus finally notices the young man holds out his arms to show a fresh and folded blanket, a small pillow. Gustus allows him to pass, and he hands these things to Clarke with a small smile.

She tries to smile in response when she takes them, but she can feel it shake around the edges.

Finally, *finally*, Gustus leaves her, looking back over his shoulder with every other step.

Clarke waits ten minutes, maybe fifteen, before she’s up and making her way back out of the dorm.

The other -- are they apprentices? isn’t that where the Commander said they’d put her -- watch her go, but do nothing to stop her.

The entrance is unguarded, and the doors don’t appear to have any kind of locks. *Trusting*, she thinks -- also speaks to the Commander’s faith that no one would want to leave once they’re here. Perhaps Clarke is her only unwilling house guest. Perhaps it’s a new thing she’s trying.

The corridor outside is bustling with people. No one notices her. They’re all too busy -- carrying, fetching, calling out to each other as they pass without slowing down. It’s easy to trail behind someone with her head down, following them down hallways and short flights of stairs, looking like she’s following with purpose, looking like she belongs. Whenever they arrive at their destination she simply switches to someone new.

It’s -- *stop thinking how things are huge*, she tells herself, tired of the same shock over and over. But it is. She passes rooms upon rooms filled with all manner of things, and filled with yet more people. Some of them are arguing, some are knocking shoulders in close consultation, she even catches a glimpse of a group in animated discussion as they knock at the beads of a large abacus. It’s a contained microcosm, a city in miniature.

And there’s no way out.
Or, there’s a way out. Maybe even dozens. Just not any that are accessible to her.

The elevator shaft runs through the center of the tower like a vein pumping blood to a heart. Unlike the shorter flights of stairs that only connect three or four floors at a time, this one has guards posted at every entrance. She takes the stairs instead, wincing at the thought of how far down she has to go, but still game. She makes it down two or three floors before a guard breaks from his post by the elevator doors and is on her, a hand clamped down on her shoulder like a vise. She’s turned around and encouraged to make her way back up, the guard muttering something under his breath.

Clarke tries that two more times, at different entry points on different floors, before sour certainty ripens in her stomach. This isn’t just their being on alert. Somehow, they’ve all been told about her. She’s not allowed to leave.

Panic is like the undertow of a rising tide, tugging and pulling at her even as her limbs feel sluggish and cold. Get to a better vantage point, her common sense whispers, cutting through the fog in her brain. There are open, rectangular windows on almost every floor, the glass long since knocked out, maybe from the explosions. They’re not guarded, but walking up close it’s easy to see why: it’s not an escape. It’s just a long, long way down.

Clarke looks out at the city beyond. It’s labyrinthian, the streets twisting and overlapping like a mass of snakes. Bombed-out ruins of buildings, decorated with graffiti, fold into each other and skew any regularity or predictability of the ancient city plan. She vividly remembers the ride past the main gates to the compound, the amazing chaos of people and animals. Her breath comes shorter as she thinks of navigating all that again by herself, as she eludes whatever guards the Commander has watching her.

If she can get out of the tower, that is. Even then, there’s still the main gate. The roads beyond.

Her legs give out as she gives in to a silent sob. The colors and movement of the people below, it all blurs as tears fill her eyes.

There has to be a way out. There has to be something I missed. She squeezes her eyes shut, and presses her palms into the tops of her thighs. Just -- I just need time to think.

She’s not sure how long she sits there with her mind a blank. Long enough to watch the last vestiges of the sun disappear from the horizon and the fires to be lit along the distant walls of the city, bright
points in the darkness. Long enough for her to drift in and out of an uneasy sleep as she curls up in the shelter of the cold stone.

Long enough for the Commander to find her again.

A hand on her shoulder shakes Clarke out of half-sleep. She’s still tangled in a dream -- she’s on the Ark, but the walls are water and Wells is shouting her name -- when her eyes open. So she’s not thinking her clearest when the familiar face, now clean of paint, leans down.

Instead, the rage and desperation boil up inside like molten metal, and before Clarke can think better of it she *shoves* at the other girl with both hands.

The Commander catches herself before she stumbles back more than a few steps, but it causes the person behind her (not Gustus, even though they share the same dark hair and full beard) to draw his sword. She throws one hand up in his direction even as the other goes to the knife hanging at her belt -- instinct, Clarke thinks. She blinks at Clarke, and behind her impassive mask Clarke thinks there might be a flicker of genuine surprise.

It’s too late to play innocent now, so Clarke just lets it all show in her face: her fear and rage and helplessness, the way the past days have stripped her of everything. First her home, then her friends, then her voice, and now she can’t even leave this tower. The Commander wasn’t around for most of that, but it’s so satisfying to look at her and think: *This is all because of you.*

She doesn’t even care about the hot tears slipping down her cheeks as she does it.

Maybe that communicates, because the Commander pulls back even further. Not noticeably, but she alters her stance so that she’s no longer leaning into Clarke’s space. She lifts her chin, pauses, and turns her gaze to the man she brought with her. They hold a quiet conversation, and the Commander indicates Clarke with an open palm, her tone one of *she’s all yours.*

Clarke doesn’t have much choice in the matter. Her own body makes a last-ditch effort at independence -- after the long ride and lying on the cold stone, her muscles have locked up to the point when the man finally lifts her into his arms. It doesn’t cost him any effort at all. *Even the people are huge,* Clarke thinks, mutinous.

The once-busy corridors are now practically deserted, and the darkness inside the tower is alleviated by torches and banks of candles above their heads. It looks like everyone has turned in for the night.
Clarke is so... tired isn’t even the word for it. She’s completely drained, and she actually falls back into sleep as she’s carried away.

Not before she catches one last glimpse of the Commander watching them from the window. Her eyes follow Clarke as long as the torchlight allows, and if Clarke didn’t know any better, she’d think they hold something like regret.

~*~

Clarke wakes up in her new bed with three curious faces peering down at hers.

She gets up onto her elbows and scoots back so fast she bangs her head against the far wall.

The next few minutes take a bit of sorting out between the pain in her skull and others’ accusatory-sounding whispers as they jostle to check if Clarke is okay.

She’s fine. The other three are Nassa, Hern, and Chanti. As soon as she had their names they’re half-dragging, half-coaxing her out of bed to get clean.

Clarke has no idea what they’re doing with her at first, and she’s a little alarmed to be ushered so urgently through the dormitory doors and out into the hallway again, taking some twisting path down several stairs. No one tries to stop her this time, though, so she figures it’s worth going along for now even if only for a better understanding of what’s inside the tower and how she can get out. The reveal of the wash room is the last thing she expects, but she’s not ungrateful.

Like the dormitory, it’s a cleared space where Clarke can guess at the original purpose and use by looking at what remains: tiled floors and large drains spaces throughout. Rows of bricks are placed over hot coals -- she’s not sure where the initial fires are burning, but she sees the glowing embers refreshed while she’s there -- and water is ladled over those to release steam, clouding the room. Clarke is barely inside before the others are stripping her of her borrowed clothes, so quickly she doesn’t even have time to push at their hands. Chanti takes them with a look of distaste, and then brings out a long cord with knots at regular internals. She puts it around Clark’s neck, waist, shoulders, noting the number of knots each time before stepping back with a satisfied nod and leaving.

Nassa and Hern have stripped as well by now. They show her the setup at one end of the room,
invite her to mimic their actions: there’s dark, slimy soap and small pots of something they scrub into her hair. It leaves her hair oilier than the shampoo used on the Ark, but least it smells nice. It’s easy to lather up in the muggy, dripping air. Then you stand by one of the drains as your friends take buckets of water, warmed by the hot bricks, and dump it over your head to rinse you clean. It’s a group effort, Clarke realizes, probably why Hern and Nassa insisted on coming in with her.

They make Clarke go through the whole thing twice.

It’s worth it, unspoken commentary aside. She’s clean -- when was the last time she felt clean? -- and warmed through when they wrap her in a long, nubby piece of cloth and rub her dry. Chanti returns with clothes and boots that fit, and Clarke isn’t even that disappointed when they walk her straight back to the dorm afterwards.

They don’t stay there for long, though. When they bring her back the dormitory is filled with apprentices: dressing, gathering up their things into neat piles, tucking damp hair behind a scarf or up into some complicated arrangement. Clarke notices something else: streaks of color on their faces that look designed, deliberate. They’re passing around blunt sticks, each in a rainbow assortment. Nassa grabs at a few and brings them back to the group, doesn’t stop Clarke from taking one to examine.

It’s paint of some kind. The colors are a lot less vibrant than the synthetic paints she’s used herself, but that’s to be expected. Paint mixed with a small amount of wax, and something else -- something that feels slightly abrasive on her fingertips, probably to better carry the color.

She remembers a face painted with the color of shadow, in the shape of dark tears.

An identifying system. Black for warriors, other colors for -- whatever. Makes sense, considering the strain on resources to create uniforms. The clothes they put her in after the showers aren’t too different from the ones in redistribution on the Ark: more natural fibers, but still faded and worn, obviously pre-owned or repurposed.

Clarke sees someone wearing a design the color of the stick in her hand, and she lifts it to her face. The others almost fall over themselves to stop her, grabbing at her wrist to pull it away. They gabble as a group, too fast for her to follow, pointing at several design and shaking their heads before pointing to another and nodding, smiling over-broad. Clarke nods as well to show she understands. Then she points to one of the “wrong” designs, to her own cheek, mimes a questioning look.

So if I wear the wrong one, what happens?
Too many words she doesn’t know, too fast. But Chanti pulls a single finger across her throat and crosses her eyes with a nervous laugh.

Well, that’s extreme.

... or maybe not. Maybe it’s a way of enforcing, in a place this large with so many people (*with their leader sleeping, eating, and vulnerable within*, a part of her whispers), a system to make sure everyone in here *belongs* here and why. No exceptions.

Clarke watches as they put on their paint. A deep curve of blue, like a second smile, on Nassa’s chin. Three thick yellow lines down Chanti’s right cheek. Hern wears two overlapping green circles high on his left temple, and he takes the same stick to copy the mark onto Clarke’s face. Like she’s one of them.

She’s not. But she can pretend for as long as it takes to escape.

~*~

In the meantime, she tries to take in as much as she can.

The first thing she notices is how many of the apprentices are -- well. She sees a lot of the kind of things considered “correctable” with minor surgery or prosthetics aboard the Ark: cleft palates, extra digits, missing or or twisted or shortened limbs. Hern has one eye gone opaque and milky, all the more startling against his dark skin, and he’s very deliberate and careful when bringing the paint stick close to Clarke’s face. Nassa often has to ask people to repeat their words with her face scrunching up as she concentrates. But Clarke has yet to notice anything about Chanti, or a good many of the others. Maybe it’s something she’s missing. Maybe it’s simply rarer to choose not to be a warrior.

They’re a pretty solid unit, the three of them (and now Clarke). At first she wonders if they’ve been told to watch her as well. But it doesn’t take long to realize that with her inability to speak and her slow responses to their language, they seem worried about her capabilities, overall. It’s bitter, but it’s hard to feel too sorry for herself when it means they speak to her carefully, simply, and with a lot of pointing. There’s almost no English in the dormitory -- she turns that over and over in her head whenever she has a spare second, wondering if it’s only the warriors, wondering *why* -- and the immersion is having a slow but steady effect. When she falls asleep at night her brain plays phrases and words back to her in dreams. When she wakes up, she understands a little more each time.
She loses track of the days. She almost has to if she wants to keep from going to pieces and keep down the food they lay out in the messdeck. (They have bread. And fresh fruit. She’d paused every other minute, overwhelmed by how it felt in her mouth, how it tasted, or unexpected seeds and grain husks.) She can’t get out. Not yet. It won’t do any good to keep throwing herself against stone walls -- literal or otherwise.

She just has to keep her head down and wait.

There’s a rhythm inside the tower and Clarke allows herself to become a part of it. Get up with the sun. Wash. Get dressed. Go to breakfast, where sometimes Nassa joins them but more often ducks into the kitchens with a wave to join in the work. After eating Hern grabs Clarke’s fingers in a loose hold, and they walk together up stairs and down halls to the infirmary.

Dozens of the apprentices end up there each day, and Clarke sees at least as twice as many faces marked with green circles than any other design. She was placed with one of the younger groups at first, but it became clear she knew many of the essentials: setting a bone, wrapping a dressing, checking for infection. Obviously, she can’t ask a patient the necessary questions, but after some observation Nyko partners her -- the more advanced apprentices work in teams of two -- with Hern. They work well as a team, and Clarke realizes as much as she needs Hern to speak for her, he needs her help in drawing his attention back to the task at hand. It’s smart. Nyko is a smart man.

He’s the head physician from what she can tell. He’s also the one that carried her away from the window, that first day. He watches her closely, and Clarke remembers how quickly he reached for his weapon when she pushed the Commander. She keeps her head down, tries to look meek and resigned.

One day he brings in a stranger: a woman with ink-stained fingers and a shawl wrapped tightly about her shoulders. Nyko points to Clarke, and the woman walks over. She gives a small wave to get Clarke’s attention, and then once she’s sure she has it her hands begin to move in more deliberate, pronounced gestures.

There had been an attempt to preserve the different Deaf cultures and languages aboard the Ark, same as all of those from the old Earth, with thriving communities in different areas among the living quarters. She learned American signs in elementary classes. These signs are different -- the palms and wrist are more rigid, the changes are in finger placement and relative position to the body. But just as it was basic to grasp my name is in this new language, she can just as easily tell it’s what this woman is signing right now.

The woman repeats the motions, this time at half speed. Clarke’s hands actually lift away from the blankets she’s folding to copy them when a chill shoots through her body.
Basic questions.

After *What’s your name?* is *Where do you come from?* and *Who are your people?*

Questions where she can’t give the answers without risking others.

Clarke turns away so sharply she feels a twinge in her neck. When a hand pulls at her sleeve, trying to divert her attention, she shrugs it off. She busies herself with folding and straightening, careful not to look at the other woman.

The woman walks off, eventually, signing something at Nyko before leaving the room. He watches Clarke even closer after that — she catches him sometimes, in between the grunt work of sorting supplies and making beds which occupy the mornings. Every time she looks up to see his eyes on her, she thinks: *There has to be a way out, there has to be something I missed.*

~*~

“What’s your name?“ Nyko says, walking over to where they’re practising sutures on half-rotted fruit, “keep an eye on her,” with a jerk of his chin at Clarke, “tomorrow. We’re going out to the *(word).*”

Their language is so very close to English. She can cheat, sometimes, by turning a word over in her head and adding in the sounds that would make it something she recognizes. But not always, and frustration has an actual *taste* at this point: the bitterness of being unable to repeat something back with the tone that would tell them she has no idea what it means.

“I will,” Hern says, cheerfully. He pats the top of her head as Nyko walks away, and she knows from the tilt of his grin he mostly does it so she’ll swat back at him. “You like to wander off and get lost, hmm?”

They’ve caught her twice more in the middle of the night trying to sneak outside. At this point she’s given up, but only because it seems unfair the other apprentices are woken up every time the guards have to drag her back.

“Silly wood witch,” he says, a little lower. “You’re supposed to run to the safe places, not away from
They’ve tried to give her a name. Clarke ignores every attempt, won’t respond or play along in trying to choose one for her. She was angry at first — here is something else she’s asked to give up — but recently she wonders. The moniker the little kids in the forest gave her is ridiculous. But it feels less like a lie than pretending she used to have the kind of name they try to gift her. And, with a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach, she realizes she doesn’t like the idea of lying to these people. Even without words. Not if she has other options.

She raps Hern’s knuckles with the end of her needle driver — it’s ancient as well, kinked beyond repair and designated only for student use — then uses it to draw his attention to where his stitches are uneven.

The next day Hern doesn’t take her to the infirmary when he takes her hand, but takes her back into the elevator. Clarke holds her breath for the last flight and a half. They pass one last threshold, warriors waving them over, and Clarke is on the ground for the first time since arriving in the city.

Heart beating fast, she’s back in the open air (and dirt) of the courtyard. No horses today: just the marketplace she remembers riding through. Some other healer apprentices are already here with them, and as they wait more and more arrive. Eventually Nyko appears, and the growing crowd starts off according to some signal Clarke misses.

They keep a slow but steady pace, not making their way deeper into the city but behind the tower and into the hills that eventually give way to the river. It’s not hard going, but it amazes Clarke how slowly it takes to get from one place to another on foot. The problem being there’s so much of any given place, on the ground. She gets bored of watching the landscape fail to change, so she drifts closer to Hern and the two other apprentices he’s talking with. She doesn’t remember the shorter boy’s name — he’s stocky and blunt-fingered, she does remember his dressings never fell apart, even on joints. The girl is easier. Versi. She’s pretty, with slightly narrow features and hair that’s a whiter shade of blonde than Clarke’s. But Clarke remembers her because of the crush: Versi has her eye on some girl. She uses any opportunity to bring her name into conversation. Clarke can hardly retain the names of all the other healers, though, so she can never remember... She sways closer, wondering if Versi is true to form this morning.

“She’s been gone for eight days,” Versi is saying. She shakes her head, and the boys roll their eyes at each other. “I worry,” she sighs. “I know she has important business, but I think Lexa should spend more time at home.”

That’s the one. Sometimes Clarke wonders if Lexa knows about the torch Versi is carrying; if the apprentice would be less insufferable if Lexa returned her feelings, or more so.
“She has duties, Versi,” the other apprentice says, the one whose name Clarke can’t remember. His tone is one of someone who knows they won’t be heard but feels compelled to speak anyway. “We all have duties. You should concentrate on yours.”

“What’s her first duty to us? To the people of Polis?”

“Lexa, Lexa, Lexa,” Hern repeats just under his breath, mocking. He catches Clarke watching him and makes a face. “It will take more than two (word) with the Commander for me to be free with her name,” he whispers to her.

Clarke nearly trips and falls into the dirt.

Lexa is the Commander?

“Not just two (word),” Versi corrects as her head swivels in Hern’s direction. If she’s embarrassed there’s no trace of it on her face. She looks proud, instead. “Three. Two this past summer, and last winter.”

“Last winter doesn’t count,” her partner says. “She sent half of the apprentices back to Polis before a drop of blood hit the dirt, and you were with that half.”

A type of battle, maybe, a military campaign. That’s what that word means.

Of course it does. What else could Versi be talking about?

Clarke shakes her head and files the information away as she listens with half an ear, the other three bickering about what makes for experience in the field.

... the Commander’s name is Lexa.

Clarke has the sudden wish to try it in her mouth, use her tongue and teeth to press it out. She can’t, but she can imagine, if she had the voice: the long draw of the L, the sigh and release of the vowels.
It’s a pretty name. It’s light, almost yielding.

Clarke casts back to dark lines of paint around sharp eyes, the pressure of the hands that pinned her wrists. *It doesn't suit her,* she thinks.

She concentrates on putting one foot in front of the other for the rest of their journey.

~*~

The word Nyko used yesterday, she decides, is *orchards.*

It’s maybe an hour’s walk until the apprentices reach the area where trees are planted in regimented lines, uniform spaces between their trunks until they’re almost like rows of soldiers cresting over the hills. Clarke never had much chance to visit Farm Station beyond class trips. It was nothing like this, though. This -- the swell of ripening fruit above their heads, the sturdy trunks that speak of years of tending and growth -- is a whole world away from the careful cultivation of anemic-looking plants on the space station, the UV lights and strictly regimented watering system. Farm Station was impressive for just *being,* a collection of growing things literally miles away from anything like a hospitable environment -- like a dragon’s hoard. The waves of fruit and flowering trees covering this landscape feels, in comparison, like never-ending wealth.

Nyko walks them through certain sections as he lectures. Sometimes he reaches up to take a blossom or two off a branch, dissecting it with his dagger and instructing them on the possible medicinal uses of its whole or parts. When it comes to fruited trees he only points, and the apprentices are also dissuaded from picking up any that have already fallen to the ground. Sometimes they come across a worker busy at the harvest, or gathering up dropped un- or over-ripe fruit. Clarke taps Hern on the shoulder and points to the trees she can see are bundled up protectively, with a questioning look, but he shakes his head. “Different season, different lesson,” he whispers to her.

Clarke misses Monty. He would love this.

They spend the whole morning like that. When the sun travels close its height in the sky Nyko calls for a break and the packs some of the apprentices have carried this far are revealed as containing food from the kitchens. Clarke sits in the grass eating bread and soft cheese, the breeze shifting her hair, listening to the leaves rustle all around, and takes a moment.

She’s on the ground.
And she’s been going about this all wrong, she realizes. She can’t blame herself -- much -- but her attempts to get back to the dropship have been half-cocked and useless. Of course the guards have caught her. Of course Nyko watches her too closely. Everything she’s done has told them they can’t trust her, even without words.

The trick is letting them think that she wants to stay.

So Clarke makes herself relax with the other apprentices. She can’t join the conversation, but she can listen. She makes the appropriate faces, rips up grass and throws it in protest at particularly unrepentant jokers. She leans back and basks in the sunlight that makes it through the trees.

See? she thinks at Nyko when she catches him watching. I’m happy here. Do I look like someone who would up and leave?

It’s not enough, she thinks to herself later after lunch, as Nyko moves them to another section of the orchards with a different kind of tree. These are huge, with thick trunks and branches and dark, glossy leaves in precise, pointed ovals. They aren’t bearing flowers or fruit, but Nyko has taken what looks like a brown seedpod out of a pouch and uses it to gesture back at the tree behind him. The pod is passed around the apprentices: it’s almost as long as Clarke’s hand and soft to the touch, wrinkled like a walnut with bright red seeds peeking through each crease.

No, if Clarke wants them to trust her, she has to be more proactive. It’s not enough to lie low, she’s already on their radar. She was to work to undo the impression she’s already made.

Her mom had been the one to tell her, once, after a confrontation with a group from Factory Station over a recent Council decree that had almost gotten physical: “Politics isn’t about who’s best-liked. Prove you can be valuable, that you’re attentive to what they need -- that’s when people will trust you.”

So when Clarke spots the abandoned bird nest in one of the branches high above their heads, she makes a snap decision. Eggshells are one of the supplies they seem to always be running low on in the infirmary, and she’s seen Nyko scowling over their diminishing supply two or three times already. All she has to do is climb up quick and bring them back down.

There were climbing machines in the dilapidated gymnasiums on the Ark -- machines kept alive and kicking by generations of loving care by repair techs, even after decades of use. She’s confident in her ability to hoist herself into the upper branches before anyone notices she’s wandered off.
It’s easy to let herself slip out of the laughing, chattering mass of apprentices. Everyone’s a little less focused, a bit more playful after lunch. Even Nyko seems willing to be distracted, she sees, as he keeps looking over his shoulder as if his attention is being called by some sight or sound just beyond. Clarke grabs onto the lowest branch with both hands and uses the momentum to swing her legs up to hook onto the next-lowest, and just like that, she’s climbing her first tree.

It’s nice, actually. The bark is just rough enough to provide traction beneath her boots without scraping at her hands. She balances on that first branch for a moment, testing, but it doesn’t give beneath her weight. She looks down -- okay, it’s strange being this far off the ground. Ironically. But she should be safe. She just has to be careful in choosing her next branches, and remember the path for the way down.

A squeal of excitement whips her head around back to the group.

She catches sight of Versi first, white-blonde hair bouncing as she does. But she’s not alone in her enthusiasm. The other are more subdued, but she sees most of the apprentices smiling, and all of them looking toward...

A procession of horses, six or eight, maybe, just now finishing their descent from one of the nearby hills. They’re close enough for Clarke to pick out the shine on the metal ornament gracing the leader’s brow.

Clarke presses her forehead against the trunk of the tree. Oh, perfect. The Commander would show up now. She has that kind of timing.

Maybe she won’t stay. Maybe she’ll ride on past.

The horses slow as they approach, and the Commander dismounts with her customary ease before clasping Nyko’s arm in greeting. They talk briefly, and then one of the apprentices gathers the courage to approach. Within the seconds the entire group surges forward, if respectfully, all of them wanting a piece of her attention. Clarke can see Versi nearer the back as she tries to push through.

The Commander surprises her, though. She smiles, open and relaxed, appears to be able to greet each apprentice by name. She’s not *friendly*, exactly -- her spine is iron-rod straight, she lets each one come to her instead of giving quarter. Still. She’s not unhappy to see them, not resentful at the demand on her time to give the attention they crave. Clarke knows how little free time leaders have to themselves.
Her name is Lexa.

Clarke swats away the thought before turning back to her task.

She wonders, as she pulls herself higher and higher, how someone comes into so much power so young. Could be hereditary, maybe, but that doesn’t quite suit her title. Or the way people look at her, talk about her. That’s not familiarity, the kind you might feel for a girl you watched grow from a child into someone who expected to claim a seat of power. This is admiration. However she became the Commander, she did something for it. Or maybe she did something after, something to make them love her.

Although, not just love her -- thinking of Gustus kneeling, the terror of the assassin in the tent.

Clarke hasn’t seen any of that since arriving in Polis, though. She’s no longer in close quarters with the Commander, but: Versi’s constant chatter and obvious crush, the way the others tolerate it with good-natured annoyance, even the eagerness in their voices when they talk of the Commander calling them to serve on the battlefield. That’s all very different.

Clarke blinks when she realizes she’s nearly within reach of the nest, the broken blue shells peeking out just over the edge of the twigs. She’s been so wrapped up in her thoughts the stretch-pull of climbing became automatic. She’s not even breathing hard. She’s kind of proud of herself -- here she is, doing something she’s only read about in books, and doing well. She spares a glance down to measure her progress.

Oh. Oh, mistake.

Every single muscle locks up of its own volition, and she hugs the tree trunk so tightly there’ll probably be a bruise on her cheek. None of it’s under her conscious control. Clarke sees the long, long drop below her, and her body decides she’s made enough stupid decisions for the day.

She squeezes her eyes shut, drawing in ragged breaths. It’s fine. She’s fine. For once, she’s grateful for the constant looking-after from Hern and the others, even Nyko’s suspicion. They won’t allow her to go missing for long.

Sure enough, she soon hears the sounds of them calling for her. She can’t call back, of course, and by now her legs are trembling a little from both strain and shock, so she just keeps still and hopes for
She finds her fairly quickly. She can see them just out of the corner of her eye -- no way is she pulling back from the safety of the solid trunk for a better look -- clustered beneath the tree. The tree is too solid to shift with the added weight, but she can feel the vibrations through the wood as someone else begins to climb to where Clarke is stranded.

Clarke lets her eyes fall shut in the wake of her relief, but they snap open when she hears the voice of the very last person she wants as a rescue.

“How did you get up this high, if you’re afraid of heights?” the Commander asks. She settles on a branch a short distance from Clarke. She’s taken off her high-collared coat for the climb, and arm she stretches above her head to secure her hold on a branch is left bare by the sleeveless item she wears beneath. Clarke can see the effort in the flex of muscle in her arm, but otherwise she has the same ease as if she were simply sitting in a chair. Or riding one of her stupidly huge horses.

Clarke glares at her, feeling her nails dig into bark.

“Howm.” The Commander tilts her head to the side, considering. “You didn’t know, did you?” She doesn’t smile, but her face somehow gives the impression of everything but. “There are a lot of things you don’t know until it’s too late.”

Clarke glares harder.

She thinks the Commander does smile at that, but she turns her head to an angle so that Clarke can’t quite see. When she turns back, her expression is wiped clean of anything but patient tolerance. “Come on. I won’t let you fall.”

She swings into position behind Clarke. There’s a bad moment where the branch dips under their combined weight. It holds, and Clarke makes an effort to slow her breathing.

“Give me your hands.” She’s so terribly understanding, her tone and the way she waits for Clarke to loosen her grip on the trunk. Clarke wants to hate her for it, a bit, but it’s hard to feel anything past the terror pounding in her head.

She cages Clarke’s wrists with long fingers. She then guides Clarke to hold two branches on either
side, slightly lower down from their current position. “Bend your knees, let your right leg drop down,” she says, keeping a careful distance. “But don’t look down. You’ll be fine.”

They make some progress like that, the Commander -- Clarke wonders who calls her *Lexa* to her face, if anyone does, if she allows it -- guiding her hands, sometimes prompting her to shift left or right to find the next branch to stand on. She stays behind Clarke the entire time.

“How good, almost there!” Hern calls to them. Clarke chances a look for herself.

He’s lying.

The sight of all that distance between them and the safety of the ground leaves her literally gasping. This time her muscles just give up, legs buckling, arms giving out, and she has an awful moment of feeling her feet start to slip before she’s *slammed* up against the trunk by another body. Clarke’s teeth click together, but at least she’s anchored in place.

A hand makes its way to cover her eyes. Clarke feels the Commander sigh just as much as she hears it. “What did I just tell you?” the other girl asks, low, and her breath skitters up the back of Clark’s neck.

“Sorry, *Heda,*” from Hern below.

“Don’t help me,” the Commander calls back.

She gives Clarke a moment, not pressing her to resume, just letting her clutch at the tree trunk and wait until her heart stops trying to beat straight through her chest.

“You’re fine,” the Commander says after the moment has passed. “I won’t let you fall.” She eases back until they aren’t pressed together so tightly. “Do you trust me?”

It takes a moment for Clarke to realize what the Commander wants. She nods.

“Good. Ready to try again?”
Clarke hesitates. She has to convince her shaking hand to peel away from the rough bark of the tree, but she manages it, touching her fingers to the Commander’s wrist where she’s still covering Clarke’s eyes. There’s a ridge across the meat of the Commander’s left palm -- a sword callus, Clarke guesses, since she remembers seeing the ancient weapon sheathed at the other girl’s hip. Clarke can feel it along her cheekbone.

A short laugh, caught in her throat, and again Clarke almost feels it as much as she hears it. “No, that’s staying. Come on.”

It should be easier like this. It is, on some level -- she only has to let Lexa guide her, giving over entirely to her quiet instruction, the soft touches to her side that tell her where to move. She does trust the other girl in this, and it’s better moving in darkness than glimpsing the terrifying drop below.

Still, it’s -- she doesn’t like it. It’s like an itch building beneath her skin, the hyper-awareness of the hand across her eyes and the body behind hers, the way the Commander sometimes checks her with a hip or shoulder to keep her in place. She keeps talking, too, soft words of encouragement that make Clarke want to scream. Make her want to push away the helping hands and presence, shout at her to stop being something you’re not.

Clarke remembers how they ended up here: threats, capture, captivity. She’s not about to forget.

Not even when the Commander says, “Trust me one more time,” right by her ear before taking her hand away. Clarke barely has time to blink back the onslaught of sunlight before an arm is hooking around her waist, drawing her into the Commander’s side, whose other arm is reaching for a lower branch. Then she’s swinging them together, pulling up to stop the momentum and releasing, almost with a little hop, to come down onto the grass.

Clarke realizes she’s clutching at the other girl’s shirt with one hand, at her bare shoulder with the other. She yanks back her hands as she turns to walk away.

“You’re welcome,” she hears behind her. The back of Clark's neck burns, but she doesn’t turn. Not even seeing Versi on the edge of tears as she pushes her way past the crowd. Or Nyko, eyes narrowing with every step she takes from the girl everyone else adores.

*I know who you are*, Clarke thinks, to that same girl.
She knows who she is, too. Clarke knows where she belongs.

Not here.

~*~

They make their way back to the tower before the sun dips too low into the horizon. There’s the sound of horses passing them, the jingle and noise of their tack, but Clarke keeps her head down. She still sees a few of the apprentices wave as the entourage rides ahead.

“Do you think she’ll stay in Polis now, with winter coming?” someone asks.

“She didn’t choose to leave,” someone else protests. “She needed to deal with the (word).”

“Anya dealt with them.”

“Under the Commander!”

Anya. Clarke frowns. She knows that name. She heard it before. Where..?

“They thought they could burn an entire village and get away with it.” Versi’s partner, whose name Clarke still can’t remember, shakes his head in disbelief. “I heard it took almost fifty warriors to bring them down.”

Anya would not appreciate the gift of yet another mouth to feed.

Meaning her, of course -- Clarke. Anya is someone near the place where Clarke was found.

Which was near the dropship.

She stumbles over nothing. Hern catches her elbow, his face bending down to check on her. “You
Clarke nods, her mouth gone dry. It’s a coincidence. It has nothing to do with --

“Is it true they fell out of the sky?”

Hern slings her arm around his shoulders for support, and the conversation continues to flow around them, bouncing idly from apprentice to apprentice. Clarke struggles to keep up, to keep the panic from her face.

“Stories,” someone scoffs. “They’re not (word), they came from the mountain --”

“No, I heard the same! They lived in a metal box, and it crashed down from the sky.”

“Does it matter where they came from? They’re dead.”

Another voice joined in from up front, shouting something about blood. A few others took up the chant, before dissolving into cheers.

Clarke can’t keep up the pretense. She stops, one hand clutching at her chest where it feels like her chest is collapsing in on itself, bending over at the pain until she’s almost folded in two. Hern begins to fuss, checking her forehead and pulse. He raises his voice to call for something before leaning in close, his breath warm against her clammy skin.

It reminds her of -- of the Commander, the sudden humanity of her. Her patience with the apprentices. The scar on her shoulder -- Clarke felt the edges of it with her fingertips -- as proof against her invulnerable facade. She’s a real person. She’s feared, but she’s also loved. She’s the kind of leader Clarke genuinely didn’t think could thrive in power: poised between meaningful connection and absolute command.

And she’s killed almost everyone Clarke cares about.
The Commander moves so quickly it almost takes Clarke’s breath away. It probably would have, if the other girl’s arm squeezing around her torso didn’t get there first. The Commander lifts them both to their feet, hauling Clarke in too close to land a hit. Her other hand wraps around Clarke’s fingers where she’s holding the bottle, but the Commander forces the makeshift weapon close to their bodies. Low, and hidden.

Clarke angles her head to look into her eyes, a little taken aback. The Commander’s eyes flick down to their overlapping hands and she shakes her head, minutely.

She doesn’t want anyone else to see what Clarke just attempted. What Clarke might still attempt, given the chance.

Chapter End Notes

More housekeeping/nerd notes:

1. Eggshells were/are a really popular ingredient in natural toothpaste recipes, which is why Nyko is forever running low.

2. Clarke gets stuck in a southern magnolia, which I can attest make for some of the best climbing. The bark has a surprising number of medicinal applications.

3. I know we’re generally hand-wavy about this stuff -- not unlike canon -- but I’m of the opinion it wouldn’t take that long for an English speaker to pick up a language that’s a modified form of English, especially in an immersive environment. Feel free to chat it out with me, though.
Clarke just -- stops.

Everything.

It’s so much easier than she might have expected.

Clarke wakes up the next morning before anyone else in the dormitory. It’s possible she never went to sleep to begin with, she’s not sure. Her head is swollen with memories she both feels like it’s now her duty to preserve, perhaps forever, and also wishes she could shove into a deep, dark place and forget.

They’re dead. Wells, Finn, Octavia, Bellamy, Monty, Harper, Miller, Monroe... maybe she should write the names down. In case she starts to forget. Every person abandoned by the Ark, entranced by the freedom of the ground, depending on her to keep them alive -- dead.

(And the Ark. What now? How long can the air supply last? Will they come down in a year, a few years? Or will they implement even more brutal methods to preserve their way of life, thinking it’s the only way to stay alive?)

So her eyes are already open when the dawn light begins to filter through the windows, turning everything gray-tinged and shadowy before the full force of the sun returns color to the room. The others see she’s awake when they rise and start to dress for the day. They exchange looks and whispers at her stillness. Chanti’s the one to approach her first.

“Don’t feel well?” she asks, kneeling by Clarke’s bed and holding a hand to her forehead. “You’re not warm.” She gives Clarke’s shoulder a squeeze with an encouraging smile. “It can be hard to get out of bed, but we all have work to do.”

Everyone on the dropship is dead.
Clarke turns over, drawing her blanket up past her shoulder to cover her head.

She still doesn’t sleep. The others leave her alone, bring her water and snacks when they have a break between duties, but she stays in bed. She... drifts, in and out of awareness, her entire body aching and heavy. It’s as if her thoughts themselves are something hot and full of hurt, so she curls up as tightly as she can, breathing shallow, as if she can make herself small and still enough that they won’t touch her.

Days pass like this. The other apprentices become more insistent in trying to get her to rise, bathe, eat, but Clarke just puts her head down and thinks: *There’s no point. They’re all dead.*

Nyko comes in one day. He stands with his hands on his hips, frowning at her for long moments. He takes her wrist out from under her blankets to read her pulse, lifts her eyelids slightly to check her pupils.

“Is she sick?” Hern asks. He’s often the first in the morning to approach Clarke and try to get her out of bed. When Nyko shakes his head, he only looks more concerned. “Then what’s wrong?”

“Exactly what I warned her would happen,” Nyko says. “You can’t plant a desert sapling by the river, and you can’t command people to thrive where you put them.” He’s still shaking his head as he leaves.

~*~

She hears the furious eruption of whispers first, and the heavy click of boot heels on stone. Then the rustle of fabric as someone wearing a heavy coat walks up close. Clarke can almost feel the banked energy of her presence.

Her stomach is twisting before she even opens her eyes to see the Commander sitting on her heels by Clarke’s bed.

Maybe if she’d had more to eat recently, Clarke thinks, she’d be able to better make out the expression on the other girl’s face. Her features are rigid with what looks like anger, but with something with the mobility of passion just under it -- Clarke can see it in the way she holds her jaw,
the sheen of her wide eyes.

“You should get up and wash,” the other girl says, wearing that strange expression. “You’re starting to smell.”

The last few days have settled in Clarke’s body like a malaise, leaving her numb. It feels similar to a leg or an arm falling asleep from restricted blood flow, except it’s all of her. Now, for the first time in days, she feels the prickling rush of sensation: hot needles of emotion piercing the fog in her brain.

Specifically, rage.

“I thought you were stronger than this,” the Commander continues, oblivious. “You traveled out of the Dead Zone on your own to unfamiliar territory, only to give up now? Now, when you have food and shelter, and the protection of my clan?”

The clan that’s responsible for the deaths of Clarke’s people. Deaths this girl ordered.

Nassa has been bringing her water in heavy glass bottles, thick enough to withstand rough handling, their color muddled and dark. Clarke picks one up by the neck, she’s sliding off the bed until the Commander’s in reach --

The Commander moves so quickly it almost takes Clarke’s breath away. It probably would have, if the other girl’s arm squeezing around her torso didn’t get there first. The Commander lifts them both to their feet, hauling Clarke in too close to land a hit. Her other hand wraps around Clarke’s fingers where she’s holding the bottle, but the Commander forces the makeshift weapon close to their bodies. Low, and hidden.

Clarke angles her head to look into her eyes, a little taken aback. The Commander’s eyes flick down to their overlapping hands and she shakes her head, minutely.

She doesn’t want anyone else to see what Clarke just attempted. What Clarke might still attempt, given the chance.

A warrior culture, remember? Clarke reminds herself. They probably have a lot of stupid beliefs about honor or first blood and things like that: needlessly elaborate death in the face of betrayal, the necessary level of retaliation against unprovoked attacks. Clarke got away with shoving her last time,
at the window, because Nyko had been the sole witness -- and he’d almost taken her head off anyway. The Commander had stopped him.

But if Clarke strikes out at her now -- if Clarke even tries -- an entire room of apprentices will see it. And if the Commander doesn’t put her down every single one of them might take it as weakness.

The Commander’s grip tightens around Clarke’s fingers until it’s almost too painful to bear. She doesn’t say a word. But the look in her eyes might be described as pleading.

Clarke realizes she doesn’t really want to die. She hates... everything, she hates herself and this tower and the stupid demands of her body to be fed and cared for, hates the fucking whim of fate that gave her and only her the safety she wanted for everyone else. Every breath feels like she’s drawing it from someone else’s lungs.

But she’s still taking them. She doesn’t want to die.

Damn. She’d been making such good headway.

“I don’t know your people, or how you lost them,” the Commander says, so close her mouth is almost against Clarke’s temple, “but I don’t think they would want your life to end like this.”

Oh, fuck her, fuck her. That hits right where her walls are cracking and weak. Abby is still out there. If there’s anything like an afterlife, Wells will kick Clarke’s ass if she shows up now.

She never got to say goodbye to Wells. He died while she hated him.

Clarke breaks. That’s the only word for it. Her neck bends and she feels the tears dripping down her nose before she’s taking her next breath to sob. Grief crushes every other emotion and impulse, leaves her feeling emptied out and useless. She barely notices the Commander quickly taking the bottle from her hand to drop it noiselessly onto Clarke’s bed and out of sight of the others.

The other apprentices notice Clarke is crying, though. It snaps their reticence and they surge forward almost as a group, Clarke’s bunkmates three steps ahead of the herd. Hern practically snatches Clarke out of the Commander’s hands to wrap her in a bear hug, Chanti and Nassa on either side as they stroke her hair away from her face. Nassa promises whatever is wrong, they can fix it, they can, and Hern rubs Clarke’s back. Chanti isn’t glaring at the Commander, but she’s directing a heated
scowl at the floor by the Commander’s boots. Clarke kind of loves her for it.

(There’d been a brief moment, right before that first sob and before anyone else can near them, when Clarke thought she felt the lightest touch to the top of her skull. Like someone was about to place their hand there, draw her in for comfort.)

(But it doesn’t matter, because by the time she looks over her shoulder the Commander has already left.)

~*~

There are children here, too.

She sees children in the infirmary, of course. But these children are different: their clothes and hair aren’t dusty from the loose dirt kicked into the open air, they aren’t immediately shadowed by adult guardians or older siblings who run through a litany of symptoms for Hern and Clarke. These children don’t travel through the tower with wide eyes and sneaking glances. Whenever she catches a glimpse of one of them, they walk down the halls as if they are already at home.

She doesn’t connect them as being part of a group, at first -- she only notices there are children in the tower. Sometimes. Then she notices the way they appeared in groups of two and three together, always dressed in the protective gear Clarke has only seen on warriors. They wear no markings, or not that she can make out. Instead they seem to be recognized on sight by almost everyone they pass, hands reaching out to touch their shoulders or ruffle their hair. The children bear this with smiling grace, and an unexpected reserve that makes Clarke itch to remember who or what it reminds her of.

Her suspicions are confirmed the first time she sees them all together.

It’s hard, getting back into the rhythm of life in the tower. Habit takes her through washing, dressing, eating -- but then she finds herself back in the infirmary and wondering: is this going to be her life? Is she a Grounder? The person she was -- a person with a name, a voice, an identity -- are they gone, now? If everyone who even knew her as Clarke is dead or orbiting miles above her head, where does that leave her?
Maybe she should still try to get back to the dropship, she thinks dully, watching as Hern works with patients without her. He casts worried looks every now and again to where she sits, arms hugging her knees to her chest. Maybe she can get the radio to work on her own, find a way to send a message to the Ark.

... except tech was never her area. And what would she say, even if she could beat out a code or find some way of making herself understood -- the ground is habitable but inhabited, and the natives are unfriendly? They don’t seem to have any post-Industrial weapons, but they still managed to take on a hundred delinquents with guns?

There are weapons on board the Ark. Not just guns or shock batons, but big, mass.damage weapons left over from before unification. The general pop isn’t supposed to know that, but Clarke was -- is? -- the daughter of important people. She could send up a message, and the Ark could aim those weapons right where they would do the most damage. If might take another year’s orbit before they were in position, but it would make it possible for the Arkers to come safely to the ground.

Clarke considers it. She looks around the infirmary -- imagines it on fire, all the apprentices and patients screaming as they burn to death.

She slams a hand over her mouth as she chokes back bile, and Hern rushes to her side. He fusses until she lets him take her back to the dorm and tuck her into bed early.

Clarke gets up the next day ready for the infirmary and gets a bit of a shock when Hern takes the green paint stick out of her hand with a sad smile. Chanti approaches and explains: maybe Clarke will like some of the other disciplines more than healing, they want to show her how the other apprentices spend their days. They assumed she was a healer, but maybe she would like to choose like everyone else.

It causes an ache just beneath the hollow of her throat, how careful they’re being with her, how kind. She hopes it was Nyko’s idea. She’s not sure she wants to feel this grateful to... anyone else.

It makes her days a little easier. Clarke’s not expected to do anything more than stay out of the way and observe, unlike at the infirmary. She doesn’t have to push through the fog in her head to help out. Instead she lets Chanti dress her in heavy overclothes and an old helmet with a cracked plastic partition over the eyes, scavenged from Before. They walk back out to the fields where they check tiered stacks that open up, drawer-like, to reveal hundreds and hundreds of crawling insects with yellow stripes that mimic the ones drawn on Chanti’s cheek. That day is spent watching apprentices boil honeycomb and separate wax from honey, and Clarke is allowed to touch new-made candles so she can feel how smooth they are, smell their lingering sweetness. The next morning she’s handed off to a boy she doesn’t know, one with three grey mountains on his face, and he shows her the pots filled with nut shells which they boil to produce dark ink, the rough sheets of paper to be smoothed.
with stones.

It makes the nights harder. Every day she sees more people, more ways in which life at the tower fits together like the pieces of a puzzle. Her sleep is light, fitful. She dreams of rubble strewn with human bones, the air filled with greasy ash.

No, Clarke decides one day, tucked into the corner of the kitchens, listening to Nassa’s chatter as the other girl peels vegetables. No, she won’t find a way to tell the Ark to use their weapons. Not yet. She can leave it as a last resort.

Besides, she doesn’t even know if there’s enough air to last the Ark another Earth revolution. Maybe they’ll be forced down before then, somewhere miles and miles from here. Even if they land she might never see any of them ever again.

She believes that for an hour, maybe even two, before practicality wins out against self-pity. If her mom reaches the ground, she’ll find Clarke.

So. What can Clarke do, until then?

Listen. Learn. Watch. She doesn’t know when -- if -- no, when -- she’ll be reunited with anyone from the Ark. That doesn’t mean her time here is wasted.

The shifts for kitchen apprentices are different, more staggered. Nassa got Clarke up this morning before dawn to show her preparations for the morning meal, but this also means they’re released from duties early. Nassa yawns hugely as they make their way back to the dorms, giggles when Clarke catches it. The giggles are echoed a little further down the corridor, and Clarke turns to see a tight cluster of those oddly un-childlike children watching them around the corner.

Nassa waves, and it’s like a signal for them to come running. The smaller ones hug her around the waist, talking a mile a minute. The older ones hang back a bit, smiling shyly first at Clarke before more widely at Nassa. She greets them all by name, their questions and talk overlapping until Clarke can’t parse it. The children are almost different creatures with Nassa -- eager, laughing -- and Clarke wonders at the difference until one of the younger ones pipes up: “Nassa, did you bring us a present?”

“Of course,” and Clarke watches as she reaches into her jacket for a cloth-wrapped bundle. Clarke’s jaw drops when Nassa unwraps it to reveal a slab of the concoction the head cook had been
occupied with all morning, boiled-down honey and nuts poured out into pans and allowed to harden. There was always some special treat prepared for the dinner service on this day -- feast day. It marked the beginning of a short rest period for most of the apprentices and workers within the tower. The candy had made the kitchens smell incredible all morning, and the cook had snarled at anyone who came within three feet of the cooling portions.

Nassa catches Clarke’s shocked look and shrugs. “I didn’t take it for me,” she explains quickly, still sounding a bit guilty. “Cook won’t care if it’s for the --” Here she says a word Clarke knows. Or, two words that sound pushed together, except... *nightblood*? That can’t be right.

The kids press forward and one of the older boys takes charge of splitting the bounty between them.

“What lessons do you have this afternoon?” Nassa asks them. Her hands are still on the shoulders of one of the younger boys, and every now and then her hand reaches up to smooth back his hair. She seems to do it absently, and he leans back into her hold with the same unthinking ease. “History with Titus, or training with Gustus? Or strategy with Ryland?”

“No, not today,” the other boy, the one who doled out the candy, says. He’s a little distracted, squinting at the pieces remaining as if trying to see if another equal portion could be scrounged together for each of them. “Today we’re in the throne hall. With --”

“With the *Commander*?” Nassa gasps, and Clarke’s own heart gives a sudden lurch. The kitchen apprentice snatches back her present and wraps it up to place back in her jacket. “I thought all her lessons were in the evenings, after the petitioners leave.”

The boy frowns at her. “Usually, but she’s leaving again before dinner, so --”

“And you still waited for me?” Nassa sounds incredulous. “You should have gone on without, you don’t keep the Commander waiting.”

The younger boy, the one who is still leaning against her, looks up with an unhappy twist to his mouth. “But you always bring a present on feast day.”

“It doesn’t matter! Quick, go now, *run*, before she comes looking for you all --”

“Too late.”
Unconsciously, Clarke moves behind Nassa. She’s not scared -- and she’s not *hiding* -- she’s just. It seems better, to have as many bodies as possible between Clarke and the last person she thought about killing.

If the Commander notices she doesn’t give any sign of it. All her attention is for the children as she stands in front of them. Her expression is carefully neutral, but she still manages to give the impression of immense disapproval.

The effect of her presence runs through the children like an electric current: they straighten, swallow down whatever sweetness is left in their mouths, swipe at their faces before tucking their hands behind their backs.

“Did I hear correctly?” the Commander asks coolly. “Are you often delayed in attending your afternoon lessons?”

The children are, all of the sudden, very interested in the pattern of broken and cracked tiles underfoot. All except the fair-haired boy who divided up Nassa’s present. He raises his chin, throat bobbing with nervousness.

“Only on feast day,” says the little boy Nassa is holding, almost in a whisper.

The Commander still hears it. She moves through the crowd of children and they part around her, only to inch closer as she passes by. She kneels before the little one until they are at eye level. Nassa removes her hands from the boy’s shoulders, clenching them with reluctance.

“Time is very valuable, especially to a Commander and all who might assist one,” she tells him. Her tone is firm, but not unkind. It has ring of both authority and affection to it, and the little boy is nodding even before she finishes. “Those who serve as your teachers today might one day be your generals, your advisors. You should treat them with the respect they deserve, and in a manner worthy of your --” and it is, the word is “nightblood.” What the hell does that *mean*, Clarke wonders.

“Aden,” the Commander says as she rises to her feet, “you will lead them back to the throne hall.”

The fair-haired boy nods, quickly marshals the rest into a makeshift procession and places himself at the rear to encourage stragglers. The youngest boy, for instance, who turns to wave goodbye to Nassa before Aden gently turns him in the right direction, and they march off.
The Commander waits until they’ve rounded the corner before turning back to the kitchen apprentice, raising an eyebrow.

Nassa bows her head, hands coming together in an attitude of contrition. “I’m so sorry, Heda. I won’t keep them from their duties again.”

For a long moment the Commander simply looks at her. Clarke itches to put herself between them, glare at the Commander for making her friend so unhappy. Maybe push her again.

She’s just about worked herself up to intervene when the Commander speaks again: “Evych does very well in his lessons.”

There’s such unexpected gentleness in her voice, Clarke can only blink at her.

Nassa raises her head. “Really?” she asks, sounding relieved. “He’s so much younger than the others. I know my mother worries he won’t have the chance -- that he can’t --”

“Your brother applies himself admirably for his age,” the Commander interrupts, sparing Nassa the distress of whatever it is she’s stumbling over. “I’m sure he will catch up to the others in no time at all. And,” here there is the slightest uptick at the corner of her mouth, not a smile, but something with the same lightness, “if it is any consolation to you mother, I do not plan for the next (word) to be necessary for many years to come.”

Whatever the word means, it makes happiness break across Nassa’s face as Clarke watches. “Of course, I -- long life and health to you, Heda,” she says, with a shy smile.

The Commander accepts this with a nod, and her carriage relaxes a touch. “What did you bring them?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, just whatever extra is lying about in the kitchens that day,” Nassa says, coloring. “And as promised, I will stop.”

The Commander tilts her head to the side. “Do you bring enough for all of them, every time?”
“Of course,” Nassa says, sounding almost insulted. “I would hope their families would do the same for Evych should they be the ones living in the tower, and not me.”

Again, the small not-smile. “Then I see no reason for you to stop. From now on, however, deliver your presents after their lessons.”

“Yes, Heda.”

“You still haven’t told me what you brought them.”

Nassa reaches back into her jacket, brings out the wrapped cloth. “A little something Cook kept back from the dinner preparations. I thought maybe he wanted a portion all to himself —”

“Or for me,” the Commander says, wry. She takes the bundle for herself, stirs a finger through the remaining pieces with a look that might be called wistful. “This is my favorite.”

“Oh, no.” Nassa’s hands fly up to her mouth. “Oh, that’s why -- the rest won’t be cool enough for hours --”

“And I’m leaving very soon.”

“Oh,” Nassa says, sounding small.

Clarke, still behind her, wants to cross her arms and scowl. Why are they still talking like this? Doesn’t everyone have somewhere to be? ... she could leave herself, actually, she knows the way back to the dorms. But she finds herself reluctant. It’s nothing. She’s just concerned for her friend, after the stormcloud the Commander was earlier.

“Another war party?” Nassa asks.

“No, just scavenge work. You heard about the invaders near Tondisi?”
Nausea grips Clarke.

“I don’t want Anya sending her people to strip their camp without backup,” the Commander continues. “It’s too near the mountain.”

The mountain? Mount Weather? Do these people know of the stockpile there -- have they already ransacked that, too, the way they’re planning with the dropship? Was Clarke’s attempt to find safety there doomed from the start?

The Commander finally finds a big enough piece among the sweet shard of broken candy, holds it out in offer. “For thinking of all of them,” she says quietly, “and not just your brother.”

Nassa’s face is a dull red when she takes it. The Commander turns to Clarke.

If Clarke felt any unease about being so thoroughly ignored up to this point, it’s gone the instant the Commander’s intensity finds and focuses on her.

Slowly, the Commander holds out another piece of confection.

“For finding your strength again,” she says, even quieter than before.

Clarke meets her eyes. She’s spent the last few days sick with the knowledge of the destruction she could bring down on the Commander’s people, the weight their lives heavy in the palm of her hand. She’s decided against it, mostly because she sees every day how little they have to do with what happened to the dropship -- to her friends. Those deaths aren’t even on the radar. Clarke’s hand might still be forced in the future, but for now she gets to live in a world where people unconnected to tragedy aren’t forced to bear its consequences.

But the Commander isn’t unconnected.

*I won’t forgive you,* Clarke thinks at her. *You can’t win me over.*

The other girl’s hand is outstretched for what feels like a full minute, maybe even two. Nassa shifts, clearly uncomfortable at the growing tension, and finally the Commander’s arm slackens and falls.
“I understand,” she says under her breath. Her gaze flickers back to Clarke, and there’s a finality to her expression that says: this was the last time. There will be no more attempts at connection, no more last-minute saves. Clarke doesn’t want them -- message received.

It should be a relief, watching the Commander give Nassa a short nod before turning away, Clarke as good as dismissed from her attention. It should make Clarke glad, knowing she has one less pair of eyes on her, that the person responsible for gifting her so much grief will no longer intrude on what little peace she has left.

*It does,* she tells herself as Nassa takes her arm, and they go back down the corridor to where they belong. *It does.*

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Several days later the apprentices set the entire array of paint sticks before Clarke, asking if she’s ready to make her choice.

She doesn’t hesitate before reaching for the green one, and Hern hugs her so hard it hurts.

Versi and her partner (Sanga, Clarke should really try to remember that) are almost as happy to see her back in the infirmary -- especially, as they explain, as the three of them had to had to share Clarke’s cleanup duties during her extended vacation. They’ve decided they’ll only accept Clarke’s thanks in the form of the returned favor, at least for today.

She’s surprised how much she doesn’t mind. It’s better -- she decides as she folds all their blankets, and straightens their patient beds, and sweeps the floor, and straightens supplies -- than being coddled. It means she really is one of them. Or at least, that’s the way they see it.

And they’re not *mean* about it. The tasks take a lot longer with just one person, but all three stick around to keep her company. They talk as she works, telling her stories of events and lessons she missed. As the sun fades from the sky and takes the light streaming through the windows with it, Sanga runs out to bring back bread and cheese and fruit from the kitchens, and they eat together when Clarke takes a short rest.
Once she finished they continue to tease, inspecting her work and imitating Nyko’s own attitudes and criticisms, until she throws cheese rinds at them to make them stop.

Hern is still smiling when he puts both hands on her shoulders to look her full in the face. “Now do you understand?” he asks. “No more running. Not from here,” and he indicates the tower, its climbing levels, before moving to sling his arms around Versi’s and Sanga’s shoulders, bringing them in close, “and not from us.” He continues to watch Clarke’s face. “Understand?”

She lets him pull her into another embrace, her own arms going up around him. He’s right. She can’t save the people she’s already lost, no matter what she’d give for that. All she can do now is be grateful for what she still has.

The four apprentices are the only ones in the infirmary by the time they finish up. Patients with long-term or infectious illnesses are kept on another floor that only allows more experienced healers. The only light provided from the banks of flickering candles that line the walls, and the four of them work together to douse all but a few before readying to return to the dorms.

The doors burst open just as they’re about to leave, swinging with such violence the four of them are forced to jump back.

“Up on the table,” Nyko orders, speaking over his shoulder as he walks through the doors. He doesn’t even notice the apprentices as he ushers in a group of warriors, all of them intent on carrying a shared burden between them. Clarke catches glimpses of it between their tight-pressed bodies: a limp arm, a booted foot.

“You said no one else would be here,” she hears, thunderous, and turns her head to see a stranger standing between the open doors: a tall man with dark tattoos against the curve of his naked skull. He wears robes instead of a warrior’s gear, and his face is contorted with anger.

“They’re just apprentices,” Nyko says, after checking. “Back to the dorms, all of you.”

“No.” The robed man blocks the doors, then moves to shut them, barring their exit. “I don’t want them telling anyone of this.”

“They wouldn’t -- fine,” Nyko says, seeing the other man is adamant. He jerks his head at the apprentices, clearly impatient to dismiss them and move onto the patient. “In there, all of you. Now,”
he says, pointing.

He means the medicine room, what Clarke thinks of as a kind of pharmacy -- where all the basic ingredients are kept, to be ground up or combined together and given out to patients who require them. She and the others are swept inside by one of the other warriors, and he maneuvers his bulk to further block their view of the body that has been placed on the main table. None of the apprentices protest, and the sound of the bolt being slammed home as soon as they are inside is loud in the silence of the deserted room.

Versi is the first one to say it, while all four of them are still someone frozen in shock and dismay. “Did you see?” she asks, voice low and face ashen. “Did you see who it was?”

Clarke is the only one to nod, but she’s sure all of them saw what she did: the familiar features of the person the warriors had laid out so carefully, set in a face now slack and pale.

Lexa.

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(next chapter)

“The others have more experience, more training --” Nyko protests.

“You asked for assistance, and I will grant you the use of one apprentice.” The man -- Titus -- tightens his grip on Clarke. “But I choose the one who cannot speak of what she sees.”
The other apprentices crowd against the locked door, ears pressed against its surface or the crack where it meets the jamb. Clarke keeps to her own space. She fingers the open stores of supplies -- seeds, dried leaves, shaving of bark -- and breathes deep of their mixture of pungent scents, trying to calm the furious beat of her heart.

“Do you hear anything?” Versi asks the others in a whisper.

Clarke watches as they collectively hold their breath.

Hern finally straightens, shaking his head. Sanga steps away with a sigh. Only Versi remains in position as she gnaws on her bottom lip.

“Who do you think it was this time?” Hern asks as he takes a seat at the table in the center of the room.

Sanga snorts as he does the same. “We don’t know who it was the other times, do we? Not for sure.”

“The ambush on the road to the Lake people, that was (word),” Hern continues, using a term Clarke hasn’t been able to suss out the meaning of quite yet. She knows it’s not good, whatever it is, it’s almost always accompanied by a scowl or even a shiver of fear.

Sanga puts his elbows on the table and holds up a finger. “The poison in the beer we thought was from Blue Cliff,” adding another finger.

“We were lucky then,” Hern says, grim. “If one of the handmaidens wasn’t from that clan, and knew about the bad harvest...”
Sanga holds up a third finger. “The horde of (word) during the meeting at Tondisi.”

“No,” Hern says, frowning. “(word) are everywhere, especially that close to the mountain.”

“Have you ever heard of more than five or six in a pack?” Sanga demands. “It was dozens, and they all fell on the camp in the middle of the night?” He shakes his head. “It was the mountain. They wanted the Commander dead.”

... she does know that word, but it doesn’t make any sense in context. What do murderers have to do with Mount Weather? She bites down on the inside of her cheek in a surge of frustration.

“That spear that went astray and at the training grounds,” Versi says, quietly. “Remember? It missed her by less than a hand’s width.”

The boys look at her in surprise. “That was an accident,” Sanga says.

“Was it?” Versi demands.

Herns face darkens, and he looks down at the tabletop. Slowly, Sanga puts up another finger.

“Four,” Versi says. She’s standing with her head leaning against the wooden door, still, although from her expression it’s more for support than anything else. “Four attempts to kill her in just this year.”

Clarke remembers a cat-footed intruder in the middle of the night and thinks: five.

The deadbolt shoots back with a thunk, and Versi stumbles further into the room. Just in time -- it swings open to reveal the robed man from earlier. He casts his eyes over them as a group before they alight on Clarke, and he steps forward.

“This one?” he asks the room at large. “This is the mute?”
“Not her,” Nyko says as he halts in the open doorway.

The robed man takes this as confirmation and reaches out, snatching Clarke’s upper arm before she can collect herself and avoid his grasp. He pulls her forward. She would fight back, slip out of his hold, except something about him frightens her -- a bleakness to his look, a low-simmering zealotry that makes her uneasy. She’s not even sure he sees her. Not as a person, anyway. Just a means to an all-important end.


“I’ve chosen. Every moment you delay is a moment she suffers.”

“The others have more experience, more training --”

“You ask for assistance, and I will grant you the use of one apprentice.” The man -- Titus -- tightens his grip on Clarke. “But I choose the one who cannot speak of what she sees.”

Nyko doesn’t nod so much as jerk his head, clearly impatient and unwilling to waste the time as he turns away. Titus drags her along and out the door into the main area. Clarke stumbles, but she doesn’t think he notices -- he wouldn’t notice if her legs gave out altogether.

She has one last glimpse of the other apprentices, wide-eyed -- she didn’t realize until just now how terrified they are -- until the door is slammed shut behind her.

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“Each of you, grab legs and arms,” Nyko orders at the remaining warriors, back by the table where they’ve laid out the unconscious Commander. He strips out of his outer garment as he talks, leaving him in something sleeveless.
The warriors look at each other, uneasy.

“Legs and arms,” Nyko snarls. “She will wake up once I begin to cut. I don’t want her doing damage to herself.” He grabs one of the bottles of boiled water stored above the sink -- no running water, but the drains work -- and starts to lather his hands and all the way up to the elbows. “You,” as Titus drags Clarke closer. “There’s sleep-flower in my coat. Get it.”

Clarke does so, discovering a ball of the stuff wrapped in a soft cloth. Nyko has lectured the apprentices about the use of it, but only for surgical patients, and those are kept in the other wing. It’s flower sap dried into a dark and sticky mass, and from what she can tell it works like an herbal anesthesia.

“A piece the size of this,” as he indicates the first joint of his thumb before going back to scrubbing. “Make her swallow it.”

Clarke stumbles for a second, knowing what that requires -- but then she clicks into the mindset she had to cultivate working under her mother, all those evenings and breaks from school. If you really want to do this, you should see what it takes, Abby had said, and Clarke had learned: the ability to shut off the part of your brain that saw the patient as someone who would feel pain, discomfort, even humiliation because of your decisions. To start thinking of them first and foremost as a collection of mysteries to be solved, though housed in tender skin.

She tears off a chunk of the sticky mass -- it takes some doing, and it gets under her fingernails -- before striding over to the raised table. Lexa is, the Commander is lying still on its surface, the accompanying warriors standing as Nyko asked with their hands on her limbs. All of them are watching as she breathes, frighteningly slow and shallow.

Clarke steps up to the corner closest to the Commander’s head. She’s pretty sure the tremor in her hands goes unnoticed as she reaches for Lexa’s -- the Commander’s --

Oh, float this. If she keeps thinking of a patient as a warmongering leader with a very intimate say in Clarke’s own life or death, nothing will get done.

Clarke has to thread her fingers through Lexa’s hair, stretching her fingers to anchor the other girl’s head. Lexa’s mouth falls open a little as Clarke turns her as needed. Clarke pushes the medication in with two fingers, trying to avoid snagging on the unconscious girl’s teeth or tongue, trying to ignore the damp heat of her mouth. Lexa’s breath stutters as she withdraws her fingers, but Clarke quickly cups her chin to close her lips. She strokes the other girl’s throat. Lexa’s eyelids flutter and Clarke’s heart jumps, but then the muscles move in a sluggish swallow.
“Did she take it?” Nyko asks, coming up behind her. Clarke checks Lexa’s mouth before nodding.

“Onto her stomach,” he says to the warriors, gesturing widely without letting his clean hands come into contact with anything. “Bring up the case,” he tells Clarke. She stoops to drag it out from where it’s kept on the shelf beneath the table. There’s room enough for Lexa and the case on the tabletop -- Clarke is very carefully not thinking of how small she looks without the aura of command she carries like a cloud, how exposed -- and the warriors shift her to accommodate. Clarke opens it at Nyko’s gesture, revealing row upon row of old but cared-for medical instruments; scalpels and pliers and tweezers gleaming dully in the low light. They’re basic, barely beyond what you’d find in a first aid kit on the Ark, but Clarke knows the precision of their make is beyond the ken of this particular society.

Nyko has her run to wash her own hands, his impatience almost causing her to lose the soap. When she returns he’s already had them cut open the back of Lexa’s shirt and pull her hair to the side. Her face is turned toward Clarke like this, cheek pressed into the wood of the table.

There’s some kind of design inked onto Lexa’s back to cover the length of her spine. Clarke would be paying a lot more attention to it, except instead she’s watching Nyko peel back a bandage lower down on her side, the slow reveal of --

A bullet wound.

Lexa’s been shot.

They’re alive, is her first thought, and hope swoops in her chest like the wings of a bird. The delinquents are alive, and they’ve used their guns to shoot the Commander.

Well, she wouldn’t put it past them.

“A-are you sure?” one of the warriors ventures, looking nervous at questioning Nyko. “It might be something else, perhaps in the food --”

“You said no one else was affected.” Nyko inspects the wound closely.
“But she was fine. She was fine all the way back, until we were almost at the city gates. Then she blacked out -- she almost fell off her horse.”

“Did you find the *(word)*?”

“Right away,” the warrior says, her coppery braids bouncing as she nods. “Heda killed him herself. She threw a dagger into his heart almost in the same moment we heard the gun.”

The word in their language is close enough for Clarke to know its meaning immediately. She stares down at the slack features of the girl in front of her and thinks, *Which one of my friends did you kill?* But then:

“*You’re sure it was a Mountain Man?*” Nyko asks.

Clarke’s head snaps up.

The warriors exchange looks. “*Who else would use a gun?*” one of them mutters.

“*Did you see him for yourselves?*” Nyko barks.

The first warrior, the one with the braids, nods again. “*Yes. Yes, I’m sure it was one from the Mountain.*”

Wait, *what?*

But Clarke doesn’t have time to work her way through it, because Nyko is holding out his hand and asking for one of the instruments in the case. He orders Clarke to go and get another bottle of sterilized water, as well as clean cloths, and she’s too busy running around the room to think about anything else. By the time she returns he’s reopening the wound, slow and precise with his ancient scalpel.

When the dark liquid first rises in a swell on Lexa’s pale back, Clarke thinks *this is it, she’s dead, no one can survive an infection that severe.* Then Nyko presses deeper, the liquid spills down her side in a viscous line, and Clarke realizes she’s not looking at pus or intestinal leakage -- that’s blood.
Lexa moans, and Clarke shoves the overwhelming barrage of questions aside to step back up to the table. Lexa is twitching with every centimeter the blade travels now, and the warriors are having to lean into their assigned limbs.

“I thought the girl gave Heda the medicine,” one of them mutters, glaring at Clarke.

“Nightblossoms,” Nyko says, not looking up from his work. “It helps their pain, but it doesn’t put them out. Heda insists on being special --” Lexa grunts and Nyko pauses, his gaze flickering to her face for a second before resuming “ -- in too many respects.”

Clarke matches the glare she’s still receiving. Nyko’s defense, even if it’s more about nuclear-mutated physiome (black blood, what the hell) than for her sake, makes her feel brave. So when Lexa twitches again, the muscles in her back shivering, Clarke reaches out to place a gentling hand on the warm skin between her shoulder blades.

Lexa’s eyes snap open and meet her own.

The next thing Clarke knows they’re struggling to keep her on the table and contain the thrash of limbs. They haven’t even taken off Lexa’s boots, and Clarke winces in sympathy as a kick clips one of the warriors on the chin.

“Heda,” Nyko says, “I need you to be still, I need -- Lexa.”

Lexa ignores him, gives another wrench of one shoulder to free that arm from restraining arms, and shoves at Clarke so hard she finds herself stumbling a good five paces across the room.

As soon as Clarke regains her balance she finds Lexa up on her elbows, a heated look in her eyes.

“Get her out of here,” she says. The words are so rough with pain it takes a moment for Clarke to understand what she said. Her eyes widen as she looks at Lexa with -- no, she doesn’t feel betrayed, that. That doesn’t make any sense.
“I need her,” Nyko says. “I can get rid of her if you want, but later. Right now --”

“No.” Lexa shakes her head, and the movement is uneven, like she’s struggling with the weight of her own skull. “Not me. Her.” She takes a deep breath, shoulders heaving. “She doesn’t want to be here.”

Clarke finally calms down enough to remember the opiate-based properties of herbal anesthetics, take in Lexa’s dilated pupils.

Oh, yeah. She’s stoned.

Nyko casts his eyes skyward for a moment with an expression of appalled disbelief that makes Clarke’s cheeks heat. “That was before, Heda,” he says patiently. “She’s fine now. She’s very happy to be here. Aren’t you,” he growls at Clarke.

This has got to be -- this is some kind of cosmic joke. Clarke meets Lexa’s waiting look, knowing her face is probably deep red. She nods.

Lexa frowns at her, suspicious.

“Please lie back down, Heda,” Nyko says.

She does so with bad grace, turning her face away from Clarke as she does. “She still cries too much,” Clarke hears her say, and feels her face get even redder.

“I warned you that might happen,” Nyko says as he resumes his work. He motions for Clarke to come back to the table’s edge, to clean away the blood that’s obscuring his view of the wound. “A new situation, a new city, these things can be difficult at first.”

“I didn’t cry that much when I was brought to Polis,” Lexa says. Her voice is muffled where she speaks into her folded arms. “And I was a child.”

Clarke watches as he cuts even deeper into the flesh cauterized by the path of the bullet, searching for its source. Lexa hisses but doesn’t move away from his blade. Now that’s she’s more or less conscious she seems able to control her body’s reactions, even drugged. But Clarke knew that.

When Nyko speaks, it’s gentler than anything Clarke has heard from him this far. “The Mountain Men grow bolder since you formed the *(word).*”

Lexa sighs. “True. But this has to do with the invaders somehow. The ones that burned the village. Too many coincidences, otherwise.” Her words are softly slurred around the edges.

“I defer to my Heda in these matters, as always,” Nyko murmurs. “Pull the skin apart for me,” he tells Clarke. “Gently.”

She does, wiping away the blood first so her fingers don’t slip. He exchanges his scalpel for a pair of straight blade forceps, reaching into the wound with intense focus. Whatever he’s doing makes Lexa suck in a hard breath.

“There,” he says finally. A second later he holds up his prize: a bullet with a hollow point, its tip leaking virulent yellow.

Clarke stares.

There was never any need for a bullet of that make on the Ark. There certainly weren’t any like that among the supplies on the dropship.

Someone else on the ground has guns.
Nyko finishes up quickly. He irrigates any lingering toxins from the wound and stitches it closed afterward. He only calls on Clarke for any task which absolutely requires more than one pair of hands, and sometimes waves her back as soon as that’s finished.

Clarke might wonder what this says about his suspicions, except she begins to wonder if it’s about her at all. He treats the warriors in much the same way as soon as Lexa is good to roll onto her back and sit up, almost physically herding them toward the door as he says they’re done, they can go to their own quarters. Clarke hangs back, watches as Lexa swings her legs over the edge of the table with her face set in a grimace. Her ripped shirt hangs from her shoulders. Clarke looks away.

“Stop that,” Nyko says as he comes back her. “You’re staying here for the night.”

“I want my bed,” Lexa says. Her head tips all the way forward in exhaustion -- or maybe the drug -- until it’s resting on Nyko’s shoulder. “I want to go to bed.”

“Here,” Nyko repeats. “In case there are complications. I want you near whatever supplies are needed.”

Lexa pushes off the table to sway on her feet, and he places a careful arm around her shoulder for support. Nyko turns his head to face Clarke, his face darkening with a scowl. Clarke starts until she realizes he’s aiming it just past her.

“She’ll be fine,” he says, voice tight. “You can stop hovering like a vulture.”

Clarke turns to see the robed man -- Titus, she should remember his name -- seated just behind her in the shadows of the torchlight. Has he been there this whole time? He must have been -- silent and still, watching as they struggled to save Lexa’s life.

Titus rises to his feet. He’s a tall man, and his reserved bearing only adds to the impression of his looking down at them from a great height. “As your duty is to the flesh, mine is to the flame.”

Clarke sometimes wonders what the point of learning their language was, since these people so often refuse to make sense.
Not that she’d like this man if he did. She pulls herself from his path as he strides forward. He opens the door to the pharmacy room and ushers out the remaining apprentices.

Versi makes a sound Clarke swears is unintentional on seeing the table spattered with black blood. Nyko’s already taken Lexa somewhere, possibly behind one of the partitions. So Clarke deliberately catches Versi’s eyes and shakes her head. The other girl calms, though she reaches out to grip Sanga’s hand so hard Clarke can see his wince from across the room.

Hern is the last to walk out of the smaller room, and Clarke knows her uneasy feelings about Titus are valid from the the way Hern watches him like he’s a snake about to strike.

“All of you will go back to the dorms,” Titus says. “Tomorrow you will perform your duties as if nothing has happened. You will speak to no one of this.”

He takes a moment to look each of them in the face. “If I hear of rumors or gossip, I will know who is behind it. Understood?”

The other apprentices nod before shuffling toward the doors. Clarke goes to follow them until a heavy hand lands on her shoulder, and Titus holds her back.

“Not you,” he says.

“I told you Heda will survive,” Nyko calls over to them. “The secrets of your precious ritual are safe. You might let the girl get a night’s sleep.”

Lexa has an arm thrown over his shoulder as she wobbles over to one of the infirmary beds. She’s changed out of her torn clothing, Clarke notices, and her boots, into the lighter, looser clothes they keep for patients undergoing examination. She climbs onto one of the empty mattresses with abandon, seemingly unconcerned with Nyko and Titus’s bickering as she plops down onto her stomach. Maybe she’s used it.

“She stays,” Titus says. “In case she is needed.”

Nyko grumbles for a while longer while Titus is imperious and unbending in return. Clarke decides to follow Lexa’s example and ignore them.
The entire tower is littered with old furniture from Before, overstuffed chairs and chaise lounges patterned in what must have been rich fabric before almost a century of dust and mites did its work. She finds one of these by the window and drags it over close to the bed Lexa’s chosen, settling in. She doesn’t think she’ll sleep tonight. Her heart’s still pounding, and her head is whirling with all the things she’s seen and heard.

She sees Titus leave just as she’s getting comfortable. Nyko walks over to survey them both: Clarke in her chair, Lexa already passed out. He sighs.

“I’m sorry,” he says gruffly.

Clarke shrugs. She’s past caring about something like that.

“You aren’t tired?” He watches her closely as she shakes her head. “You can take the first watch, then. We’ll move her at dawn. Wake me if there’s any redness or swelling at the wound site, if she vomits, if she --”

He lists symptoms for the next five minutes, and Clarke nods along with them. When he finishes he settles into the nearest bed himself, still clothed. He’s snoring, soft and low, within moments.

Clarke switches her gaze back to the Commander.

Her face is turned toward Clarke where it lays on the pillow. Her breathing’s better: deeper, easier. The tension’s gone from her face as well, leaving her with the kind of smooth, even features Clarke remembers from pictures of classic paintings.

_I could still kill her_, Clarke thinks.

An entire infirmary and pharmacy at her disposal -- she could mix up something lethal with what she has at hand, she knows enough now about their herbs to cook up a lethal interaction. It’d be easy. It’d be even easier getting it into the Commander while she’s in this state. She’s maybe as weak and as helpless as Clarke will ever see her. If Clarke forces something on her now, she’d only be at half strength. Maybe less.
Clarke would be killed, of course. Her breaths would be numbered as soon as the Commander drew her last. But it might be worth it. To take out the one person really responsible for the deaths of one hundred others. Would it be worth it?

For Wells, and Finn. For everyone she’s lost.

“The ones that burned the village.”

Clarke heard about that before, back in the orchards. She’d chosen not to listen, let it get swept aside in the tide of her grief. Was it true?

She can imagine it. She can picture the uncaring chaos at the dropship as if she left it just yesterday -- the disregard for anything resembling coordination or teamwork. Bellamy’s thug tactics. Their fear, hunger, desperation. She can see something going terribly wrong in the middle of that, especially if they had no idea (and she didn’t not until she was days down the river in the wrong direction) there were other people in the surrounding woods.

Clarke’s eyes begin to sting. She presses a hand over them. She washed up, but blood’s hard to get out completely -- there’s still some traces under her nails, and the familiar scent of it clings to the skin.

Black blood.

And a bullet that wasn’t made onboard the Ark. The certainty of people already inside the mountain.

The tears spill over and down her fingers. We were so unprepared, she thinks, choking back sobs. We didn’t know enough, we didn’t know anything.

They’d wandered right into the middle of a tornado -- no, they’d been dropped into the eye of one by the Council, and left to weather its passing.

Do you blame the storm for what happened next?

“You’re crying again.”
Clarke nearly jerks out of her skin in surprise. When she takes her hand away there’s Lexa, staring up at her from the bed.

“If you don’t stop that,” she says, “I’m taking you back.”

She’s not slurring her words anymore, but she speaks with the deliberate precision of someone who knows their faculties are compromised but can’t quite get them back under control.

Lexa shifts a little, rocking on her stomach until she works her hands under her pillow. Clarke watches, fascinated, as she almost nuzzles it -- probably getting an extra load of sensory feedback due to the opiates. Probably.

“Maybe I should take you back,” she mumbles into her pillow. “Trade you for a different wood witch. One who doesn’t cry so much.”

Clarke rolls her eyes. She wipes at her face, pressing her palm into the skin as if she could rub away the memories along with the tears they inspire. When she’s finished her holds both hands up to indicate her tearless face: There. Happy?

“Mmm,” Lexa hums. She’s struggling to keep her eyes open. “Maybe I could find a prettier one, too.”

Clarke gapes at her.

Then she finds herself laughing helplessly, soundlessly, almost doubling over with the ridiculousness of it all. She probably has something like emotional whiplash, she just -- it’s a relief, despite her ongoing grief and the gnawing sense of loss, to understand it doesn’t cancel out the silly, smaller irritations, like a doped-up warlord who doesn’t like her attitude. To have a chance at a life where these are her problems. She’s smiling when she rolls her head back to look at Lexa again.

Lexus is watching with her own smile. Something small, and secret, and yet so sweet Clarke’s breath catches.

Maybe not,” she says softly.
Then she lets her eyes fall shut, taking one last deep breath and sighing out before falling back into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

No “next chapter” preview this time, I am figuring stuff out.

Housekeeping notes:

(people on tumblr have been encouraging me to continue these, so you’re stuck now)

1. The dried sap of the opium poppy has been used in this manner for absolute ages. It’s currently regulated as a crop in the United States, but even a cursory look at doomsday prepping spaces reveals people storing up seeds and preparing to plant for this purpose, should something like The 100 become reality.

2. However it’s my sad duty to reveal The Princess Bride lied to us all; my Medical Person says to never, ever, ever administer something to an unconscious person by mouth, unless it’s via tube. Still, I’m big on homage. (The thing about gunshot wounds is true-ish to life, though, it’s apparently best to clean the injury and move on rather than dig them out. And I can’t believe I go to this trouble for a canon that can’t bother to remember how bone marrow works.)

3. The idea of nightbloods reacting oddly to pain and anesthesia is based on this actual medical issue applying to redheads, due to a mutated MC1R gene. (And is in no way scientifically sound! I’m just having fun.)
Growing up, Clarke was surprised how long it took Abby to let her work in medical. Really *in* medical, face-to-face with patients. At home it sometimes felt like everything but: Abby brought back patient charts and quizzed Clarke on their symptoms, she had Jackson over for dinner while they discussed that day’s surgery, and of course Abby encouraged Clarke toward medicine since the day she tested into Advanced Bio. But Abby didn’t bring her to the medical deck. Not even to observe. Not for a while.

“You’re too young,” she’d say. “Talk to me after you turn sixteen.”

“Mom, I’m at the point where I can clean my plate after an hour of ruptured spleens. You don’t have to protect me.”

“What happens to the patients is one thing. What happens to you, watching what happens to the patients, is something else.”

Clarke didn’t understand her until much later, when a little boy she’d helped distract while her mom gave him shots was rushed back later in the night. His body was swollen with a bad reaction, his fever off the charts. Abby had fixed it. But Clarke could barely stand to see him sent home and out of her sight, had wandered by his quarters for days to check up after until his parents finally got annoyed.

You form attachments. You aren’t supposed to, Clarke knows (everyone knows), but it happens. It’s not easy to pull someone back from suffering and walk away, as if you don’t know exactly how close they came to tipping over the edge. As if you didn’t suddenly appreciate that you were in the right place and the right time -- this time. Maybe not the next.

It might have been easier back then if the Ark hadn’t been so small, if she’d had the chance of seeing dozens of new people with each day, like doctors did Before. Certainly it's easier now, with all the patients coming into the tower -- or it had been.
It might still be easier, she thinks sourly, if Lexa weren’t somehow everywhere.

At first she keeps expecting someone to say something, make note of it -- the way Lexa is so present in the tower now, how barely a day goes by without Clarke catching the sound of her boots striding down the corridor or sees the edge of her coat sweeping around a corner. Clarke’s routine hasn’t changed, but (she realizes) Lexa’s has. She isn’t taking off for days at a time. She isn’t even wearing the same clothes as when she first snatched Clarke out of the forest, the rugged pauldron or buckled waist guard. She often wears the same floor-length coat, but the rest of her ensemble is softer, more lived-in. This is routine, and what Clarke knew before was the deviation.

She looks like she’s at home, Clarke realizes one day, pausing in the hallway when she sees Lexa in one of the larger rooms. She’s standing before a group of, hmm, maybe they’re merchants? They’re older, without the face paint of the apprentices, and their clothes look a bit richer, heavier, than the refurbished articles Clarke herself is free to collect from the dispensary. Lexa’s own top is dark and almost lace-like, and she doesn’t have her coat, so the sweep of her collarbones is exposed as she curls her fingers beneath her chin and listens to the overlapping arguments. Something about the tableau, or the intensity of Lexa’s concentration, snares Clarke until Hern has to tug at her elbow to remind her to keep moving.

Maybe it should have occurred to Clarke before now that the tower is Lexa’s home, but it didn’t. Everyone else treats this as a place to be, not to live: the warriors that patrol its halls, townspeople who come for care or counsel. Even the apprentices speak often and longingly of whatever homes they came from, as much as they value having so important a role to play in the heart of Polis. She assumed Lexa was the same, but seeing her now -- remembering when I was brought to Polis, and I was a child -- Clarke begins to wonder if she’s wrong. If Lexa is the one person who sees the tower as a place to belong to.

Not the only one, a voice whispers to her late at night. It’s that for you, too.

She doesn’t like to linger on the thought, tries to quiet her churning brain so she can fall asleep. But it’s true. Maybe one day the Ark will descend -- it has to, she trusts in that -- but until then? This tower is the single point of familiarity in a completely unexpected world. She wakes up each day a little less angry about that. Then she spends a few days being angry at being less angry, until the whole thing is a headache. She has nowhere else to go. It’s no use fighting that.

She’d do much better to fight off this inexplicable concern about Lexa. She has to stop -- well, all of it, really. Looking at Lexa when their paths cross. Checking how she moves to see how she’s healing (everything connects to the back muscles, but that’s no excuse). And, well, caring. At all. Clarke searches for the resentment that kept her buoyed above her depression for so long, but somewhere in between Lexa crumpled across the examination table like a child’s doll, and the silly things that came
out of her mouth afterward, it seems to have melted away. Or transformed into this new and inconvenient awareness of the Commander.

It’s ridiculous, Clarke knows that. Lexa isn’t in any immediate danger, and even if she were, Nyko would be all over it. He is all over it. Lexa comes into the infirmary every several days to have the wound site inspected. This does nothing for Clarke’s resolution to avoid her. Clarke’s had a few close calls as it is, managing to turn away just as Lexa would have caught her looking, and sometimes she thinks she can feel the other girl frowning at her. She hasn’t approached Clarke since promising not to, necessary medical interventions aside, and -- that’s good. It’s good.

Lexa gets enough attention from other people as it is.

Clarke saw that in the admirers when they rode together on the roads to Polis, and in the greeting Lexa was given at the city. She’s even seen it in the eagerness of the apprentices. It feels different with Lexa like this, though -- relaxed, in her element. That’s why Clarke finds it so irritating, see, when young women visiting the infirmary with friends or family start flirting with Lexa, throwing her covert looks as she waits for Nyko to finish up with his current task and turn his attention to her. Some of them go beyond looks. Some of them actually approach her, and Clarke is amazed that Nyko allows this kind of chaos in his workplace.

Lexa doesn’t seem to mind. She doesn’t brighten, or even encourage them, but she allows the smiles and the low-voiced conversations, and Clarke is just irritated by her refusal to shoo them away and so the apprentices can work in peace.

It’s a sentiment she shares with Versi, of all people. Every now and again, especially if it’s a whole group of girls around Lexa, Versi catches Clarke’s gaze and rolls her eyes. Versi isn’t shy in sharing her feelings. Clarke watches with appalled fascination one day when one of the girls is actually reaches out -- they seem to grow bolder in groups -- to trace the curve of muscle along Lexa’s shoulder with a light fingertip. Clarke’s mouth drops open as she hears Versi scoff.

Clarke starts. Lexa does too, head jerking over to see the white-blonde apprentice pursing her lips at the Commander. Clarke nearly starts again when Lexa flushes, redness rising along the tops of her cheeks. She turns to her admirer -- the girl’s hand is suspended between them like all she needs is an excuse -- and says something which makes the whole group rapidly dissipate.

Versi lifts an eyebrow, and Clarke watches as Lexa lifts the corner of her mouth and one shoulder in return.

It’s not only women. It’s a very different, very specific kind of interest with the young women,
which... well, that answers that question. (Though Clarke wonders how they all know when she’s never seen Lexa with anyone like that, or even touch someone with intent.) But young men flock to her as well, and though Clarke sometimes catches them looking at Lexa with a certain softness around the eyes, their attitude is never anything more than friendly deference. Lexa’s a bit more animated with them, as she tends to hang back and fold her arms around herself with the girls. (Not that it prevents her from accepting their more marked attentions, Clarke notes.) Whenever Clarke wanders close enough to hear these conversations they’re discussing training or fighting techniques. Once time -- again, when it’s a whole group of them, with a few girls mixed in who are equally as interested, and Clarke is beginning to suspect Lexa has a weakness for larger audiences -- Lexa decides to demonstrate a particular move or hold. The boy she chooses has at least six inches on her, and Clarke can see from straining muscles that he’s giving it his best, but he ends up sprawled across the floor of the infirmary. He blinks up at the others from this new position on his back, limbs ungainly, before breaking out into laughter. Lexa’s wearing her own smirk as she bends down to help him up.

Nyko breaks up the impromptu gathering at this -- oh, okay, so girls can be practically *manhandling* the Commander, but a little friendly roughhousing is what he objects to -- and the group sketches salutes and bows, calling back *Heda* as they make their way out. Lexa lets Nyko start his examination but Clarke sees her gaze linger, chin turned away from the healer as she keeps her eyes on the door.

With the birth restrictions as strict as they are on board the Ark, Clarke not only knew everyone her own age -- she knew almost everyone in the school on sight. Imprisonment in the Skybox was a real, tangible threat when you felt the sudden absence of a classmate so keenly; the eerie sensation of turning to look for a face you’d seen each day of your life since nursery school to find they *weren’t there*. The delinquents on the dropship weren’t her friends, but she’d known most of them and they’d known her. It was hard to avoid the ephemera of everyone’s lives. Twelve stations was not nearly enough space to get away from each other.

Clarke gives herself this moment to watch Lexa, who is still watching the door. There’s nothing -- absolutely nothing -- in her expression that might hint at loneliness, or even resentment. But Clarke wonders for the first time if it might feel as claustrophobic and restrictive, in its own way, to live so much apart from your peers. To never feel truly seen.

Then she has to pretend she is very busy and absorbed with folding clean bedsheets, because Lexa turns her head in Clarke’s direction and almost catches her looking. If Clarke is being honest with herself Lexa has *caught* her a few times, and this might be one of them. She doesn’t feel like admitting it, though. So she ducks her head down even lower and fusses with invisible wrinkles.

“You shouldn’t stress your back while the muscles are healing,” she hears Nyko scold Lexa. He lets the back of her shirt drop back over the wound site, where a reddish-pink scar is now forming.
“It’s nothing.” The assurance in her tone has Clarke sneaking a peek. Lexa doesn’t look like someone who’s bragging.

“Hmmph.” Nyko folds his arms, leaning back. As he moves out of her space, Lexa takes the opportunity to leverage herself up to sit on the railing of the balcony. The two of them are ensconced by one of the open windows, where curtains drift softly in the breeze. Nyko often sees his patients and visitors by this small balcony, as it gives him a measure of privacy while affording easy supervision of the rest of the infirmary.

That’s not why Clarke is over here folding sheets when she could be doing the much more interesting, involved work of patient intake with Hern. She just. There are no small jobs, and this one needed doing.

“Well?” Nyko says.

“Well, what?” Lexa leans her weight into her hands in a move that makes Clarke twitch. Those railings are newer than the building itself, and she assumes they’re quality replacements, but it’s a long way down.

“I hear the ambassadors have asked for a special hearing.”

Lexa sighs. “You’ve been speaking with Gustus.”

“Sometime I do that, yes.” If Clarke had to guess, she would think that Nyko is trying to draw a further response from Lexa by simply waiting for it. As the seconds tick by, though, he breaks first: “Do you think they’ll call for (word)?”

“They think I’ve angered the Mountain.”

Clarke can see Nyko raise his eyebrows even from her half-hidden vantage point. “And for that they want a new Commander?”

Clarke’s hands pause in her duties for the space of a breath. A new Commander? What would happen to Lexa, then?
“They’re frightened, and they’re fools.” Another beleaguered sigh. “And they know the nightbloods are young. Some of them may think the next Commander will be more... malleable.”

“So they’re ignorant of your involvement with the children.”

“They’re ignorant of too much,” Lexa mutters, her expression stony. “But not enough. If I had made it to the tower, to my own rooms...”

“Before collapsing?” Nyko is skeptical. “You’re lucky you made it as far as you did.”

“It made me look weak.” Lexa shifts, adjusting her grip until her fingertips and the edges of her palms hold the railing. Clarke scowls and decides if she falls, she is Nyko’s problem.

“Weak? You survived being shot, a large dose of poison we can’t identify -- that makes you weak ?”

“Not everyone thinks like a healer. They see an injury, they think about what caused it and why. Not how I recovered.”

“Find a way to make them think about it.”

Lexa stills, brows drawn together in thought. “You mean,” she says slowly, “I should find a way to put the healing on display, rather than the hurt?”

Nyko shrugs impatiently. “I mean you should do whatever it takes to keep the ambassadors in line and to keep yourself alive. I’ve put too much work into you to see you deposed or dead.”

That makes two of us, Clarke thinks as he stalks off, shoulders rigid with concern.

She watches Lexa out of the corner of her eye. The Commander is lost in thought where she remains, perched on the balcony railing. Clarke will go back to her own work once both of Lexa’s feet are on the ground.

Except the other girl is in no hurry to move along, her frown growing deeper as she tilts her head
back and contemplates the sky above her head. She doesn’t seem to notice the incremental movement of her hands as she does it, the way her palms are slowly slipping off the surface of the railing.

She has to notice, Clarke tells herself, her own hands coming to a halt in their busywork. Lexa’s reflexes are too good to be caught unawares like that. She’ll catch herself.

... any second, now.

Clarke actually finds herself holding her breath, forgetting her task, forgetting subterfuge as she silently panics. Lexa won’t catch her, she’s too absorbed in whatever thoughts have her unknowingly balanced on the edge of an abyss. But what is Clarke supposed to do? Run and get someone? Walk over and grab her?

She’s dithering between her choices she sees Lexa’s hands slide completely off, the her body dipping to gravity’s inexorable pull.

The breath freezes in Clarke’s lungs. She pushes forward without thinking and the tops of her thighs meet the edge of the table with such force she bruises there for days after. Her hands scramble at the tabletop as if she could actually lean across the intervening space and catch Lexa before she falls, neatly-folded linens pushed off onto the floor. Lexa is --

Lexa is fine. Initial sway of her weight aside, Lexa is still sitting on the railing because her booted legs are discretely entwined with the railing supports. She was never in any danger. Clarke was too fixated to notice.

Clarke feels the drop in her stomach even before she raises her eyes to Lexa’s face.

Any doubt that Lexa noticed -- that she didn’t do this deliberately -- vanishes at the Commander’s slow-growing smirk.

Clarke shoves everything back onto the table where it belongs, working with a speed and efficiency that would make Nyko proud. She grabs a few linens for herself, because that’s why she was over here in the first place, there are beds to be made, and that’s the only reason. She doesn’t look at Lexa as she goes straight back to her work.
But she does have to cross in front of her to get back to the main area.

“I see,” she hears Lexa say, quiet and thoughtful, pitched just loud enough for Clarke to hear as she passes by.

Clarke straightens her spine and walks faster.

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The seasons are changing.

She’d been vaguely aware of the nights growing colder when she was huddled in her shallow cave in the forest. But so much had happened since then -- she’d gotten distracted, and she wasn’t living so completely exposed to the elements any longer.

When autumn truly settles into Polis, though, she feels it. The cold seeps into the seams of the ancient tower, drafts blasting through the open windows and chasing away any warmth accrued by the press of bodies inside. Waking up in the morning is so much harder, even after the apprentices spent a day lugging metal braziers out from storage and anchoring them at crucial points in the dormitory, surrounding each with treated bags of heavy sand to prevent the spread of fire. Washing in the steam rooms is more appreciated than ever, but it’s fifteen minutes of blissful warmth followed by a whole morning of cold, wet hair lying along her neck.

Going with Chanti to the clothing dispensary is what really brings it home for Clarke. She’s only changed her clothes when she grew out of them. The Ark’s climate controls weren’t always consistent. Depending on the point in their rotation around Earth certain stations could be noticeably chillier, even uncomfortably warm, but it stayed within an expected range. And with the population boom of the last generation, no one had extra clothing to spare. You made do with what you had. The extra layers are heavy and constricting for the first few days, and she feels like a picture from one of the old Earth books of a kitten tangled up in string.

Then, one day, it rains.

It comes up unexpectedly in the middle of an afternoon in the orchards, when the sunshine is falling
in precise shafts that remind her of the Observation Deck. The healer apprentices spend most of their
days out in the orchards in the spring and fall, Hern tells her. The harvest is bigger, and the dangers
of the more extreme seasons -- spoilage and infection in summer, exposure in winter -- don’t keep the
infirmary as busy. Plus it’s warmer out in the sun. Clarke prefers it, especially now that Nyko isn’t as
concerned about monitoring her. If Hern stays by her elbow most of the time, it’s because he wants
her to watch Sanga’s impression of a recent patient, or admire Versi’s suture technique, or listen to
the latest fascination of his own bright and buzzing brain.

The rain comes when the wind picks up. The breeze grows colder and sharper, carrying a sweet
scent behind the chill. The others start gathering their things immediately. Clarke follows their
example, then follows their escape back down the sloping hills. They’re near the tower when the
water starts falling from the sky.

It’s...

... indescribable.

She’s seen films and pictures, even holos. Nothing prepared her. Not even Finn pushing her into the
water. That was a blissful (if unwanted) relief after days of thirst and dirt and sweat. And it was
weird, being half-submerged in a resource so precious on the Ark. This is a few drops slipping into
her scalp, a cold tickle of warning, and then it’s everywhere. The sky opens up and the rain falls in a
rush, a sound almost like the waves she’s heard in recorded oceans. She lifts her head to watch it
come down and blinks away the vertigo, chokes on the water going up her nose. It’s in her eyes, her
mouth, her hair, she even feels it dripping down the back of her neck and leaving slimy trails beneath
her clothes.

... she hates it, actually.

Clarke escapes into the shelter of the tower’s overhang. She’s cold and wet, but at least she’s not
getting soaked. Not like the rest of the apprentices, who have abandoned all pretense and started
chasing each other around the courtyard like children. Nyko’s already there. He takes one look at her
and bites back a smile. Clarke wonders exactly what expression she’s wearing to cause that, but
maybe it’s better she doesn’t know.

“Not too much of this in the Dead Zone, I take it?” he asks.

But he rides with her back up the ancient elevator while the others play, so Clarke can’t hate him.
She changes into something dry and, okay, she’s not warm, but warmer. She rubs at her wet hair until it fluffs up like crazy, doesn’t even care. Or she thinks she doesn’t, until she walks out of the dorms and finds Lexa right outside in the corridor and watching the rest of the apprentices from the open window.

Lexa turns as Clarke comes to a halt, open-mouthed with surprise. The Commander blinks, which probably means she’s just as stunned.

“You’re not with them?” she asks, pointing down to the ground.

Even if Clarke had her voice, what is she supposed to say to that?

“Ah,” Lexa says at Clarke’s look. She clears her throat, shifts as she refolds her arms. “Of course.”

Clarke debates turning back and hiding in the dorms for all of two seconds. But she won’t let Lexa made her run away.

She catches sight of the world outside the window, and forgets why she wanted to go anywhere.

Rain is really beautiful, she decides, when you’re not caught in it. It’s like a soft grey veil falling over the world, except it makes all the green of the trees deeper and the blue horizon beyond richer. The rain itself shifts and ripples with the wind. Every now and then light glints off the falling water, and the grey veil turns silver. It’s nothing like she saw on old films, which makes sense, that rain was probably fake. This looks alive. It even sounds it -- the shhh, shhh, shhh as it falls like the breathing of a sleeping beast.

It creates a pocket of space high up in the tower, the sense of being enclosed in on all sides. The barrier of clouds overhead, the curtain of rain surrounding -- it eases something in her she hadn’t realized was uneasy. For the first time since she stepped out of the dropship, Clarke can look up into the sky without the irrational fear the ground might upend and tilt her back into the void of space.

“I see you’re not used to it.” The sound of Lexa’s voice brings her back to earth. Clarke hadn’t realized how close she’d moved to the Commander -- right up to and then past her, to sit on the wide stone ledge of the open window. The Commander is still standing with her arms folded, eyes on the apprentices below as they jump into puddles and splash each other with mud. “But the first rain of the season is seen as something to celebrate. It’s a sign the world is recovering, from... a long sickness.”
Clarke wonders what kinds of stories these people tell about the bombs, about the recovery after the devastation. What kinds of monsters lurk in the subconscious of a people who survived a nuclear holocaust?

She shivers and rubs her arms. Lexa watches her do it.

“It will grow colder than this,” the other girl says. “Much colder. I suppose you’re not used to that, either.” She shuts her mouth abruptly, line of her jaw going rigid as if from the effort of keeping words back. She swallows before saying: “You will weather it better here than out in the woods.”

Turns out Clarke hasn’t lost all her anger, because that stirs at the embers among the ashes of her old despair. Clarke turns more fully away. She hears Lexa sigh.

“It’s not just the cold,” she says softly. “The Mountain Men increase their efforts in winter. They use the threat of exposure and the lack of resources in their favor. They unleash the fog when villages are at the end of their winter stores and need to forage. Or the ripas when the snows prevent my people from escaping to safety.”

Clarke continues to be unsure what that word means when applied to the Mountain -- and is Lexa saying that the same fog that chased her away from Wells and Finn comes from there, too? -- but she doesn’t have to see the other girl’s face to know the seriousness of the threat. She sneaks a look anyway.

Lexa’s eyes are unfocused now, distant. Her gaze is directed down to the ground, but it’s clear she sees something else. “I hate winter,” she says. The unexpected passion in her voice makes Clarke flinch.

It draws Lexa’s attention she she seems almost -- embarrassed? She shifts her weight and looks down at the floor for a moment before raising her eyes to Clarke’s. “There is something about your silence which causes others to speak more than they should, I think.”

Clarke can’t keep her shoulders from hunching defensively.

“No, I know it’s not on purpose,” Lexa says. “It’s a useful tactic. I will have to remember it for my own use.” Her lips part and she hesitates before adding: “I won’t apologize for bringing you here. You wouldn’t have lasted much longer on your own, and I -- I have a duty to protect my people.
Even those who don’t know who I am,” she adds with an edge of humor. “I can’t apologize for that.”

*You didn’t have to bring me so far*, Clarke can’t say in return. *You could have left me closer to my people, close enough to have a chance at being with them when you… And you had reasons beyond my safety. We both know that.*

... what would change if she *could* communicate all of that, though? Lexa made her decisions and saw them through. It’s something she probably does every other hour of the day: evaluate a situation, pick a course of action, move on to whatever crisis needs her attention next. Clarke had seen the Council hand down decrees in much the same way, prioritizing efficiency over understanding as they tried to address the concerns of the thousands aboard the Ark. “We can’t anticipate every single consequence,” Abby had explained to Clarke when a Council edict had resulting in schoolmates ignoring her, trying to hurt Clarke the way Abby had hurt their parents. “The best we can hope for it to learn from our mistakes.”

Lexa rules over thousands upon thousands more, and she does it alone.

It doesn’t make it okay. But it does make it easier to meet for Clarke to meet Lexa’s eyes and give her a small nod of understanding.

Lexa’s shoulders relax infinitesimally -- Clarke’s not sure she’s even aware she did it. She doesn’t smile back at Clarke but her expression lightens as she draws a deep breath.

Then something flickers across her face and before Clarke can process it Lexa is jumping up to stand on the window ledge and turning to lean back into the open air.

Clarke’s heart pounds so hard she can feel it in her *fingers*, and she reaches to grab onto the other girl with a quickness that leaves her startled.

But Lexa is fine -- *again*. There are wide metal loops protruding from the top edges of the window opening, sunk deep into the cement. They were probably once used to secure panes of heavy glass that were long since blown out in the explosions. Lexa’s holding onto them as she arches back, face turned up into the rain.

Clarke is standing with both hands gripping each of Lexa’s legs above her knees. She’s not in immediate danger of falling, but that doesn’t mean it’s *safe*. Clarke tugs at her.
Lexa ducks her head back inside the window. Her face is wet, and the torchlight picks up drops scattered throughout her braids. Her lips twist with amusement. “Still worrying about me?”

Clarke feels her face heat, but she tightens her grip.

“Hmm.” Lexa is definitely smug. “See, I knew you belonged with Nyko. You think like a healer.”

Clarke will figure out how to pay her back for this. Later. Once she gets down.

“You shouldn’t, though,” Lexa says. “I’ve lived in this tower since I was young, I know all its secrets. This is the last place I’d be in danger.” She tilts her head. “Did you taste it?”

Clarke stares at her.

“I heard you don’t drink the water at meals.” She leans back again, mouth open like a little kid. When she straightens she has to use one hand to brush water out of her eyes. “This is different, you’d like it.”

She’s right, Clarke doesn’t drink the water they provide in the mess areas. It’s groundwater tasting of minerals and metal. It’s not awful, but after years of the recycled, stale water of the Ark the heavy flavors make her gag. She drinks a light brown beverage made from boiling the water together with barley seeds to yield something richer and slightly sweet instead. She’s hardly the only one, though, so why would Lexa -- who would have told -- does she think Clarke’s going to hop up and lean out for a taste herself? Because that’s not happening.

Lexa takes one hand out of the metal loops. Clarke’s hands are going to cramp from holding onto her if she keeps this up. Lexa stretches it out into the open air, cupping her palm to catch the rain. She turns back, looks down at Clarke’s hands. Clarke forces her fingers to unknit from the fabric of the Commander’s clothes so than she can step back down to the floor.

“Here,” she says, holding out the handful of rainwater.

Clarke is too dumbfounded to react as Lexa raises her hand to Clarke’s mouth. She grabs the Commander’s wrist at the last second in an attempt to regain some control over the situation, warm
skin and corded muscle beneath her fingertips. But the water slips past her lips and she swallows without thinking.

It tastes like... like cold and brightness together, and when she closes her eyes she can picture the sun shining on mountain ice. There’s something beneath the sweetness, an electric buzz that sends goosebumps racing up her arms. *Ozone,* she realizes, opening her eyes to smile at Lexa in genuine wonder.

Lexa doesn’t smile back. Her eyes are a little wide and surprised. As if she didn’t until this minute realize how close they are, the intimacy of her chilled fingers against Clarke’s mouth. Clarke releases her wrist with a jerk and steps back, the two of them staring at each other.

There’s a noise down the corridor and Clarke jumps, turning to look. The rest of the apprentices have finally found their way up the tower, are now laughing and covered in mud as they call out to her.

When she turns back Lexa is gone.

*(next chapter)*

"Everyone thinks she has wood witch magic," Aden says, sounding already defeated as he dodges Lexa's attacks. "They say she's the reason you survived."

Lexa traps him neatly between the tree trunk and her staff, waiting for him to drop his weapon in surrender. "Do they," she said dryly. Her eyes drift over to where Clarke is still watching, become thoughtful. "Do they?"
I have no housekeeping notes for this chapter, except if you have a Medical Person in your life it's possible dinner conversations will include things like ruptured spleens. You've been warned.

(Oh, wait: Clarke's drinking barley tea, which is excellent.)

(And: this goddamn year. My darlings, stay safe.)
“The nightbloods are training on the hillside today,” Nyko tells the apprentices as they shuffle in, most of them still bleary-eyed and yawning. “Do I have a volunteer?”

There’s a vague grumble that comes from the apprentices as a response. Clarke casts a look at the wide windows and can’t blame them. Outside has become dark and grey, the wind whipping colder and colder as the nights lengthen.

“Rabar?” Nyko asks, turning to an apprentice with wild brown curls. She makes a face.

“I went to the training area three weeks ago,” she whines. “It’s someone else’s turn.”

“Everyone has taken a turn, so it’s time to start again.”

“Not her.” Rabar points at Clarke, who pauses in the middle of washing her hands. “Send the witch.”

Clarke really doesn’t mind the epithet. Most of the time it’s a joke, with a wink or a raised eyebrow. No one seems scared of her. No one among the apprentices, at least.

Nyko turns. Clarke tries to keep her expression blank as he scrutinizes.

Finally he nods. “Here,” he tosses her the prepared pack of basic medical supplies. “She’s right. It’s your turn.”

The both know why he hasn’t sent her before. The training plateau is high up in the hills. Outside the city walls.
Clarke’s heart pounds as she cradles the pack close to her chest. Hern is whispering in her ear: can she get to the plateau on her own? Does she remember him pointing it out, the direction she has to travel out of the city? She nods at each question until he lets her go with a pat on the back.

Her heart continues to thud in her ears as she rides the elevator down to the ground, even as she makes her way through the twisting streets of the city. She gets turned around a few times, but every time someone spots the green circles on her temple and points her back in the right direction. The same glances get her through the break in the city walls as the guards let her pass out of the city.

And like that, she’s escaped.

~*~

She’s not going anywhere, of course. She has nowhere to go.

But it’s nice to feel the fetters of constant watchful eyes and awareness fall away, letting her shoulders slump with release. If she concentrates, walking up the well-worn path that starts at the base of the hills, she can almost pretend she has nowhere to go, no one to be, that she is finally on the ground and truly free. For the first time in her life.

The wind picks up, and she walks faster to keep herself warm.

There’s a ring of warriors standing guard at the training area, and they hold her back from entering until Lexa spots her and waves her through. She sits at the far end of the clearing with the children at her feet. Her blade is drawn and lying naked in her lap. As Clarke approaches Lexa is pointing to designs on the hilt, notches on the blade, as the children lean in close and drink in her words.

“Now that our healer is here,” Lexa says, rising to her feet with her sword in hand, “you may pair off for sparring.”

She throws Clarke a warm look but busies herself with helping the nightbloods find their partners, assembling them in a ragged line so that one child faces another. Clarke tucks herself out of the way to sit on an outcropping of rock. That allows her to keep an eye on the group without getting in their way.
Her presence is pretty much a precautionary measure. The nightbloods are disciplined, and Clarke doesn’t see any of them goofing off or fooling around with their weapons even when Lexa or another warrior isn’t with them. Their young faces are very serious as they go through the demonstrated drills, step by step. Lexa calls out times -- quarter, half, full, double -- and they follow through with surety, hands steady and eyes focused.

It’s the same level of concentration that surprised her watching the children at the river (Baya, Jeffer, Thesda, the others, Clarke hopes they’re all warm for the oncoming winter) but more, somehow. Even when those kids almost frightened Clarke with their skill, she could see they were playing. The nightbloods are not. As Lexa calls out faster and faster times their weapons move so quickly they almost blur before Clarke’s eyes.

What are they training for with such unsmiling determination? If Lexa became Commander because she’s a nightblood, does that mean she has generals or warriors out there, pledged to her, who once trained like this with her? Nyko said Lexa had been chosen -- chosen how?

These are the questions that chase each other around and around in her head, because really, there’s nothing else for her to do. She goes over the supplies in the pack Nyko gave her: basic first aid stuff, all sanitized and organized. She makes a mental note to to show him it’s low on gauze wrappings. Otherwise? She resigns herself to huddling on her rock, cold and a little bored, and develops a new appreciation for the warmth and sheer amount of stuff to do in the infirmary.

Lexa’s having fun, Clarke notes with a trace of sourness. This is the most animated Clarke has ever seen her. Lexa comes dangerously close to smiling once or twice. Her cheeks and the tops of her ears are red from the cold, but Clarke doubts she’s even registers it. She’s too absorbed in the nightbloods. Lexa has seemingly infinite patience with them, correcting their form again and again, taking the time to talk through a particular grip technique and its importance. Sometimes she takes the place of a nightblood to spar with their partner, and she takes small hits to the ankles and hands without flinching. She congratulates them for it. The only time Clarke sees her come close to losing her temper is when a nightblood lets her guard drop early and Lexa has to correct the path of her blow at the last minute to keep it from connecting with the little girl’s skull. That gets a rise from Lexa, and she spends the next minute scolding in such a harsh tone of voice the girl ends up on the edge of tears.

Lexa stops as soon as she sees this, bends close to whisper in the nightblood’s ear. The little girl nods, her straight black hair bobbing, and Lexa straightens with a relieved look.

“Break,” she calls out, and immediately the remaining children freeze in place before stepping back from their opponents. “Lunch.”

The children all dive for the pile of wrapped packs Clarke now notices in a corner of the training
area. Lexa clears her throat loudly and they all halt before turning back to pick up their abandoned weapons and hand them to the adult warriors, looking sheepish.

They quickly settle in a group with their packed lunches, normal kids again in the blink of an eye. Clarke has time to wonder if Nyko forgot to instruct her to collect one before leaving, or if he really thought she was going to run off and didn’t bother, just before Lexa walks over and offers half of her own. Clarke looks down at the food and considers making a good show of it, but then her stomach rumbles.

Lexa doesn’t move away after, instead leaning back against the rocks embedded into the hillside as they eat in silence. Clarke sneaks a look at her, catches Lexa with her head tipped back and her eyes closed as she turns her face up to the spare autumn sunlight.

*She really is having fun out here,* she thinks, and then her attention switches to someone calling out *Heda.*

It’s the robed and tattooed man she met in the infirmary: Titus. She can already see his frustration in his speed as he strides over to them.

“What trouble?” he demands. “I expected them back for their lesson an hour past.”

“No trouble, Titus. We started a little later than usual -- my fault,” Lexa says smoothly.

Clarke ducks her head down and concentrates on her food, tries not to think of how many times she got lost on streets of Polis.

“No matter, I wanted the chance to speak with you.” His eyes dart briefly to Clarke, and he dismisses her presence with the same speed. “This coming assembly. Are you sure you’re wise to hold it?”

“The ambassadors called for a hearing. I would be remiss in my duties if I refused to hear their concerns.”

Titus makes an impatient noise. “You are not required to endure their insults and, and insinuations --”
“Titus,” Lexa interrupts. “They’re concerned. They have every right.”

“They want to force the next conclave.”

“That, too,” she says around a mouthful of food. “It won’t come to that.”

“Heda, how can you be sure?”

Clarke looks up at him. For the first time his expression makes her wonder what he feels for Lexa as a person, not as the vessel for whatever mystical forces he imagines himself responsible for.

“Nyko had a suggestion earlier. My plan is to distract them from their fear of the Mountain, to make them focus on something new. Something that will reinforce their faith in me, and the power of the Commander.”

“An excellent plan, Heda,” Titus deadpans. “And how will you execute it?”

“I don’t need to share the details with you, Titus. You will understand when you see it in action.” Lexa finishes her food, dusting off her hands as if to signal the conversation is also finished. “You should hurry back to the tower if you want to make the best use of daylight.”

Titus glowers, but sighs and sweeps over to the nightbloods, robes fluttering.

Clarke turns her eyes on Lexa, waiting until she has the other girl’s attention before she tilts her head and raises her eyebrows. A plan, huh?

“Perhaps I am working out the details,” Lexa admits. She turns her head, raising her voice to call out: “Aden! You will stay here with me.”

Even across the clearing Clarke can hear the boy’s groan.

She understands why a moment later, when Lexa tosses him a quarterstaff and jumps right into sparring. This isn’t like before, with the younger children -- she’s not demonstrating or teaching,
she’s testing him. Even Clarke can tell that Lexa is holding back, but Aden is struggling and panting within minutes. At times Lexa will land a hit, or draw back before a crucial blow to the throat or head. Then she calls their fight to a halt as she walks Aden back through his mistake, pointing out how he misused his stance, or the terrain, or his focus. As soon as that’s finished she launches into the next flurry of blows, and Aden does his best to keep up.

“When I’m the Commander,” Aden finds the breath to say, after the fifth or sixth break, “I will outlaw staves.”

Clarke thinks Lexa comes close to smiling again. “You can’t outlaw something because you’re bad at it.”

“Yes I can,” Aden grumbles.

Lexa gives a single shout of laughter, a hah that rings out against the vault of grey sky, the reaching branches of the naked trees surrounding them. Clarke watches as she whirls, parrying Aden’s attempts to pin her. Each meeting of their staffs echoes in the otherwise empty clearing.

“You can do almost anything you wish,” Lexa says. She isn't even winded. Clarke starts rooting for Aden. “But you have to place the needs of your people above your own. The staff is a popular weapon, especially among those who are not warriors.” She dodges a blow, eyes alight with good humor. “Imagine if the Commander was defeated by a farmer with a big stick and a minute’s worth of luck.”

Aden’s scowl deepens. “Then I’ll carry a talisman for protection. It will steal their luck for me.” Clarke, watching his face, sees the moment he lunges for a risk, getting in under Lexa’s guard and making her fight him off as she takes a step back, and then two.

“Commanders cannot rely on luck,” Lexa says. She has the upper hand, but Aden is making her work for it just that little bit more. “And magic doesn’t exist.”

“You have a wood witch.”

“Aden,” with a glance at Clarke sitting on her rock, “you don’t really think she’s... you’re too old for such stories.”
“But everyone says she is.” Aden sounds crestfallen. “She saved you in the forest, didn’t she?”

“You --” Lexa stumbles, surprised, but then returns in force. Her blows are quicker, her movements are cleaner. It puts Aden back on his heels as he struggles to keep up. “You aren’t supposed to know about that. No one should.”

“I don’t think everyone does.” Aden’s growing sloppier, the new pace wearing at him. “But Gustus told Titus about it. Titus is loud when he’s angry.”

“I see.” Lexa is grim as she presses forward. “What else?”

“She -- she saved you after the attack from the Mountain,” Aden struggles to say between blows.

“Nyko saved me. That’s medicine, not magic.” Lexa drives him harder, parrying and striking without pause. The kid can do little besides defend himself, falling back and back until he’s almost exited the clearing and gone into the surrounding trees. “Weak thinking does not serve a Commander.”

“It’s not only me. Everyone thinks she has wood witch magic,” Aden says, sounding already defeated as he dodges Lexa’s attacks. “They say she’s the reason you survived.”

Lexa traps him neatly between a tree trunk and her staff, waiting for him to drop his weapon and surrender. “Do they,” she says drily. Her eyes drift to where Clarke is still watching, become thoughtful. “Do they?”

Clarke shrugs. It’s true that it goes beyond the nickname -- sometimes people whisper and watch as she passes, she’s heard snatches of questions and conversations that make her out to be more than just another apprentice. She ignores it, mostly, and her friends are too protective to let any of it actually touch her.

“Is it really only stories?” Aden asks wistfully. Clarke takes one look at him, his face slightly round with baby fat, and glares at Lexa.

*He’s a kid,* she tries to tell Lexa with her eyebrows. *Let him have magic for a little while longer.*
Some of that must come through, because Lexa’s lips quirk. “Maybe,” she says, picking up Aden’s dropped staff. “Maybe... maybe she does have a little magic. Of a sort.”

Clarke has time to wonder what the hell Lexa means by *that* when Aden’s face breaks into a dazzling smile. “Really?” he breathes. “When I’m Commander, can I have a wood witch, too?”

“When you are Commander,” Lexa says, making it sound more of a supposition than a certainty, but only just. “You’ll have to capture your own, though, this one belongs to me.”

Clarke falls for it, of course, going rigid with indignation before she catches the sly look from the other girl. Clarke rolls her eyes, forcing herself to slump. Lexa bites back a grin as she ruffles Aden’s hair.

“Good work today,” she says. “Run and wash up before the evening meal.”

He bows and exits with visible relief, flanked by a few guards as he departs the clearing. Lexa watches him go, and Clarke watches her.


She looks over her shoulder at Clarke. Clarke isn’t sure what she wants in response, and so keeps her face carefully blank.

“He’s the best of them, though. The brightest at lessons, and staff work aside unmatched in combat. And he’s a natural leader, the others look to him and follow. He’ll be the one to ascend, I know it.”

Clarke wonders that Lexa should look so sad when she says that. Shouldn’t she be proud to see her favorite pupil take the prize? Why does she look like the idea pains her, instead?

“It’s not easy to be the one left standing,” Lexa says softly. “I don’t see why I shouldn’t favor him now, when I’m *here* to --” She breaks off with a huff, looks down before saying; “You are far too easy to talk to, sometimes.”

*I wish*, Clarke thinks, looking at her downturned face. *I wish...* She doesn’t know how to finish the
“You also did good work today, thank you.” Lexa raises her head, her expression smooth and sure once more. “You will be escorted back. It should be a quicker journey this way,” with a ghost of her former teasing.

Clarke rises to her feet, makes it three steps when she realizes Lexa is staying in place. She turns with a questioning look.

Lexa shakes her head. “I’m staying here a while longer,” she says as she looks about the training area. “I want some time to think.”

Clarke leaves her like that, alone in the clearing except for the cold wind and the lengthening shadows as the sun fades weakly from the sky.

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She gets no warning at all.

The next day Clarke is halfway to the infirmary with Hern, the two of them returning from the afternoon meal and still swallowing down the taste of their food. Someone reaches out and touches her shoulder. Clarke turns to find a young woman, almost head and shoulders taller than she is, regarding her with cool and dispassionate eyes.

Right away Clarke knows two things. One, she’s never seen this person before. She would remember. Two, whoever she is, she’s important.

It’s not only the quality of her clothing, the dark richness of the color and the close cut which tells Clarke it’s a custom fit. It isn’t even the sheathes displayed openly on her forearms, or the hilts of the slender knives below her elbows, even though the only other people to openly carry weapons in the tower are guards. Mostly it’s the design in deep ochre that spiderwebs across the girl’s left cheek, a design which Clarke has only ever seen one other person wear, though not with paint.
“Come with me,” the young woman says. She speaks like someone with no conception of being disobeyed.

Clarke looks back at Hern, who’s as surprised as she is. He nods at her questioning look. “She’s a handmaiden,” he tells Clarke in a low voice. “Do as she says.”

The handmaiden doesn’t give her name. She leads Clarke down unfamiliar hallways and flights of stairs, eventually taking her to a section of the tower with higher ceilings and more open spaces than the common areas. There’s a sense of grandeur here, even with the walls still stained with the smoke of the ancient fires that must have ravaged through, back when the world ended.

The people gathered in this section of the tower are different, too. She catches snippets of conversations conducted in wholly new languages, or maybe a dialect she isn’t familiar with. She sees more warriors than usual, sporting tattoos and leathers. But these seem different from the guards around the tower -- the construction of their armor is more complicated, or is decorated with more furs and medallions, and they hold their heads higher. Some of them have an air that comes dangerously close to arrogance.

All of them make way for the handmaiden as soon as they see her approach. A few of them even nod their heads in deference as she passes. If she notices, she doesn’t give any sign of it. A few of them eye Clarke in curiosity as well.

Clarke ducks her head down and makes sure to never be more than a step or two behind her escort.

The handmaiden leads her beyond these crowds and deeper into the tower, past so many checkpoints where guards stand sentry Clarke begins to feel uneasy. Sure, they let Clarke through as soon as they see who’s accompanying her, but how is she supposed to find her way out again? Why is this part of the tower such a labyrinth, with enough twists and turns and barred doors to make her dizzy? Why haven’t the walls been knocked down to clear the space, like she’s seen elsewhere?

She gets an itch of insight when she spots a few of the nightbloods racing through the hallways, laughing and carefree, without reserve she’s seen them wear like an extra layer of clothing. A few more sets of guarded doors and the itch grows more persistent. Especially when they enter a room with wide, arching windows that let in so much sunlight it leaves Clarke blinking away the brightness. There’s a bed against the far wall, elaborately carved wood at the base and rising above the head, heaped with more furs than she’s seen in once place since... since...
Oh, no, Clarke thinks. There’s definitely been a mistake made somewhere.

The handmaiden is unfazed by the sudden dragging of Clarke’s feet, simply reaches out to grab her elbow and haul Clarke where she wants her. Which is, thankfully, nowhere near the bed. Instead she leads Clarke behind a partition of yet more carved wood to an area of the room where several other handmaidens -- all armed, all wearing the same design on their faces -- and a tub full of steaming water are waiting.

Up until she sees the bathtub, Clarke is fully prepared to throw down and make it clear that whatever nonsense is happening isn’t about to happen to her. But that tub -- she’s always wondered what it felt like to climb into one of those. What Ark kid hasn't after watching countless old movies where the characters did so with blissful looks on their faces. Clarke makes a split-second decision before she starts shucking off her clothes: this is Lexa’s problem, it can be her misunderstanding to clear up.

It takes a little maneuvering to get into the bath, and the handmaidens have to grab at her shoulders and elbows to keep her from slipping on the polished metal tub. But once she’s settled in it’s so good. The initial sting of heat dissipates into gorgeous, slow-burning lassitude throughout her entire body, settling deep into muscles she didn’t even realize were aching. The hot water feels like an actual pressure against her lungs, expelling all air in one long breath as she settles back against the edge of the tub. Whatever they’ve added to the bathwater makes it milky and opaque, and it feels silky-slick when she rubs her fingertips together. It smells nice, too. Some kind of herbal ingredient: spicy, but not too medicinal. She can scootch down until the water covers her from toes to collarbones and, yeah, she’s staying in here forever.

The handmaidens have other ideas. They coax her head back until it’s resting against the edge of the tub. Another girl brings a pitcher of steaming water. They must be heating it somewhere separately, and Clarke wonders if it’s pumped directly into the room or if someone has the unenviable task of carrying it up to the top of the tower. This they pour the fresh water over her head, hands at her hairline to keep it from running into her eyes, and the excess is neatly caught in a basin beneath. One of them massages something into her scalp -- it lathers, unlike the stuff they use in the showers -- and Clarke would moan if she could.

She lets herself drift into the center of that moment until it feels like an eternity: swallowed up in steaming water, soothed by clever fingers. After they’ve rinsed her hair clean and dried it lightly one of the handmaidens settles in a chair behind Clarke and starts on, well, Clarke can’t see it for herself, but it feels like one of those elaborately braided hairstyles she’s seen on Lexa. Every now and again another handmaiden will check the temperature of the water and ask if Clarke wants it freshened. If she nods they remove a few pitchers of cooled bathwater to who knows where, and replenish the tub with scalding additions.
They’re *lucky* Clarke can’t talk. If she told the other apprentices about this set-up, there’d be a riot.

“Is she ready?” Lexa asks from the corner of the room.

Clarke starts so violently she nearly slips below water level. Boundaries were *important* on the Ark - - policies had been established early by psychological advisors recommending that, as cramped and limited as their space was, inhabitants should invest twice as much of their emotional and mental energy in respecting both their own personal bubble of space and that of others. She never questioned it, growing up, and kids as young as four were allowed to request “privacy” at school (limited if blissful time in a darkened space, empty of anyone but themselves) whenever they felt the walls begin to cave in on them. It’d taken a while for Clarke to adjust to the openness of the ground, the sheer amount of *room* -- plus the easily-shared space and casual nakedness that came with it. Grounders don’t seem to have *any* boundaries, but Clarke has gotten used to it, mostly.

Or she thought she had, because right now she’d give anything to be able to duck into the bathwater and disappear.

Lexa doesn’t notice her discomfort. She isn’t even speaking to Clarke -- the Commander’s gaze goes over her head to the handmaiden who led Clarke to this room. She’s been stationed in the corner ever since, one hand resting on the hilt of her knife.

Lexa’s now in that same corner. Clarke can see the open door of her rooms beyond, and the guards as their arms reach inside to close them. Her thudding heart slows as realizes Lexa only arrived seconds ago.

“Almost ready,” the handmaiden answers. “She’s in no hurry to get out.”

“Is that so.” Lexa shifts her gaze, and Clarke sinks down until the water laps at her chin. The handmaiden behind her has to hold her hair up to keep it dry. It’s only out of consideration for her handiwork -- and a vague instinct to not give Lexa the satisfaction -- that keeps Clarke from dunking under as Lexa approaches. The water is still thankfully opaque.

Clarke’s hands are curled over the edges of the tub to keep her from slipping, and Lexa gently pries her fingers loose. Clarke’s worried for a second that Lexa wants to pull her up, but the Commander is only interested in inspecting Clarke’s fingertips.

She smiles slightly at the pruned skin there, wags her own finger back at Clarke. “You might grow
scales if you stay in there any longer.” She only chuckles at Clarke’s glare in response.

... okay. Fine. Now that she knows where Lexa’s bed is, she can always leave something gross in it.

“Commander,” the head handmaiden (Clarke is guessing) says, appearing at her shoulder. “Perhaps while she finishes preparing I could fix your braids.”

“My braids are fine, Jollett.”

But Lexa allows herself to be led away to the other side of the partition, and Clarke is grateful. The other handmaidens help her out of the tub, and if they exchange knowing smiles at Clarke’s sudden eagerness to dry off and dress, well.

(She doesn’t let herself pause to think about how she hasn’t, even for a second, felt herself to be really worried about what’s happening. First she thought it was a mix-up she trusted Lexa to fix. Now that it’s clear this is a situation Lexa designed, she still isn’t concerned about where it’s going. Curious. But not concerned.

Not yet, anyway.)

The clothing they bring her is unlike anything available to her in the tower. She has a sneaking suspicion it’s new. The fabric is smooth, the weave tight, the color crisp. They bring out two pieces: a skirt to wrap around her hips, and a top with sleeves long enough to cover her hands but ending high on her waist to expose a thin strip of pale stomach. It’s all a beautiful deep blue, like the sky just before the sunlight completely disappears and leeches all color with it. Beautifully soft, too, and it stretches with her enough to be comfortable. There are boots made of yielding leather, not cracked and worn like the ones she’s worn every day since arriving. As the final piece they place a matching length of fabric across her head and shoulders, fussing with the drape and pinning it where needed until they’re satisfied with the effect.

They lead her back out to the main area where Lexa is letting Jollet draw dark lines right up against the edges of her eyes. Her head is tilted back, neck exposed, in order to allow for the candlelight to best reach her face. Jollett leans over her with complete assurance. The two of them exchanging quiet words as she works. Clarke is struck by how relaxed Lexa is; not preening, like she’d been with her admirers in the infirmary, and not happy, the way she was with the nightbloods. But loose-limbed and easy, looking for the first time since Clarke has met her like a girl without the weight of the world on her shoulders.
She trusts these handmaidens completely. She must trust them — considering the nearness of Jollett’s hands to her neck and eyes — with her life.

They must be pledged to protect her. Clarke guessed that when she glimpsed Jollett’s knives. She wishes she knew what safeguard is in place to make Lexa so certain those weapons would never be turned on her.

Clarke thinks of the layers and layers of protection of this place — the rigid protocols of face paint and identification rituals, the guards, the sectioning off of the tower floors, "this is the last place I’d be in danger" — and wonders if it’s all for Lexa.

Wonders, if it is, what would happen should they ever discover Clarke’s true origins, and how close she was allowed to get to their Commander.

“Do you like it?” Lexa asks, raising her head.

Clarke twirls. She can’t help it, it’s fun seeing the hem fly out in a perfect circle around her ankles. She catches Lexa’s eyes afterward and slowly raises her shoulders, lets them fall. She pantomimes confusion, using her hands to indicate her new outfit.

“Come sit, and I’ll explain.” Lexa rises from the chair so that Clarke can sit instead, Jollett moving away. She waits until Clarke is settled and looking up at her. “You heard Aden earlier.”

She seems to be waiting for a response to that, so Clarke nods. Lexa clears her throat, hooks her hands in front of her — if Clarke didn’t know better, she would say Lexa is almost nervous.

“I believe you also heard Nyko and I, the other day, speaking about the ambassadors,” with a quick, sly look, and Clarke tilts her chin up as if to say, yeah, yeah, you got me. A smile flits across Lexa’s face.

“Sometimes,” she continues slowly, “a leader command not through action but by... suggestion. Sometimes, even powerful warriors can be like children, wanting a story to chase away the shadows.”

She dips her head down, lowering her voice. “You will be that story. You will stand behind me, silent but seen, and remind them of what I am capable of surviving.”
Clarke’s eyebrows shoot up. Lexa can dress it up any way she wants -- she’s dragging Clarke into her assembly to say “look at my wood witch! I captured her fair and square, and now no one can hurt me.” Clarke allows her face to fall into an exaggerated frown. She’s not special. She’s not magic. She and Lexa know that, whatever anyone else thinks.

“It’s not a deception,” Lexa murmurs in response. “We will simply change their focus: from what hurt me, to what healed me.” Her gaze, heavy-lidded, slides down to the floor. “I won’t force you against your will. But I would ask this, not for myself, but for the sake of the Coalition and the Woods Clan itself.” She raises her eyes. “Will you do this for your people?”

Lexa doesn’t know her people. Point of fact, she had them massacred.

... well. Not all of them. Maybe Clarke feels completely alone, maybe she feels like she might never be among old familiar faces again -- but the truth of the matter is, her people are where they’ve always been. Orbiting the Earth.

Clarke failed the rest of the hundred sent to the ground. She wasn’t there for them when... and she failed the people on the Ark, too, the thousands whose lives depend on knowing the Earth is now habitable.

She has debts to repay. Maybe not now but maybe... maybe... it won’t be such a bad thing, to position herself closer to the seat of power. She’s more visible that way, exposed. But it will help her understand these people better, and pass that knowledge on when her people finally come to the ground.

She holds Lexa’s eyes and nods. Lexa doesn’t smile, but contentment spreads across her face almost as if she did.

“Good,” she says.

There’s a small curio cabinet in the corner, salvaged who knows how many years ago. The bright blue paint only remains in the whorls and cracks of the wood. Several spaces are missing their drawers, several drawers their knobs. Lexa reaches for one of the few that are intact and pulls out a circular container and a small brush.

She brings these both back to Clarke, who can now see that the container is made of that old, once-
valued material called *porcelain*, and the brush has a long handle of ivory. The container is covered in a fine layer of dust that Lexa brushes away with her fingertips before twisting off the lid.

It’s more paint. But it’s not a color Clarke has seen on anyone’s face in the tower before -- not black, green, yellow, blue, or grey.

This is gold.

*True* gold. Not the dark goldenrod she’s seen “gold” given to certain paints or chalks, but metallic and glittering. She’s seen it used as shielding on the Ark, but she wonders where this came from, if the Grounders mine for the stuff. There must be actual gold flakes or dust mixed in, that might explain why this is kept in a pot instead of the usual stick form, it must require a softer and more malleable binding agent to hold the solid particles in homogeneous suspension.

Clarke’s so wrapped up in her reasoning it takes her a second to notice the reactions of everyone else in the room.

First it’s Jollett, her face going white and still as she sees what Lexa has in her hands. The other handmaidens follow after, each slowing in their tasks until they come to a complete stop, eyes wide and staring. One of them drops the empty pitcher and basin in her hands and they clatter across the stone floor.

The noise draws Lexa’s attention, but it’s Jollett she turns to face.

“Heda,” the other girl says, hesitant. “Is this wise?”

Lexa straightens. Clarke can’t see her eyes at this angle, but the way she’s holding her head, the set of her jaw -- it all brings back vivid memories of Lexa as Clarke first knew her, the girl who swept her up out of the forest and commanded Gustus to his knees.

Jollett, to her credit, holds the Commander’s gaze without flinching. Even if the line of her mouth wavers a bit.

They stand facing off in this manner for moments that stretch, uncomfortably, until the other handmaidens shift with nervousness. Clarke can feel the mounting energy like the build of electricity in the air before a storm.
She reaches out to touch her fingers lightly to Lexa’s wrist. It breaks the other girl’s focus as she looks back at Clarke. She doesn’t lose the arrogant set to her shoulders, but the much of the tension drains from her body.

“I suppose there’s no reason for anger,” she says to Clarke. “Jollett is only worried for you.”

“For you both,” the handmaiden says, too softly to be heard beyond the three of them.

Finally, Lexa’s expression softens. “She misunderstands. It isn’t -- this is for your protection,” still speaking to Clarke. “There is a risk in putting you before the ambassadors. These are powerful and sometimes unscrupulous people. I would never place you in their company without making it clear that anyone who raises a hand against you will answer to me.”

“Heda.” Even at a whisper, Jollett’s voice is so heavy with regret it has an almost palpable weight. “That did not save the last person who wore that paint.”

Lexa makes no movement in response, but Clarke has the distinct impression of her withdrawal. She keeps her eyes on Clarke. “Commanders have claimed dozens as their own with no incident. Slaves, favorites, concubines. It’s a respected tradition, and it will protect you. I promise.”

Then she finally turns and says to Jollett, the words so stripped of emotion it takes Clarke a moment to register their meaning: “Costia died because I loved her. Not because she was mine.”

Jollett bows incredibly low, almost kneeling, and the other handmaidens echo the gesture. With a last look at Lexa’s face Jollett herds them all from the room. She meets Clarke's gaze as she closes the door behind them, as if in warning.

Lexa dips the brush into the glittering paint. She has to pass the soft bristles against its hardened surface a few times before the pigment begins to cling, as the friction begins to warm and soften it. When she raises the brush again, the hand holding it shakes.

Clarke doesn’t think about it. She puts out her own hand, reaching up to cup the side of Lexa’s face.

Lexa’s eyes widen as they hold hers. They’re already emphasized by the soft outline of kohl Jollett
put there, and now they look almost comically big. Clarke finds she likes them better without the embellishment. Lexa doesn’t need anything more to look beautiful, though Clarke thinks it must help with the sense of occasion.

She takes her hand away from the other girl’s smooth skin, curling her fingers against the urge to rub away the dark lines with her thumb.

Lexa swallows, looking a bit startled. “It was a long time ago,” she says. Clarke doubts that -- Lexa isn’t much older than her, she’s sure. But then she thinks back to her father, how her life feels divided by his death: everything she knows either Before or After, and how everything on the other side of that dividing line feels so very distant from the person she is now.

Lexa takes a steadying breath. “It taught me a very important lesson.” Her eyes linger on the glittering flecks at the end of her brush. “So don’t worry. I would never put you in danger by repeating past mistakes.”

She raises the brush as if to trace a pattern across Clarke’s forehead, hesitates.

“But perhaps,” she says to herself, “I can do a little more to make that clear to others. Close your eyes.”

Clarke does, feels the cool sweep of paint below her right eye and then a smooth steady line up to her temple. Lexa repeats this for the other eye, fussing a little with perfecting her new design before standing back with a sound of satisfaction.

“Wait,” she commands. She puts back the paint and brush. When she returns she picks of a loose length of the fabric the handmaidens arranged around Clarke’s head and shoulders earlier. This Lexa pins so that it falls loosely across Clarke’s nose and mouth.

She takes a moment to examine the finished effect before nodding, satisfied. She picks up a mirror lying on top of the curio cabinet, the glass cracked and pockmarked with age, and holds it up so Clarke can see for herself.

Clarke’s breath catches.

She should have expected Lexa to be good at this. She remembers what it was like, seeing that
painted face emerge silently from the forest, eyes ferocious amid false shadows. Lexa understands symbolism, and ceremony. She has a talent for it. Clarke wouldn’t be in this room right now -- or even in Polis -- if she didn’t.

It’s still strange to see herself like this. The play of her dark clothing and light skin and hair creates a stark contrast, and to eerie effect. She looks like something you’d find hiding in the forest: pale and secretive, shrouded. The cloth draped about her head forces focus to her eyes, and the gold paint there only enhances the sense of the otherworldly. It picks up the glints of gold in her hair like sunlight dappling through trees, makes her eyes look almost bottomless. Even the design -- the careful sweep across her eyelids, the angle point beneath the pupil -- looks less stylized than the usual patterns she sees inside the tower, more like warrior’s paint. It’s like a part of her.

Lexa puts the mirror back, reaches out her hand. “Ready?”

Clarke places her hand in the Commander’s and rises to her feet.

Lexa smiles -- Clarke almost pulls back in surprise to see it. But she does. Nothing like the smile in the infirmary, though. This one is a pleased curl of lips, satisfied and bordering on smug.

That’s what she looks like when she’s about to win a gambit, Clarke thinks as Lexa’s fingers tighten around her own.

Clarke is familiar with very different games: the maneuvers of the Council, the black and white of a checkered board. But she knows the first rule of playing is to watch, and learn.

She lets Lexa lead her out of the room and onto the field of battle.
“The ambassador from (word) speaks,” Lexa says. From her tone, she’s not thrilled by it.

... and that’s it, that’s a word that Clarke has never been able to place in context. She knows the pieces -- “ice” and “gather” -- but she could never understand why the two words together would deserve to be spoken with such vitriol and fear.

Azgeda. It’s a place, then. Or a people.
Lexa stops a few feet before a set of double doors guarded by warriors. She turns and takes Clarke’s hands in her own.

“Don’t be afraid,” she says, intent on Clarke’s face. “The people in that room will be searching for weakness in you. Anything they can exploit and use to their advantage.” She squeezes Clarke’s hands once before releasing them. “Don’t give it to them.”

She turns back, her shoulders straightening and head lifting. Clarke finds herself imitating Lexa’s carriage, smoothing out the fabric of her new clothes before she falls a few steps behind the Commander.

Lexa nods to the warriors, and they reach for the door handles as one.

“Rise for your Commander,” someone bellows as the doors open. Clarke follows Lexa into the room.

It’s a damn throne room.

There’s no other term for it, or any way of avoiding the significance of the... throne on the raised dais facing them, fashioned from twisted wood that gives an air of looming menace. Lexa makes straight for it as Clarke tries not to fall on her face, quickening her stride as they move past an audience seated in a half-circle. Clarke can feel their eyes moving over her, and she keeps hers on the floor.

When Lexa takes her seat -- easy, nonchalant -- she meets Clarke’s eyes before flickering a pointed glance behind her and to her left. Clarke moves into position. She mirrors Titus this way, who stands at Lexa’s right. Titus keeps looking between the two of them with barely-concealed horror.

“Sit,” Lexa orders. Clothes rustle and whispers are exchanged as her audience complies.
It’s a little easier, feeling sheltered in the metaphorical shadow of power, for Clarke to hold her head up high. She wishes she could see Lexa better -- at this angle she only gets the sharp jut of her chin and the side of her nose. She switches her gaze to the people before them instead.

They’re all older. Adults. A few of them wear warriors’ gear but most wear softer clothes, with brighter colors and more intricate details. They each sit in a chair decorated with a symbol, and she can see it echoed in their attire: in a ring or bracelet, or stitched into fabric.

“I have called this meeting at your collective request,” Lexa says, cold as the darkness of space. “Step forward, and speak your concerns.”

There’s a hesitation before one of them stands. Her symbol is a rough circle with arrows pointing inward.

“Our only wish is for your health and wellness, Heda.” She’s by far the oldest of those assembled, with softly graying hair and sun-damaged cheeks. “There is, perhaps, the fear that they may be in jeopardy.”

“Greetings to Delphi Clan,” Lexa says, a trace warmer than before. “I’m happy to see you back in Polis, Loun.”

“I’m very happy to be back, Heda,” Loun says. “According to the ambassadors from the other clans, I’ve missed quite a bit while visiting my own.”

Representatives of different clans, then. Clarke quickly counts the chairs: eleven. Eleven clans?

“No more than usual,” Lexa says, matching the older woman’s dry tone. “I hear a small horde of ripas made it all the way to the intersection between three clan territories and destroyed whole villages, but what of that. No, the real concern seems to be the Mountain’s continued failure to kill me. And I will hear on these concerns, but only after the assembled ambassadors have assured me what supplies and assistance will be sent to those villages.”

Clarke wonders if that’s why Lexa allowed this to move forward in the first place.

“Not from us,” one man says where he sits, arms folded. “Our resources went to fighting off the invasion. We shouldn’t be depleted twice just because other clans can’t protect their people.”
“The ambassador from (word) speaks,” Lexa says. From her tone, she’s not thrilled by it.

... and that’s it, that’s a word that Clarke has never been able to place in context. She knows the pieces -- “ice” and “gather” -- but she could never understand why the two words together would deserve to be spoken with such vitriol and fear.

Azgeda. It’s a place, then. Or a people.

“I see no point in dancing around the real reason we are here, Heda,” the man drawls, his attitude treading the line of insolence. “What could be more important than your life, and when it will finally end?”

“I can think of at least a dozen more demanding concerns, Rison,” Lexa says. “Whether I live or die, the Spirit will continue on in the next Commander. But those settlements in Blue Cliff and Rock Line are suffering now. Shall we?”

This spirit thing. She heard that before, from Nyko in the infirmary. Lexa was chosen by the Spirit, it continues -- some kind of reincarnation deal? Is that why Titus was adamant on being around when Lexa was close to dying, some sort of ritual there? Is that why Lexa worries about Aden becoming the next Commander?

There’s just so much she doesn’t know.

Clarke tries to put together what pieces she can as they debate what each clan will contribute. The Commander thing will take a while, she can already tell, but today she observes and learns the different clans: Azgeda, Delphi, Broadleaf, Blue Cliff, Boat Clan, Lake People, Rock Line, Plains Riders, Shadow Valley, Desert Clan, Glowing Forest.

No, wait. Lexa mentioned a Woods Clan before they came here. So where is the ambassador..?

Unless that’s her clan. Lexa’s. Makes sense, when Clarke thinks of the thick forests surrounding Polis.

Twelve clans.
Clarke shivers to think of all the land they must require, how spread out they must be over the remnants of what used to be a country. It hadn’t been just bad luck the dropship landed in inhabited territory -- these people must be everywhere. Distinct cultures take time and numbers to develop: enough people to establish traditions, identities, and then preserve them in the wake of near-total desolation.

And they all rose to their feet when Lexa walked into a room.

No wonder she’d once found Clarke’s ignorance of her position so amusing.

It’s absorbing to observe the ambassadors in discussion, the different attitudes and relationships between each other as individuals, as individuals to Lexa, and as a group facing their leader. She should probably stop feeling to surprised at how well Lexa navigates these interpersonal currents, by turns commanding or cajoling the representatives into the position she wants. Often she’s just clever about it, pointing out something they missed or didn’t consider which turns the whole issue on its head. Whenever that happens Titus looks like he’s about to do something he’ll later regret, like smile.

He’s very proud of her, Clarke realizes. It’s not just whatever strange mysticism he sees Lexa as an integral part of, Titus cares for her. Not like Gustus or Nyko, or the handmaidens and apprentices, or the warriors that greet their Commander at every corner of the tower. But he does care.

Which is why his expression falls into such stern lines when the final details of the decimated villages are dealt with, and there’s an anticipatory lull in talk.

“Now,” Lexa says, settling further back in her throne. “I will hear on the issue of my effectiveness as Commander.”

“You misunderstand, Heda.” Rison oozes obsequiousness. “We are simply worried for you. You are still new to your position, and we have seen so many Commanders come and go. The ways of the Woods Clan does not always lead to seasoned leadership.”

Lexa is thinking of roasting him alive. Clarke can tell. “And what is your advice on reigning, say, as long as your own queen? Could it have anything to do with how so many ripas made it to the intersection of Blue Cliff and Rock Line undetected?”

“Are you accusing us of not properly patrolling our territory?”
“Perhaps your queen should release a few dozen of her personal guards to protect those who need it most. If my own safety is sometimes threatened, it is only because I do not require others to fight my battles for me.”

Rison has the look of a man caught between anger and self-preservation. “Of course, Heda,” he spits. “But Queen Nia is not so foolish as to provoke the Mountain Men to greater violence. If your people demand more protection, it’s only because they need it.”

He’s not alone in his defiance, Clarke notices. Some of the other ambassadors, especially Loun, are sitting with openly bored or derisive expressions. A few more are watching with detached interest. But some are hunched, eyes darting back and forth between Rison and Lexa, hands clenching. Clearly rooting for a victory for someone other than the girl sitting on the twisted throne.

Clarke has the feeling they’re not going to get it.

“Tell me,” Lexa says, “how am I responsible for the actions of the same Mountain which has slaughtered us for generations?”

Slaughtered?

“There have been more attacks in the past two years than ever before,” Rison says triumphantly. “More ripas. And now we hear rumors of them walking freely, outside their mountain!”


Can’t leave the Mountain?

What would cause that? Post-nuclear pathogens? Mutated immune response?

So these people -- these people with guns, she remembers what Nyko took out of Lexa’s back -- went into Mount Weather before the bombs, probably. Now they’re trapped. But why kill the other survivors? Why target Lexa?
“There have been too many sightings! You can’t dismiss the claims!”

“Enough,” Lexa roars. Clarke can almost feel the soundwave go through her.

There is no echo within the throne room, but it seems to take a while for the command to die away completely. The ambassadors shift in their seats.

“Unless you can bring one of them here, to stand in front of me without burning away in the sunlight, I will treat these tales for what they are: the stories of children whispered in the dark to frighten each other.” Lexa is impassive. “Do not try me until that day.”

... radiation, then. Clarke’s head hurts. She longs for a painkiller tablet and a medical textbook.

“Heda.” Another man stands, one of the ambassadors who appeared to be neither for Lexa, nor against her. “I do not believe in these wild rumors, either, but you cannot deny how many times your life has been threatened since your ascension.”

“Of course the Mountain wishes me dead,” Lexa scoffs. She indicates all of them with a sweep of her hand. “This peace between us, this cooperation, is the greatest threat to them in generations. If they kill me for bringing that about, they believe the rest of you will run back to your clans and cower.”

So this is a new thing, the uniting of the clans and struggle for accord between them. It wasn’t always like this. Lexa is the reason things changed.

“And,” deathly quiet, “perhaps there are those among you who question whether the next Commander might be more lenient towards your personal demands.”

Everyone in the room becomes very still, like prey animals sensing a predator in their midst.

“But no matter.” Lexa leans back, fingers drumming against one armrest. “I might not have Nia’s legions of bodyguards, but I have no intention of releasing the Spirit anytime soon. And I have my own ways,” with a small, slight smile, “of ensuring that does not happen.”
Clarke has the very strange sensation of everyone deliberately not looking her way.

“Woods Clan ways,” Lexa adds, in case anyone missed her point.

“We had heard that you took... someone... from a nearby forest,” a different ambassador ventures, “and that she later saved your life.”

“Have you heard our stories?” Lexa tilts her head to the side. “We say there are creatures -- wood witches -- who are born from the trees and the rocks and the rivers. They must steal their humanity, such as sight and voice, from others in order to walk among us. But they can be charmed into captivity. If you find one before she is completely disguised, her magic will protect you from harm.”

... wow. Okay, wow. Lexa has... well, she has something coming, and some day Clarke is going to be the one to give it to her.

(Seriously, Clarke can’t believe that’s the story she’s been playing into all this while.)

(She also doesn’t believe that’s all of it. She’s read volumes and volumes of old Earth mythology, back on the Ark. You don't get to keep supernatural advantages forever. There’s always a risk, a trick, a catch. Lexa’s holding it back.)

But it’s effective enough on the assembled ambassadors, who are trying even harder not to look in Clarke’s direction. A few of them are shivering at Lexa’s dramatic tone.

Clarke wants to roll her eyes, but... these are people living with the legacy of the end of the world. There was no warning, no reason, just one day: boom. And the mutants that roamed the earth for years after, the radiation poisoning that killed seemingly without a source -- it must have been a waking nightmare, surreal and inexplicable. She can’t laugh at their resulting acceptance of creatures and cause-and-effect beyond their control.

“So there’s no need to worry on my behalf,” Lexa says softly.

The ambassadors are eager to leave after that, some of them barely managing to sketch a bow to their Commander before they exit. Each of them take a last look at Clarke before they go, eyes filled with
curiosity, or speculation -- or fear.

Lexa, Clarke, and Titus are the only ones who remain in the throne room. Except there’s Gustus emerging from the shadows -- Clarke didn’t see him until now -- stepping forward to stand before the Commander.

“Well.” Lexa takes her hands from the armrests and folds them in her lap. “That went better than expected.”

“Heda,” Titus explodes, as if he’s been holding it in too long for comfort, “I must beg you to rethink this approach. This is shadows and illusion in the place of real power, it has no bearing on your strength as Commander.” He can’t resist sending Clarke a glare. “You do not need a charlatan by your side to be a leader.

Oh, Clarke gets it. Titus doesn’t like being replaced.

“No, Titus,” Lexa soothes, “there’s no trickery here. I didn’t mislead anyone on who or what she is.” Her lips curl into something perilously close to a smirk. “But if they come to certain conclusions on their own... Am I supposed to anticipate to any and all misunderstandings from my subjects?”

“Heda,” Titus says, despairing.

Lexa turns to Gustus. “What do you think?”

The advisor narrows his eyes at Clarke, who straightens. Titus is one thing, but Lexa relies on Gustus.

“I see no real harm in it,” Gustus says slowly. “As said, you’ve told no lies. And you would not be the first clan leader to indulge in the impact of an impression.”

“Are we Azgeda, now?” Titus sneers. “Shall we scar our warriors, and shall I fashion our Commander a crown of bones? The Commander is above play-acting. You bear the Spirit, that should be enough to impress anyone.”
“I’m sure it would, were the practice of the flame not such a closely-guarded secret,” Lexa says.

Titus turns a dull red. “Heda --”

“Enough.” Lexa sighs, and stands. “I am tired of being thought weak simply because I am a target,” she says quietly. And then, with a little more fire: “I am tired of being targeted. Let them fear otherworldly retribution, or a protective force they can’t counter. Having been wounded in the past does not now make me easy prey.”

The build of her anger has the others watching her, but Clarke ends up watching Titus, arrested by the spasm of pain across his features. At first Clarke thinks it’s because of Lexa’s decision, but when the Commander turns in his direction Titus shifts his expression to one of resignation. Something else, then, about what Lexa just said made Titus look like he’d been gutted.

“It’s decided,” Lexa says as she appraises her advisors. She settles back into her throne, crossing one leg over the other with an air of finality. “I won’t take her too much away from her regular duties, but she shall attend on me as often as I deem fit. Now,” lifting two fingers up, crooking them, “send in the petitioners.”

~*~

It creates a shift.

Nothing too noticeable at first. Clarke still spends her early mornings with the apprentices, waking up with them before the sun rises and shivering into slow wakefulness through washing up and breakfast. They have lessons with Nyko and patient care, the daily tasks of the infirmary now so routine Clarke thinks she could go through them blindfolded. She has lunch with them as well, and sometimes the rest of the day progresses as days (and weeks) have previously.

Sometimes not.

There are days when she’s finishing up her midday meal -- or she’s right in the middle of it -- and the familiar red robes of a handmaiden will enter her peripheral vision. She learns to quickly swallow down whatever she has left or grab it off the table, because she only has a few moments before a summons is whispered in her ear. Clarke knows the ways to Lexa’s quarters at this point, but as long as she wears the green paint of a healer apprentice she needs an escort. Once they arrive she changes
into her new clothes. Sometimes she has time to scrub off the blood and smell of sickness in the bath, but more often the handmaidens wipe a warm cloth along her face and arms as they do something with her hair. Lexa will arrive at the last minute to paint Clarke in gold streaks. None of the handmaidens will touch it. The one instance when Clarke tentatively reached for the drawer she knows it’s kept in, thinking she could save Lexa the trouble, Jollett squeezed her wrist, hard, with a shake of her head.

Clarke feels like she’s managing to keep the precarious balance between the two worlds. When she’s Lexa’s wood witch that’s what people see, a hooded and mysterious figure who serves as the Commander’s protective shadow. Otherwise she’s just herself. Or, the identity she has left in this place: nameless, voiceless, alone.

Lexa’s been trying to give her a name. “You need one,” she says bluntly, in between audiences. “I can’t say hey, witch whenever I want your attention.”

Clarke raises her eyebrows as she shrugs: Why not? She’s cleaning the last shreds of meat from the bones of her dinner. Lexa often has so many concerns over the course of the day she can only eat her meals in snatched moments between them, and when Clarke is with her she does the same. Clarke might be more annoyed about it if the cooks didn’t so obviously spoil their Commander, holding back the best pieces of meat and tenderest vegetables for her portion -- and whoever else is fortunate to eat with her.

“It’s not... dignified,” Lexa answers. She frowns, arms folded. “You’re a person, not a pet. Even if you do steal from my plate,” she says as Clarke reaches across the table to do just that.

Clarke rolls her eyes. Lexa only eats enough to keep herself going on nights like this; she gets distracted three-quarters of the way through the meal by whatever meeting they’ll attend next. But Clarke had too many years of bland protein rations and reconstituted sauces to waste real food, now that she’s gotten used to it. (She still has trouble with grains. They take so much chewing.)

“You need a name. I know you have one.” Lexa folds her arms tighter, pinning Clarke with her eyes as if she could stare the other girl into compliance.

Clarke grins back as she crunches on her stolen carrot. It’s maybe a little childish, but she enjoys the idea of thwarting Lexa in this small thing. She may have forgiven the way she was carried off to Polis, but she hasn’t forgotten.

“I’m going to figure out what it is,” Lexa says.
Clarke sneaks another carrot.

Lexa does try. She rattles off dozens of possible names whenever they’re alone, watching Clarke for a hint of reaction. When this doesn’t work she starts adding them to the end of any sentence addressed to Clarke in audiences, albeit under her breath. Lexa’s frustration starts at a simmer, and then builds, and builds, until it’s a palpable cloud of bad feeling which has petitioners almost on their knees from the moment they cross into the throne room.

Clarke shouldn’t find it so funny.

“Are your people even Woods Clan?” Lexa demands after the last audience of the day. “Those are all our common names, but if you were originally Broadleaf before fleeing to the Dead Zone, or Blue Cliff...”

Clarke contains her smile, slants Lexa a glance beneath her eyelashes.

“You’re right,” the other girl grumbles. “No cheating. I will figure this out,” she says before stomping off her rooms.

The exchange -- and her tiredness, it’s an usually full day -- distracts Clarke. She changes her clothes on her own behind the partition in Lexa’s room, the handmaidens having long since retired for the night. Clarke makes it all the way to the dorms without realizing she never took the time to clean her face.

She remembers the moment she meets a dozen shocked stares of still-awake apprentices, but by then it’s too late.

“I told you this would happen,” Nyko tells Lexa the next morning, having snagged Clarke at the morning meal and growled a path all the way to the Commander’s quarters. For once Clarke didn’t mind being separated from the others in such a high-handed manner. She’d rubbed off the paint hastily before going to bed, but somehow that made it worse, they looked at her like she was... And it hadn’t blown over by the morning like she’d hoped. The ones that saw her told the ones who’d been asleep and now they all knew that she was marked as the Commander’s favorite. Most of them were treating her like she’d gone radioactive, giving her a wide berth. Her friends weren’t so bad, but they were still subdued. Versi spent most of breakfast staring at the traces of gold lingering beneath Clarke’s fingernails, and biting her lip.
“They remember what happened to Costia,” Nyko continues, and Clarke fights the urge to push him out of the room until he knows not to give Lexa a reason to make that face. “They don’t want to be caught in the crossfire if it happens again.”

“I won’t let it happen again,” Lexa bites out, low and murderous.

“I know that,” Nyko snaps. Perversely, it makes Lexa relax. “But I don’t have time to coddle a bunch of nervous striplings. Not when it’s easier to remove just one of them and make her your problem.”

Lexa frowns at him. She hasn’t acknowledged Clarke yet, and Clarke thinks Lexa might be a little grumpy with her right now, or with herself. It doesn’t matter, Clarke is more than happy to take this moment to observe how... *rumpled* Lexa looks. She’s never seen Lexa this early in the day before, that one assassination attempt aside. Clarke has the sneaking suspicion that, for all her discipline and routine, Lexa isn’t much of a morning person.

“Explain,” she says. It would carry a lot more authority if she weren’t in sleep clothes, with a noticeable case of bedhead. Clarke bites down on the inside of her cheek to hide her delight. The infallible Commander needs to run a comb through her hair.

“The rooms reserved for your personal healer are still empty. We’ve discussed your need for one.”

“And I dismissed it,” Lexa says, waspish. Behind her, the handmaidens clearing away the remainder of her morning meal don’t *quite* roll their eyes at each other. That cinches it for Clarke: Lexa just isn’t fun to deal with this time of day. No wonder most of her audiences are scheduled so late.

“Perhaps you should reconsider.” Nyko’s smile is more a baring of teeth. “Once news connecting your witch to my apprentice spreads beyond the tower, I wouldn’t be surprised if people came in simply to gawk at her.”

Lexa pauses, expression softening. “I didn’t think of that.” She darts a guilty glance in Clarke’s direction.

“Heda was preoccupied with other, more pressing concerns,” Nyko says, sensing he’s won some quarter. “But she won’t enjoy being made a spectacle, and I don’t appreciate my infirmary being overrun.”
Lexa sighs in defeat. “She’s finally settled in with the apprentices. I hate to take her away from them now.”

“Nonsense,” Nyko says. “She can see them whenever she likes. It will be harder for them to find a chance to see her, but I’m sure they will understand. And,” a little quieter, his head turned toward Clarke, “the interim will give them time to adjust.”

Clarke manages a small smile. She hopes he’s right. Even Hern had been tentative with her this morning.

“You’re comfortable with this?” Clarke doesn’t realize Lexa is addressing her until the Commander reaches out, hooking her fingers around Clarke’s. Clarke startles, but Lexa doesn’t release her, waiting until Clarke meets her eyes. “This is more than I initially planned. Are you sure you want to step into this role?”

Clarke’s cheeks feel warm, which is -- strange, she’s not sure why... Only Lexa asks as if it were a much more serious question, and Nyko’s eyes narrow at their linked hands. She nods and tries, half-heartedly, to draw away.

But Lexa doesn’t release her. “I’ll send for someone to gather her things, and Jollet can show her the quarters right away. Thank you, Nyko. You’re dismissed.”

Nyko directs one last frown at their hands before sketching a rough bow and leaving, the curve of his hunched shoulders expressing sudden displeasure. Clarke makes sure he’s gone before allowing the outrage to filter into her expression, turning to widen her eyes at Lexa: What do you think you’re up to?

Lexa is clearly suppressing amusement. “See,” she says, raising their linked fingers. “This is why you need a name.”

Clarke glares, and Lexa drops her hand with a grin.

Her new rooms are just down the hall from Lexa’s, which makes sense if she’s expected to tend to the Commander whenever called on. They’re not quite as spacious as Lexa’s, but Clarke is relieved by that -- she’s a little lonely for the comfortable bustle of life of the dorms already. She tries to concentrate instead on the luxury of being able to exist, for the first time since Lexa scooped her up
in the woods, without having eyes on her. Her new bed is wide and comfortable once they drag the mattress out of storage, there’s a small workroom with bare shelves and a sturdy table, and she has her own fireplace. No more nights shivering under her blankets. Clarke keeps that in mind when she wakes up alone in the mornings.

It helps that the change comes with a massive new workload. She’s with Lexa almost all day. From the time she’s bathed and dressed and left her quarters in the morning (Lexa is always a little bit slower to get ready, and Clarke has way too much fun standing by the door with a put-upon expression whenever she has to wait) to the last meal of the day Clarke is at her elbow, attending meetings and audiences in her new clothes and gold paint. After dinner she belongs to Nyko: usually he comes to her rooms to review a lesson on herbcraft, or wound care, but sometimes he has her shadow him as well. Not just to the infirmary, but to the other areas she wasn’t allowed as a mere apprentice, to help the patients with serious infections and long-term illnesses. It’s a more demanding schedule, and often Clarke is asleep as soon as her head hits her pillow.

She doesn’t mind it. In fact, it soothes something deep inside that was still aching: the question of who she was and what she could do, now that she was so adrift from everything and everyone she built her life on. She’s aware that someday those responsibilities might emerge again, but they seem very distant compared to daily demands, and with each passing hour Clarke settles more and more into this new role she’s playing, the new life she’s been given.

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One day Lexa takes her out into the city.

It’s one of the rare -- almost unheard-of -- days where their time isn’t eaten up by others. Clarke has quickly learned that the “a moment of your attention, Heda”s can gobble up a day just as fast as back-to-back audiences, or the meetings with merchants and city officials that always devolve into shouting matches between citizens while their Commander sighs.

Clarke isn’t surprised to find that, when confronted with empty stretches of time, Lexa get antsy. She’s like a kid confined to family quarters: she fidgets, shifts on her throne, casts her eyes at the undisturbed double doors to her throne room with her mouth in something dangerously close a sulk. Clarke would be bored as well, but she’s too amused to see Lexa act like an actual teenager.

Lexa continues to be thoughtful over the noon meal. She doesn’t say anything when Clarke steals the last few bites of her honey-glazed apples, which hardly makes it worth it. Clarke is on the verge of leaving Lexa to her bad mood and sneaking off to the infirmary when Lexa focuses on her, and blinks.
“You haven’t seen much of the city, have you?” she asks. When Clarke shakes her head, Lexa
smiles. “Wait here.”

She gets up from their shared table and leaves Clarke to finish her meal alone. When she returns
she’s changed her clothes. The warriors’ leathers are gone, along with her pauldron and waist guard.
Instead she’s in loose-fitting clothes bound at the waist and arms, the fabric patched and faded -- the
kind of clothing the apprentices wear, secondhand or recycled. Even her boots are slightly worn-
looking.

She’s taken the braids of out her hair as well, though she’s tied band of cloth just behind her hairline
to keep it from falling forward. That’s why Clarke ends up gaping at her -- forget the common
clothes, Lexa almost looks like a different person just with her hair like that.

“We’re going out,” Lexa says, tossing Clarke her apprentice clothes. “Hurry and get ready before
someone tries to change my mind.”

Clarke changes in double-time and wipes at her face until she’s sure it’s red. On the other side of the
partition she can hear Lexa giving orders to Jollett to tell anyone else seeking an audience to come
back tomorrow.

They make their way out of the tower a different way, via the endless flights of stairs. It keeps
anyone but the guards from seeing them but when they reach the bottom Clarke’s thighs are dying.
She takes a firm grip on Lexa’s shoulder and walks them both over to a quiet corner, just before the
city proper, and sits to catch her breath.

Lexa only smiles. “We’ll take the regular way back up, I promise. I just didn’t want Gustus to catch
us.” She slung a bag from her rooms over her shoulder before they fled, and she opens it to take out a
dark shawl. While Clarke rests, Lexa wraps this around her own head and shoulders, tugging the
edges forward so that the shadow obscures her face. Clarke reaches up to pinch the fabric between
her fingers, giving Lexa a worried look.

“I’m not in danger. I can take care of myself,” Lexa assures her. “But I’m often recognized, and
people get... excited,” she says, wry. Clarke thinks of the flutter of girls that followed Lexa around
the infirmary and decides the scarf is a very good plan.

“Come on.” Lexa slips one hand beneath her elbow and helps her to her feet while Clarke makes a
face. “You need to learn Polis. If you keep getting lost on the way out to the training grounds, I
really will trade you for different wood witch.”

Clarke rolls her eyes, but she follows as Lexa pulls her along.

For all her talk, Lexa is a patient teacher. She takes them in a circle around the tower, venturing further and further out as they seek the high ground from which they can see the landscape spilling out under their feet. There’s an eagerness and warmth in Lexa’s voice when she points out the orchards, the fields, the different neighborhoods and their clan alliances, that Clarke hasn’t heard in her, except when...

... no, she realizes. She’s mistaken, she’s never heard Lexa sound quite like this. And Clarke never expected the remnants of a bombed-out city, with crumbling ruins of a lost world and streets decorated with ancient graffiti, to be what inspired it.

Once they’ve made a near-complete circle around the tower they hit the market and start working their way back up the streets. Lexa readjusts her scarf, making doubly sure her face is hidden, before stepping up to various stalls and inviting Clarke to examine the wares. It’s an interesting collection. Some stalls sell scavenged junk, others seasonal fruit and grains, some sell staples and dry goods. The other market-goers are just as hodgepodge, a mix of warriors wearing different clan insignias and regular people bartering for their dinners. She and Lexa seem to have come back just as things are dying down: the light is beginning to ripen into late afternoon’s gold, and there are fewer customers with each passing minute. The people running their stalls show no sign of packing up, though, and Clarke decides there must be an after-dinner rush as well before their day ends.

She’s so caught up in working out these details she barely notices what she has in her hands until she looks down and sees the words *Journey to the Heart of Balt*.

It’s a book. A real one, the kind she’s seen in archival photos or films from Before. It’s grimy and damaged, the majority of its cover ripped away so that the rest of the title and its author are lost forever. But it’s the kind of thing she never expected she’d actually see, hold in her hands, and that makes it infinitely precious.

Well, until she notices she’s standing in front of a pile of them. She blinks at the heap of tattered pages, belatedly taking in the smell of rotting paper. She reaches out to run her finger down cracked and peeling spines.

“They’re from the old world.” Lexa appears so suddenly at her elbow Clarke almost jumps. Her grin says she knows it. “A way of sharing information. Like talking, except etched and permanent.”
Clarke frowns at her. Lexa phrases it as if --

“I know it sounds strange. But apparently it used to be a common skill, before -- before.” She sighs. “Titus knows how to decipher them. It’s secret knowledge passed from Flamekeeper to Flamekeeper, a remnant of our past we have preserved from the Mountain’s terrors.” A muscle flexes in her jaw. “It’s not much. But a victory is a victory, no matter the size.”

An illiterate society. Clarke had guessed they were mostly illiterate, given the labels in the infirmary and pharmacy were all pictograms. But she’d assumed that was down to lack of schools or resources, not... She frowns. She picks at Lexa’s sleeve and points: to Lexa, to the destroyed book in her hands, to the tower.

Because she’s seen books in Lexa’s room. Small, thin ones, with more pictures than anything else. But they rest in the corners of her room gathering dust.

“I can read a little,” Lexa says reluctantly. “It’s an unusual skill for a Commander, but not discouraged.” She’s quiet again, her face a smooth mask. “Titus’s apprentice taught me.”

Titus’s apprentice? Clarke casts back, tries to remember if she’s ever seen Titus as anything but a solitary figure stalking the halls, somehow set apart even when with a group. She shows Lexa her confusion, lets it pull exaggeratedly at her features.

“No, you haven’t met her,” Lexa says. “She’s gone.”

Oh.

*Oh. So that was -- what was the name?*

*Costia.*

And she’d been Titus’s apprentice. That’s why he looked like he was in pain when Lexa talked of past wounds.
She trails a little behind Lexa, the better to watch her. Lexa doesn’t appear to notice, continuing to walk, her pace measured, her eyebrows drawn together and her eyes unseeing.

Costia. The Flamekeeper’s apprentice. Who taught Lexa how to read. The last girl to wear the gold paint.

Clarke wants to know, very badly, how she died -- she wishes she knew which questions that would explain the shock and horror she saw in the apprentices when they learned of her new position. Obviously Costia’s death was violent and meant to harm Lexa, she knows that without asking.

But she wishes -- though she can’t quite put her finger on why -- that she knew more about the girl herself, and what Costia and Lexa had been to each other. Clarke can guess their relationship must have been... significant. Not just from Lexa’s earlier words (Costia died because I loved her), but because the yawning absence opened up by her death resonates with a power that goes beyond guilt, or regret. Lexa, it’s becoming clearer and clearer to Clarke, is heartbroken.

It shouldn’t matter in the larger scheme of things. This is the Commander who wiped out everyone on the dropship. Lexa is still a young girl who brought eleven clans to heel, and now brings their ambassadors to their feet. This doesn’t change that. Nothing can.

But it makes Clarke feel the faintest regret for her lost voice, though it’s protected her this far. She can’t quash the wish to sit down with Lexa, take her hands, and ask her soft questions about Costia. To walk her through the memories and tease out the lingering shards of pain, the way she’s seen Jollett work out the knots in Lexa’s hair after a long day of audiences. She wants to see Lexa’s head dip forward with the same relief when it’s all said and done.

Selfish, she tells herself as Lexa turns back to find her lingering, reaches out a hand to speed her along. Clarke has no right to any of that. She doesn’t even know why she wants it.

Turns out Lexa was taking her hand with purpose, to draw her into a secluded corner of the market and dole out tokens for barter. Clarke doesn’t know why anyone would trade for them, but she takes them to the stall Lexa points out and gets a treat in return. She doesn’t recognize the ovoid yellow fruit, cut as if into a petaled flower and eaten off a stick, from anything she’s seen in the tower’s kitchens. She brings it back to Lexa, and the other girl leads her out of the busy streets and down an alleyway where they can sit in relative quiet. The Commander pushes her shawl away from her face the better to eat her fruit, and the sigh as she takes her first bite is blissful.

Clarke follows her example and nearly drops her portion: the flesh is tender, one bite filling her mouth with juice, and it tastes... She takes another bite, slightly bigger, savoring. The first feeling of
warm sunshine on her skin when they stepped off the dropship and onto the ground -- that’s what this tastes like.

They eat in comfortable silence.

“I haven’t done this in a long time,” Lexa says. She’s finished her fruit, and she twirls the stick as she tilts her head back, angling to catch the lingering sunshine.

Clarke sucks the last of the juice from her fingers as she watches. She can see Lexa slipping into bittersweet memories, her expression edging too close to pain. Clarke is almost... annoyed. She wants to reach over and poke her finger into Lexa’s cheek, say: you’re here with me, don’t be so sad. She knows, she knows you can’t ask a person not to mourn. But she also knows every successive day is a little darker, a little colder, and even now the shadows are starting to seep into the corners of the marketplace. They only have so many lovely days like this left. Right now Lexa is missing it.

That’s her reasoning for reaching over to tug the scarf right off the Commander’s head.

It comes away easily (Lexa didn’t even pin it, lazy) and the next thing Clarke knows she has it dangling from her hand. Lexa’s hair spills over one shoulder in dark chestnut waves shot through with color where the light catches it. Clarke has a moment for envy -- Lexa really does have beautiful hair -- before she’s caught by Lexa’s wide-eyed surprise.

“What are you...” Lexa leans forward, tries to reclaim the scarf.

Clarke steps out of reach.

“What --” Lexa frowns. She makes another lunge, but Clarke dances away. “Stop -- get back here.”

Clarke should. She knows she should.

Instead she grins, holding the scarf up like an invitation. You want it? Come and get it.

Lexa stands, unamused. “I’m faster and stronger than you are,” she says -- not like she’s bragging,
just stating the reality of the situation, “and I don’t feel like playing. We should be heading to the tower. Now,” leveling Clarke with a stern look, “will you be adult about this?”

Clarke is turning to sprint before the sentence is fully out of Lexa’s mouth.

Her heart’s pounding as she runs, and for the first time in what feels like forever it’s not out of fear or anxiety. She would laugh if she didn’t have to concentrate on keeping her footing through the twisting alleyways, heading back to streets and market stalls. She can hear, and practically feel Lexa right behind her -- the other girl wasn’t kidding about having so many advantages.

Clarke bursts out into the main area and has to slow down to keep from barrelling into other market-goers. That’s her downfall, Lexa slips fingers around her wrist in an iron grip and pulls Clarke against her.

“Got you,” she says, triumphant.

Clarke glares up at her. Or she would, but this close the few inches they have in height difference are negligible. She’s practically nose-to-nose with the Commander, all she has to do is lean in and she could --

“Heda?”

They both start and step away from each other. Clarke has the presence of mind to twist against Lexa’s hold and it breaks just before the amount of pressure needed to keep it would hurt her wrist, stepping further away as she does. Lexa shoots her a look, fingers twitching, but she remains rooted to the spot with her head held high.

Right. Clarke feels a smile growing on her face. Dignity. Lexa’s very big on dignity, she’s not going to scramble after her wood witch in full view of her public.

Oh, this could be fun.

“We haven’t seen you in the market since --” the woman who called out Heda continues before checking herself, her gaze darting to Clarke. She’s older, her hands stained deep with a rainbow of colors that are echoed in the lengths of fabric at her stall. “It’s good to have you with us again,” she finishes with a smile.
Lexa nods her acceptance of the sentiment. “It’s my pleasure to share this beautiful day with you.” She’s completely sincere. Clarke can tell. “But I -- I did not wish for my presence to disturb your routine.” Lexa makes a discrete sideways lunge, but Clarke is watching her for exactly that reason and keeps just out of reach. “Please,” Lexa says to the woman selling her wares, with a clenched jaw, “go about your business.”

“Of course, Heda,” the woman demurs.

“Heda?” An older man, his dark skin weathered darker by the sun, pokes his head out from where he was straightening his display of wares. “You’ve come to the market again?”

It goes like that down the street in a domino effect: Lexa will greet a merchant with as much dignity as she can while trying to catch Clarke, who never wanders so far away that Lexa could use the excuse to break off the conversation. By the time she’s wrapped things up with one merchant the next will have noticed, will then draw her into yet another friendly and familiar exchange while Lexa endures and Clarke grins.

Maybe she’d feel more pity for Lexa if these people didn’t so obviously adore her. None of them take liberties or ask prying questions -- they’re just happy to see their Heda again, and they say so, over and over. And as much as Lexa would clearly love to pounce on Clarke and frog-march her back to the tower, she can’t turn away from their surprised and delighted faces without some kind of acknowledgement.

Though a few of the sellers are just a little too guileless in their greeting, the careful way they don’t let their eyes drift to where Clarke is waiting.

She’s certain they know what’s up once they start giving Lexa things, despite her denials, each merchant insisting the Commander has to take it, has to, it will be an insult if she doesn’t. They keep piling up: bags of fruit, skeins of colorful yarn or fabric, a dozen pairs of long and fragrant candles still still connected by their wicks to loop over one of Lexa’s wrists. They abandon all pretext and crowd around her to press their gifts. Even the small children who help tend the stands are trying to put scraps into their Heda’s pockets as Lexa pleads they’re “more than generous, I can’t take anything more -- no, I really can’t.” Clarke slumps against a the corner of an empty stall and wheezes with noiseless laughter until her ribs ache.

Lexa, eeling her way free of the crush and over to Clarke, catches her doing it. She tips her head back to the sky as if asking someone up there for patience. Her arms are straining to hold everything she’s been given. “Fine,” she sighs out. “You win. Whatever it is, you win.”
She looks to Clarke. “Now, can we please go home?”

Her eyes are wide and pleading in a face framed by soft waves of unbound hair.

Clarke’s heart gives a sudden thump-thump, one that echoes in her wrists and throat.

She nods to cover it. Stepping forward, she relieves Lexa of a few tokens of her people’s devotion. Lexa catches her fingers and gives them a squeeze in gratitude, and Clarke can barely breathe.

“Thank you,” Lexa adds, unnecessarily. She searches Clarke’s expression, but Clarke keeps her gaze on the ground and hopes Lexa just thinks she’s a little ashamed of herself in the aftermath of childishness.

Oh, no, she thinks to herself as they start the long walk back to the tower. No, no, no.

She repeats it all the way, like a manta: focusing, filling her mind with it, not even allowing herself to fully grasp what she’s trying to deny.

Clarke knows, anyway.

No, no, no, no.

There’s no worse idea than her falling for the Commander of the twelve clans.
It’s just a crush. It makes sense to get a crush on Lexa, despite everything. She’s the one Clarke sees most of the time, who she eats with and spends the quiet moments of the day with. And Lexa is... not unattractive.

It doesn’t mean anything beyond that.

Clarke just needs a little space, time away from Lexa, to sort her head out.

Chapter End Notes

So, one of the head-scratchers I’m facing is that these chapters have doubled in length -- from 3-4K on average to 7-8K. That’s understandable, since we’re now hitting the thick of the things, but it keeps me off my update game and I might have to readjust the schedule. We’ll see how things pan out once The White Queen Running is finished. In the meantime I’m just going to ask for your patience, and your trust that I have no plans to abandon this story.

(no science notes! Jollett was not pleased to see Lexa bought more candles at the marketplace, though. and even when Lexa said "I didn't buy them, they were forced on me!" Jollett was all uh huh mmm-hmm just like the lavender sage candles that were "forced" on you during the summer festival or the beeswax globe candle with dried flowers that was "forced" on you when you visited the Lake People and Heda, enough is enough, we must embrace economy. Lexa points at Clarke like "ask her!" but Clarke does her best: "...?" expression and Jollet ends up shaking her head, really, Heda, trying to rope the poor mute girl into your schemes to deceive, it's too much. and Lexa throws up her hands and storms off declaring she wants a bath, she wants to be left in peace, and Jollett winks at Clarke.

... listen I called this story self-indulgent from the word go.)
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~*~

It hits her at odd moments.

Clarke can go days without thinking about her revelation at the market. She tries to. She throws herself into her new obligations, shifting between functions with Lexa and her ongoing apprentice lessons and never allowing the strain to show. It reminds her of the busiest times on the Ark, almost - like that month after a couple solar panels shattered, and they all had to conserve energy until the emergency repairs were put through. Or when there was a fire in the greenhouse and so nothing that had ever been green, at any point in its life, had landed on their plates for the next six months. You’d think hardship would only increase the pressures of daily life, especially in a place where there were already so many restrictions. But Clarke has always liked the focus of it, the way it excuses pushing all issues but the most vital to the side of her awareness.

She does that now, filling her head with so much of healing and politics she barely remembers to eat, much less how Lexa looked with her hair loose and the angle of the setting sun bringing out the colors of --

... she tries, anyway.

And then there are days like this one, when she has to be present but there’s nothing new to learn and she’s just... so bored. The Glowing Forest representatives have been at Lexa for most of the morning to reconsider a trade agreement drafted just last spring, and it’s been hours of this: their insistence, Lexa’s refusal, and round and round they go. It makes Clarke wonder how much of governing is the ability to simply maintain your position.

It also makes her mind wander. The second time she finds herself watching the way Lexa uses her hands -- she doesn’t gesture often, but they are expressive; they tighten or relax on the arms of whatever chair she’s in, her fingers tap out a soundless rhythm when she’s impatient -- Clarke makes herself concentrate instead on the map they’ve hauled out for this audience. Or, it’s not so much a map as a miniature recreation of the territory under discussion, which covers that of several clans besides Glowing Forest. Lexa has a half-dozen of these covering different temperate zones and climates. She showed them to Clarke on a slow morning, along with the rest of the treasures of the room they were kept in: sheathes upon sheathes of maps, of old territories and new boundaries, covering the lands in the north, west, and south, and even something of the waters to the east of them. It made sense, Clarke thought to herself -- if the society as a whole was nearly illiterate, visual representations of territory would be that much more prized and elaborate. If the clans have been fighting each other until recently these maps would have held the key to survival, to sustaining the
Woods Clan way of life. That would more than account for the care Lexa took with them when she dragged one after the other out of storage to show Clarke, the weird affection she had for them, like she was greeting old friends. And Clarke was more than willing to enjoy their appeal for her sake.

It’s beautiful in its own right, anyway. It’s not just good craftsmanship, though whoever made it luxuriated in the details right down to the scatter of rocks and individual leaves on the trees. But there’s more than that. The creator -- creators? -- loved their work. Clarke feels like you can tell whenever that happens. She sense it in her own work, and she can pick it up here: there’s an overall harmony at work, even though the piece is intended to be functional, that makes her feel calm and content when she looks at it.

Or maybe it’s the stark contrast with the tension in the room. Or the way she feels when she looks at Lexa. Either way, she’ll take it.

But then she frowns, her calm cracking around the edges. She takes a closer look at the map. That can’t mean what she thinks it does. They’ve been here for hours, it’s not possible to overlook...

Someone else would have said something. If it meant anything.

She agonizes over it for what feels like forever. She listens again to the Glowing Forest representatives and their arguments... yes, that’s exactly what she thought the issue was, but on the map...

There’s a small sigh from Lexa. It probably isn’t audible to anyone else in the room, but Clarke hears it, and she sees how Lexa takes a moment to press her fingers to her temple. The look of exhaustion in her eyes just before she closes them.

Alright, Clarke decides, even if she’s wrong, even if she ends up looking really stupid...

She wanders over to the other edge of the map, near the foot of the table it’s placed on. The representatives are clustered at its head, ignoring her as they focus their efforts on the Commander. She has Lexa’s attention, though. Even as the other girl is meeting the eyes of the representatives and nodding at their words, saying the right things, Clarke knows Lexa is aware of what her wood witch is up to at almost any given moment.

So it doesn’t take much. Just a trailing hand along a certain feature of the map, a finger held on a landmark for too long to be just coincidence. Clarke looks up, keeps her attitude nonchalant even as she sees she now has Lexa’s full attention.
Lexa’s eyes widen. Just a fraction.

“Tell me,” she interrupts the representative in the middle of hashing a point Clarke has heard him make five times already, “have you considered using the river that crosses your shared border on the east to transport your goods? It takes you straight to Broadleaf’s capital, as per the treaties, but it will also reduce the costs you’re complaining make those treaties so prohibitive.”

It throws them. Which is when Clarke sees it: of course they’ve considered this option. But taking their goods all the way to the main city meant greater regulation and standard taxation. What they really wanted was an excuse to hand off their goods closer to their own border, with more of their own warriors at their backs to enforce their adjusted prices.

Lexa might have seen the option earlier, except they’ve been hammering at her so incessantly since the meeting began she hasn’t been able to hear herself think. Which was the point of that.

But none of them thought to distract Clarke.

“... it would create extra effort,” Glowing Forest merchant begins.

“More effort than breaking an established treaty?” Lexa retorts. “More effort than possibly engaging in a minor war with Broadleaf?” She almost purrs her next words: “Tell your clan leader if I find out he’s violated these agreements, I will see him stripped and lashed for Broadleaf’s pleasure at the next summit.”

They scuttle out the door pretty quickly after that. There’s no time to celebrate -- Glowing Forest held up many of the planned audiences for the rest of the day, and it looks like another one where Clarke won’t stumble into her own bed until the sun is beginning to light the sky. Lexa calls for the next round of petitioners.

But there’s a moment.

There’s a moment before she settles back in her chair and assumes the invisible mantle of authority, when her eyes meet Clarke’s across the room. In that moment, she’s not a Commander. She’s a conspirator, and so is Clarke -- and the look Lexa sends across the room is equal parts shared triumph and gratitude.
Clarke’s heart gives kind of hiccuping *thump* that makes her feel like every inch of her skin has been scraped raw.

And Clarke thinks to her heart: *Stop that.*

~*~

Lexa gets the bright idea to teach Clarke to ride a horse.

The irony isn’t lost on Clarke. A year ago, half a year ago, the idea of being on the ground and on a horse -- it would have been one of those fantasies that kept her sane inside of solitary.

Well, that was the dream. The reality is *really big.* And doesn’t smell great.

“As my personal healer you’ll need to come with me on campaigns,” Lexa explains, looking exasperated. She’s dressed for riding, with fewer straps around her legs and and no sleeves. It’s a lot of exposed flesh, for her. Clarke is very careful to keep her eyes above Lexa’s collarbone. “You can’t ride double in my saddle forever.”

Clarke gives her a puzzled look.

“Because it’s not good for the horse,” Lexa says. “Only children, invalids, or prisoners ride that way.” Lexa is as close to awkward as Clarke has ever seen her when she pauses, deliberately changes the angle of conversation: “Even if you’re not a warrior, you need to ride like one. It will help you command respect.”

Clarke’s pretty sure falling off the horse and onto her butt is going to do the opposite for all the warriors currently in the training area, which includes the stables, but hey. She’s not the *Commander.* What does she know?

“Oh, stop sulking.” Lexa walks over, pries one of Clarke’s hands away from its defensive clutch on a support beam, and drags her closer to the horse. It’s a beautiful specimen: full mane and tail, silvery-white body with a dappling of darkness along the legs and neck. “This is Storm. She was my first warrior’s mount, but she’s too old now for long campaigns. She’s a good horse, and she’s
Firmly, she places Clarke’s hand onto the softness of the horse’s long face, halfway down between the eyes and nose. The horse snorts quietly, but doesn’t move her head away. Clarke’s hand is shaking.

“There, now,” Lexa says, and Clarke wonders which of them one she’s trying to soothe. “You see? Nothing to worry about.”

Clarke glares at her, but can’t resist the urge to give Storm a few pets. Storm appears resigned to it.

She expects to be handed off to the stable master, or maybe some unlucky warrior who got caught with babysitting duty. But it’s still Lexa, every day, parsing away a slice of time from an already packed schedule to take Clarke down to the stables and go over: saddle care, tacking up, grooming, mounting and dismounting technique, everything and anything except actual riding until Clarke is more than ready to climb onto Storm and set off.

Lexa seems to know the day Clarke reaches her tipping point, and leads her and Storm out to one of the smaller, quieter training areas, a fenced-in circle of dirt.

“I’ll have the lead the entire time,” Lexa promises, holding up the rope that connects to the horse’s bridle. She steps away from Clarke and the horse until she’s at the center of the ring, the lead still slightly slack. “You can do this. Go on.”

Clarke nods, tried to breathe normally.

It’s so bizarre to be carried by a living creature, to feel the shift of its muscles and every dip in the ground as it goes. To think, this is what it takes to travel long distances on the ground, when she spend her childhood careening at thousands of miles per hour and always felt like she was standing still.

It takes a few tries to get it right. She isn’t allowed to just sit, she has to use certain muscles, and Lexa isn’t shy about poking a finger into the meat of Clarke’s thigh to show her where they are. The change is immediate once she finds her seat, though, and Storm seems to un-hunch her neck a bit at the sensation her rider might have a clue. They spend a while like that as Lexa takes her through the different commands: the silent ones where Clarke puts some pressure on the reins or saddle, or the whistling cues Lexa helpfully demonstrates. Clarke’s attempts at a whistle are pretty pathetic, and
Lexa grins.

“It only takes practice. Are you ready to come down?”

More than ready. They’ve practiced dismounting, but never after actual riding: all the extra muscle work has left Clarke stiff and sore, and she -- as predicted -- basically falls out of the saddle and into the paddock dirt.

Storm shakes all over, as if grateful that’s done. Lexa is silent, but when Clarke looks up she can see it’s because the other girl has a hand over her mouth.

Clarke picks up a handful of earth and throws it at her.

“If you took a second to think what that’s mostly made of,” Lexa says, easily sidestepping, “you wouldn’t put your hands in it.”

... oh, well, she’s sweaty and filthy anyway at this point, what’s the use. Clarke stays on the ground propped up on her hands as her thighs unknit their knots. She watches Lexa put Storm through her paces, sunlight spilling over them both in ripples and slanting beams, heart thudding in her chest.

Stop that, she tells it. You’re smarter than that.

~*~

It’s just a crush. It makes sense to get a crush on Lexa, despite everything. She’s the one Clarke sees most of the time, who she eats with and spends the quiet moments of the day with. And Lexa is... not unattractive.

It doesn’t mean anything beyond that.

Clarke just needs a little space, time away from Lexa, to sort her head out. The solution, perhaps not surprisingly, comes from Nyko.
One night, during their regular session, he begins to quiz her, laying out herbs and tinctures on the table between them as he barks out symptoms or ailments, waiting for her to show him what procedures they follow. His arms are tightly folded, brow furrowed, and he never praises a good answer. He goes faster, instead, or comes back with a (plausible) complication that only makes the patient worse. When it’s not an answer she can point to he gives her rapid-fire options as he holds up fingers for each, and she gives him back the correct number. It goes on like this for so long the candles burn down to stumps and the fire flickers low in its grate.

Clarke enjoys it. She hasn’t been bored shadowing Lexa in her meetings, but the learning curve there is so much steeper. Sometimes Clarke goes to bed with headaches over the mess of past grievances and newer treaties she’s learning about, the complicated web of history and relationships, with Lexa spinning delicate connecting threads between them from where she’s poised in the middle. One audience nearly erupted into chaos when a warrior, with bleached locks threaded through his braids, hissed something under her breath -- Clarke still sometimes hears words or phrases that don’t make sense to her, but this sounded wrong. The vowels were different, clenched, and the warrior was practically swallowing his “r”s and “d”s.

She barely processed this before another warrior was flying at the first with a roar, weapon bared, and Lexa shot out of her seat to shout in the same strange... strangeness. Clarke struggled to keep a stoic look on her face even when the meeting concluded with words she could understand, and as soon as the door closed behind the petitioners she whirled to face Lexa. She sketched her confusion in broad charades -- her hand cupping and coming away from her mouth, pointing to where the first warrior had stood, an accusing finger at Lexa, her own mouth again, hands help out as empty as her own understanding.

“Oh,” Lexa said after a moment. If she were anyone else, Clarke would say she sounded sheepish. “That was the language of the Shadow Valley Clan.” She picked up her knife -- she’d driven the blade into the surface of the table in the midst of the chaos to make a point -- and started examining the tip. There was absolutely nothing wrong with it, even Clarke could see that. “Did I not assign you a language tutor? I meant to put some kind of instruction into place.”

Clarke waved a hand in front of Lexa’s face until she looked up. Clarke then tapped her thumb to each fingertip, rubbed it across them in a sweep, held her palm up: How many in total?

“Well,” Lexa ducked her head down again, “it isn’t vital for you to understand all the languages of the clans. Of course, you won’t be speaking any, I only thought, if you’re going to attend on me, there will be times when you might wish to understand... I sometimes tour the other clans, and in more remote areas the Woods Clan language isn’t spoken by everyday people --”

Clarke narrowed her eyes, fists on her hips.
“At least one for each clan, plus that of the Mountain,” Lexa said, looking contrite. “Then there are... dialects.”

Clarke considered, in the days that followed where she met her new teachers and made a schedule for their lessons, simply washing her hands of it. Not everything, of course, not being Lexa’s healer, or even her wood witch -- but trying so hard. Doing so *much*. Wasn’t it enough that she was training with Nyko and available to Lexa so many hours out of the day? Sure, she might need to understand things that were spoken in a room where her understanding wasn’t expected -- she just had to look back to her first meeting with Lexa in the woods to realize the advantages of that situation. Or how it could lead to some small insight or edge that could protect them.

(Protect Lexa.)

In the end she submitted to the extra work and weariness by telling herself that if *Lexa* learned all these languages, so can she. Clarke Griffin is the daughter of the Senior Medical Officer and Senior Engineer on the Ark, and the Ark is the culmination of humanity’s overall scientific understanding and ambition. She’s not about to be shown up by some... some *decalingual-plus* Grounder who probably couldn’t pass basic algebra.

(She’ll have to fake learning English all over again. She can cross that bridge when she comes to it.)

So it’s nice to sit in front of Nyko and be tested on something she knows backwards and forwards. And the healer doesn’t intimidate her, no matter how he scowls. He should try it on someone who didn’t have Abby Griffin double-checking their biology homework.

Eventually he lets her go with a grunt of acceptance. She thinks that’s the end of it, until she wakes up the next morning to him entering her rooms, a rucksack in one hand.

“Pack a bag,” he says, tossing in on top of her covers. “Enough for five days, maybe more. Don’t take longer than twenty minutes. I’m waiting for you in the hall.”

Nyko’s attitude makes a lot more sense now that she’s observed him in the infirmary for weeks: she’s not sure how he ended up the only healer in Polis with extensive knowledge of medical procedure and the job to pass it on, but she can appreciate now just how much he has to do at any given moment. So she doesn’t fuss, just dresses and packs several changes of clothes and some personal belongings with one hand while cramming breakfast into her mouth with the other.
When she comes out he leads her into Lexa’s rooms.

It’s early for Clarke -- the sun isn’t up -- so of course Lexa isn’t awake. She’s a curled-up lump under her nest of furs, and she only stirs when Nyko starts lighting the bank of candles with the one that’s routinely left burning overnight. She mumbles indistinctly as she sits up, and Clarke hates the sudden urge to go over and shush Lexa back to sleep, press her back into bed and draw the covers up to her chin.

Stop it, she tells the itch in her fingertips.

“Nyko?” Lexa finally manages, blinking.

“Good morning, Heda,” Nyko says. He finishes with the candles. “I’ve sent for your breakfast. Also, I’m taking your wood witch.”

That wakes her up. She sits up straighter and pushes sleep from her eyes with the heel of her hand. “What?”

“I want her as part of the relief team I’m taking to the northern settlements.”

Lexa frowns. “You have dozens of apprentices. Take someone else.”

“From reports I’ll need to operate two separate teams. I want her to head the second, she’s the best of the current crop.”

Satisfaction uncurls at the pit of Clarke’s stomach at his words, and the way he says them: matter-of-fact, without flattery. She’s always known she was good, but she’s never had a chance to hear her skills judged separately from the fact that she’s Dr. Griffin’s daughter.

It’s almost enough to let her ignore the unhappiness Lexa is too tired to conceal. “I don’t want her gone that long.”
“Why not?” Nyko asks.

“I...” Lexa casts a hesitant look at him, and then Clarke. Her hair is a mess, and there’s a faint crease across one cheek from her pillow. She’s so befuddled, and if Clarke climbed up on the bed right now she’d probably fall back without protest, let Clarke put her hands in that hair and her mouth right under the curve of her jaw, and Lexa would only gasp and loosen, and...

... Clarke needs to get away. They should have left before seeing Lexa.

“So you see the necessity,” Nyko fills the silence when it becomes clear Lexa cannot.

Lexa nods, reluctant. She keeps her eyes on her bedspread even as the handmaidens place a tray beside her filled with covered dishes. Steam drifts into the chilly pre-dawn air when they lift away the lids.

“Good.” If he finds all this uncharacteristic of his Commander, Nyko doesn’t say as much. He turns on his heel as he makes his way out of the room.

Clarke needs to give some kind of goodbye. For obvious reasons, she shouldn’t touch Lexa right now. Not even two fingers to the back of her hand. But she sneaks a little bit closer until she knows the other girl is aware of her, and then lightning-fast steals the top piece of toast, spread thick with honey and spices, off her breakfast tray. She knows it’s Lexa’s favorite. She wonders if Nyko knew when he instructed the kitchens to send it up this particular morning.

Lexa snarls: a weak, almost kittenish thing compared to what Clarke’s seen her use to intimidate in audiences. “Thief,” she says, pulling the tray out of Clarke’s reach. “Why do I even... I have the chance to eat my food with you gone.”

Clarke takes a huge bite as she grins. But the animation fades from Lexa’s face and Clarke can’t bring herself to leave.

Lexa raises her eyes. They look vulnerable without her paint or even the delicate lines of khol she wears for formal audiences.

“Go,” she says. “Nyko’s waiting.”
It’s a command.

Clarke obeys. There’s a lump in her throat from swallowing the toast too quickly. That definitely the reason. Not how solitary Lexa looks, in her wonderful bed in the biggest room atop the highest tower in the city.

~*~

She can’t deny how much she’s missed the apprentices.

Nyko was right -- they just needed time to adjust to her new position. There’s no hesitance or wariness when she approaches them as they load up the wagons. Hern *whoops* to see her, catching Clarke up in a rough hug that lifts her clear off the ground as Sanga and Versi cluster around to grab her hands and shoulders.

“We’re going to have so much fun,” Hern whispers into her ear. “You’ll regret leaving us to become the Commander’s favorite, just wait and see.”

She punches him faux-hard in the bicep as the others laugh.

None of the apprentices ride, so there’s a wagon for them to pile into. The rumblings of the cart along the dirt roads are made bearable by mounds of soft hay. They don’t travel too fast, as the horses that pull them need to set a pace. Sometimes apprentices jog alongside the cart for brief stretches of time to work out their stiff legs. Clarke prefers to sprawl out and watch the countryside go by as the others tell her stories of what she’s missed, sharper bits of hay poking through her clothing when the cart jolts. The air just cold enough to be refreshing, the sun shines high above their heads, and she feels free.

This is what she needs.

The journey takes almost two days and they ride the entire time, sharing the wagons with warriors who sleep in shifts. They pass through fields, and then forests, and then fields again. The road climbs up a mountain and grows narrow, rougher and rockier, until even Clarke opts to hike next to the cart rather than pitch back and forth with the uneven ride. She thinks about a pale gray horse in the
stables who must be waiting for her, maybe even missing her, how if she were here Clarke wouldn’t have to press down on her thighs to leverage herself up the steep trail, and Lexa would --

Clarke catches herself.

Thankfully they don’t have to walk much farther to set up camp. The road dips down into a valley where a creek cuts across one corner, fresh and fast-flowing. That’s where they unpack the wagons and put up the tents, staking out firepits and dividing into teams to get everything ready by nightfall. She buddies up with Sanga to venture into a nearby copse to gather kindling. They find what they need easily enough, but then Clarke spots a few late berries dangling from a bush, the color and shape familiar from one of Nyko’s lectures. Dried and ground into a powder they’re used as a fever reducer, but fresh ingredients this late in the season is an opportunity they can’t pass up. They find another patch, and then another, until Sanga is carrying all the gathered kindling so that Clarke can use both hands to hold the edges of her hair scarf together in a makeshift pouch for all the berries. By the time they’ve picked the bushes clean the sun is sinking low in the sky, and they’ve wandered pretty far from camp.

“Don’t worry about it,” Sanga says when he sees Clarke casting around, alarmed. “I still know where we are. Look.”

He points: the land begins to slope upward out of the valley and into a hillside, here. Clarke tilts her head back to follow the direction of his finger, and spots the vague shape of man-made buildings among the cover of the trees, the drift of smoke.

“We’re underneath the Blue Cliff settlements. We’ll be going there tomorrow morning.” He shifts his burden of dry twigs and greenwood to his other arm, shaking the strain out of the first. “We came through the woods the long way around, we just need to cut across there,” he indicates a break in the trees, a steep ravine crossable by a wooden bridge, “to get back to camp.” Clarke can’t quite read his expression when he adds: “Technically, we’re in Azgeda’s territory now.”

There’s nothing particularly ominous to his tone, but there’s an unspoken agreement to get a move on. Clarke ties up the scarf so that their findings are secure and winds the ends around her wrists so she has both hands to hold onto the railings as they cross the bridge. Sanga scoffs at her, but he’s not the one whose fear of heights got them stuck in a tree to be retrieved by the Commander, so. She keeps her chin up as they go, eyes so focused on the hillside they cross a few times.

The bridge isn’t bad. It’s just wood and applied physics, but besides a few creaks it seems sturdy. It’s narrow enough for Clarke to keep each hand on one railing, but she thinks two people could walk abreast comfortably. She gives a small sigh of relief once they’re over the ravine, though, and she can step into the long grass of the other bank. She moves to make way for Sanga and trips.
She twists at the last moment to land on her elbow, wincing as the impact jars all the way up to her shoulder. Her first instinct is to check the berries -- a few of them were smashed, the dark juice leaking out and staining her scarf, but the rest are okay. She sits up with a sigh of relief.

“You okay?” Sanga asks. Clarke nods and accepts his hand as a help up. “Were you just in a hurry, or -- oh.” He stops, looking wide-eyed at what caused Clarke’s stumble.

It’s a hand. The palm and fingertips are scraped raw, half the fingernails torn out, fingers twisted into a claw. The hand leads to a wrist, leads to an arm, and Sanga tentatively reaches out to push back the thickly-growing grass to reveal a dead body.

... there’s something wrong with it.

Clarke saw her first dead body when she was seven years old: a grandfather who went peacefully in an infirmary bed while Clarke was waiting for Abby finish up and take her home. She’s familiar with the undefinable otherness of death, the strangeness of flesh and muscle with nothing to animate it.

So when she looks down on this dead body and feels a slow, creeping shiver in her belly, it isn’t for that reason.

Whoever they were in life, their death was... hard. And probably a long time coming -- she can see evidence of old bruises, half-healed cuts everywhere tattered clothing falls back to expose skin. The hair is matted into filthy knots. Flies buzz around the eyes and open mouth, where she can see yellowed and broken teeth.

Clarke jerks back, one hand covering her nose and mouth. It’s not just the stench. The body in the grass feels obscene in a way she can’t quite place. Immediately she feels guilty. Alright, the people of Polis are well-fed and cared for, not this... this... But maybe Lexa’s influence only stretches so far, maybe the people of the Blue Cliff and Rock Line settlements aren’t taken care of in the same way by their leaders. Maybe they look like this: battered and on the very edge of brokenness. The healers have their hands full if that’s true.

But Clarke knows she’s missed something when she looks back at Sanga to find his face twisted up in a rictus of hatred.

“Ripa,” he says, with all the vehemence of a curse.
Clarke’s eyes widen. He can’t mean -- this can’t be --

“Look,” he says, subdued. He points to the the body’s bared upper arm. Clarke can barely make herself focus -- her mind is spinning, and at the same time it’s like she can almost hear the clickclickclick of so many pieces falling into place, if only she could get a grip to see the big picture -- on what Sanga means. A curved and pronged brand has been burned into the ripa’s flesh. The same brand she’s seen on dozens of people in the tower; the sign of Lexa’s trust and favor.

“This one was Woods Clan before the Mountain got to it,” Sanga says.

Clarke’s mind reels.

She’s spent too much time in Lexa’s audiences, at this point, not to pick up the gist: ripas are connected to the Mountain, and though they seem to be a special use of the word, they do murder. They attack villages, people, and sometimes only leave pieces of the bodies behind. There doesn’t seem to be any set pattern their attacks, are spoken of with the same randomness of weather patterns. In her wildest, most insane imaginings, Clarke wondered if whoever lurked inside the Mountains (whoever had guns on the ground, and shot those guns at Lexa) had engineered a new breed of wolf or other animal, ramping up the natural savagery of the beast to make it a true monster.

She wasn’t that far off. In the end.

So the Mountain was capturing Grounders. They were using the tech of the old world, all the science and knowledge of the people who had destroyed it, to turn human beings into this.

-- these things ate people --

Clarke just has time to turn to the side and fall on her knees before being sick into the long grass.

“Oh, hey. Hey.” Sanga stands by her shoulder as she spits out the saliva flooding her mouth. “I’m sorry. First time you saw one this close?”

Clarke takes a second before nodding. It’s not a lie.
“Sorry,” he repeats. “Let’s get back to camp. One of the warriors will come by later to burn it.”

He hovers until he can hand her off to Hem, who takes one look at Clarke’s face and forces her to eat an extra helping of the dinner meal. He offers her a sprig of an herb they use for nausea, at least, and Clarke submits to the mothering. She’s feeling better by the time to turn in, and she falls asleep cocooned in the comforting presence of bodies on every side of her bedroll.

~*~

She bolts upright and awake in the middle of the night.

Her breathing is rapid, pulse beating a tattoo at the base of her throat. There’s no threat -- the sounds outside the tent are normal ones, like the wind through the trees and the crackle of embers in the firepits. She can hear the sweetly-pitched hum of insects, the hoots and calls of night animals. It took a while, getting used to how much sound there was on the ground, but she’s learned it’s a good warning system. As long as all those small and secret lives are making noise, they’re not hiding, they’re not on the run from a predator.

So what woke her up?

She’d been dreaming.

She’d been back on the bridge over the ravine, hands gripping the rail on either side. She could see the settlements on the rising hillside, but it had been hard to focus: the perspective kept tilting, kept swaying. The wooden slats shifted beneath her feet with the storm of bodies behind her -- reapers. She’d woken up when she felt hot breath, rotten with the smell of blood, on her neck.

A dream.

That’s all, just a dream.

She lies back down. Closes her eyes.
“The advantage is in the high ground.”

Her eyes pop open.

It’s one of Mr. Pike’s favorite phrases. Earth Skills class is a mishmash of information: part botany, part zoology, part wilderness skills. Then there were the lessons where Pike would roll out the ancient maps and walk them through the battles that had raged, before humankind had found ways to make the mountains shiver and the skies weep acid.

“We have no idea what’s left on the ground,” was how Pike explained the shift in focus. “Or who is left. I know what the Council says,” he said, raising one hand to ward off their protests, “and maybe we are the last humans. But we’re a resilient species. And it can’t hurt to learn some basic military strategy.”

So they discussed the wars they knew the dates and facts about, and Pike showed them troop movements, the way past commanders and generals directed their attacks and planned their defenses in accordance with the shape of the land. “See how they captured the high ground,” was a popular refrain. “The advantage is in the high ground. You have cover, and they don’t. Gravity’s on your side. They have to work harder to get at you. If you can get it, you want to use the high ground.”

That’s where the settlements were. Grounders knew, even decades and a lost world later, how to best position their villages.

And yet.

The reapers were animalistic. Clearly. But they weren’t mindless. They wouldn’t be such a danger if they were stupid or senseless enough to linger out in the open or attack with advance warning. They usually didn’t, she knows that from meetings describing the damages done. The problem with this particular attack was the sheer number of them: the settlements hadn’t had a chance, even being able to see the mass of them advancing up the hill.

She can’t imagine a process that strips enough of one’s humanity to turn you into a cannibal, but leaves enough of the rational mind for teamwork.

And that bridge. More than two people at a time -- four, if she’s being generous -- and it would have broken under their feet. If they came from Ice Nation territory as reported, they would have to take
the bridge in smaller groups.

Maybe she’s wrong. Maybe those, those *things*, were capable of reasoning. Of looking at that bridge and taking the time, one by one or two by two, with a mind for safety.

She doubted it.

So.

*Who guided them across?*

(next chapter)

“You don’t think I know you have secrets? Sharla would have taught you to speak with your hands, but you refused to learn. Who does that? Who cuts themselves off from every person around them, unless they have something to hide? Something they were willing to suffer for, in order to protect?”

Chapter End Notes

I am thrilled to announce the triumphant return to regular updates -- every other Monday -- as long as the fates and my new internet connection cooperate.

(shut up this totally still counts as Monday)
Chapter 11

The days spent at the devastated settlements are long ones. The apprentices get up before dawn, eat and dress in the chilly half-light, and carefully replenish whatever supplies were exhausted from yesterday’s efforts. Then they split into groups, with half accompanying Nyko to Rock Line, the others following Clarke to Blue Cliff.

Clarke can’t verbalize her orders, of course, and the first day her stomach swooped dangerously at the realization that she didn’t know how to marshall the others. But Hern stepped in and became her voice. He anticipates her wishes after long hours working together in the infirmary, and when he has questions he asks them in a low tone before the two of them suss out the answer. Within a few days their partnership is almost seamless, working as a unit in the hospital set up in the village, until sometimes Clarke has to shake off the feeling like she’s missing something once they return to camp and go their separate ways. Once, in the middle of that feeling, like she should have a third hand to grab everything she needs for dinner, she catches Hern’s eye across the firepit. He grins, and she knows he feels the same.

Running the hospital is a blur. The attacks happened days prior, but that only means whatever injuries were treated with makeshift solutions, or even ignored for other concerns, had that time to worsen. Infection has set in, or illness, or Clarke has to figure out how to reverse a wrong-headed “cure” applied in the heat of battle. She delegates what she can to the other apprentices and mostly supervises, trying to make sure the most critical cases receive the attention they need in time. Sometimes hours can pass without her laying hands on a patient herself, but she’s still emptied out and exhausted by the end of each day.

And every day, Clarke stews over how to share her realizations at the ravine bridge.

She does try. She thought Hern was her best bet, and she dragged him out to the bridge one afternoon when the worst injuries were dealt with and all that was left was the waiting. But their connection failed her. Hern knows what she needs, and can guess what she’s thinking, from long observation in a very specific context. Presented with the view at the bottom of the hill, the bridge over the ravine leading to the field of long grass, all Hern could do was look around helplessly and ask if she spotted something else they could harvest for their supplies, like the berries. Clarke eventually gave up, angry helplessness making her hands shake for the rest of the afternoon.

Nyko was another failure. She couldn’t even get him out to the clearing, and her attempts to shift him were only met with growls that he brought her here to share in the work, not to help with hers. “If you have a problem you can’t solve on your own,” he told her, “do it anyway.”
She might have gotten angry again, but his eyes were red-rimmed and she knew for a fact that he was getting by on mere hours of sleep. Rock Line’s village is larger, and had taken the brunt of the reaper attack. Sometimes he stays at the village overnight and doesn’t return to the apprentices’ camp at all.

So Clarke resigns herself to not being understood and doubles down on the work that’s expected of her. Maybe she can boss around one of the warriors before they pick up and leave -- she knows they’re sending reports back to Lexa, probably even specific ones on Clarke. If she makes a big enough fuss right before they go, maybe it will reach the right ears and someone will come out to take another look.

~*~

Their hospital is popular with the village children. Nyko explained to her on the journey here that their tasks would include, among setting bones and stitching wounds, looking after the newer orphans. Once the adults sort through the chaos in the aftermath of the attack each child will be fostered, and have a home and family to call their own again. Until then, it doesn’t hurt for the relief teams from Polis to make sure they have full bellies and warm clothing.

But the kids stick around even after they’ve eaten their rations and picked through all the secondhand offerings from the tower’s dispensary. Clarke thought of shooing them away until she considered that part of their fascination might be chalked up to how rarely they got to see the healing process, instead of the hurt. She had Hern explain the rules to them: they had to keep to the edges, keep out of everyone’s way, and don’t touch anything. The ones that wanted to stay after that have visited consistently, though. Clarke begins to make use of them, showing how to boil dressings or keep watch over sleeping patients and notify the apprentices when they wake. It frees up her more experienced workers and she thinks it makes the children happier -- she can see how much they want to be involved, to belong somewhere.

So it’s a shock to lose so many of them, all at once, after another child runs in breathless and spreads whispers throughout the rest. The only ones remaining stick to their tasks but crane their necks, owl-eyed, to see wherever the rest of the mob has run off to. Clarke dismisses them with a few gestures -- obviously there’s some kind of disruption going on, and she’s annoyed, but she can’t expect untrained kids to stay focused. As they run outside she hears shouts, whoops and cries of delight. She lets her curiosity get the better of her and walks outside into the sunlight.

It takes her eyes a second to adjust after the shadows of the hospital tent. She has the warning of a
child’s shriek of *Heda* before they focus, and find Lexa riding through the village on her horse.

The sight hits Clarke like a physical blow and she sways on her feet, almost unbalanced by the desperate joy that envelops her like a flame, all other concerns, all other doubts, turning to ash.

Lexa spots her right away. Clarke sees the moment it happens. Her face transforms. She doesn’t smile, her expression doesn’t change, but something kindles behind her mask of authority and softens it into warmth. She dismounts, head held high, and opens her mouth --

-- only to be besieged by smaller bodies. The older children find it in themselves to hold back, but the younger kids throw themselves as Lexa, clinging to her legs and arms. One of them, a little girl who’s always putting herself forward for chore duty despite barely coming up to Clarke’s hip, climbs the Commander like she’s a tree. Clarke holds her breath -- she can’t imagine Lexa would be angry with them, not really, but appearances are so very important to her. But these children have had so little to brighten their lives, and --

And Lexa laughs.

She frees one of her arms, but only to better support the girl hanging from her neck. The entire gaggle immediately gets her undivided attention -- she asks them each questions, and Clarke’s pretty sure she greets a few of them by name. Clarke’s too far away to catch the details, but she recalls Lexa talked about touring the different clans and villages. She’s been here before. She remembers them.

She looks so happy.

Clarke has to lock her muscles to keep from running up to her. She wants to -- kiss her, yes, okay, reach up and weave her fingers into Lexa’s tangle of braids and pull that smiling mouth down to her own, definitely. But even more than that. She just wants to... feel her. Lean into Lexa’s warmth and the strong lines of her body, put her head on Lexa’s shoulder and breathe her in. Let go of all the blood and pain that’s filled the last few days and remember what it feels like to be at peace in another person’s presence. *Because* of their presence.

Lexa’s still smiling, laughing with the children. She catches Clarke’s eye again and the smile becomes a little rueful.

Clarke manages to smile back, feeling like she’s swallowing down longing like it’s alcohol, until it
fills her up and makes her fingertips buzz. She points back to the tent and Lexa nods as she keeps up the conversation with her young devotees.

Clarke returns to the comforting darkness of the hospital tent to take a moment. She presses a hand over her heart to feel it banging away in her chest, the way it burns, and burns.

It’s not a crush.

~*~

She can’t deal with it right now. Not here.

So she gathers it up and *shoves* it down, deep inside somewhere, secures it under the pressing weight of everything else that is happening. By the time Lexa enters the hospital tent, Clarke is ready.

Lexa walks in wearing the smile the children gave her.

Clarke grabs her wrist and pulls.

There’s a token resistance -- force of habit, probably -- before Lexa allows herself to be pulled, following Clarke as she leads them both out of the hospital tent. When they reach the edge of the village some instinct prompts Clarke to looks over her shoulder and she sees Lexa opening her mouth to speak. Clarke holds up a finger to her lips. Lexa presses hers together and swallows whatever she was about to say.

Clarke’s not sure which of them shifts the grip, but by the time they’re at the clearing with the long grass she no longer holds Lexa by the wrist. Instead, their fingers are intertwined. Clarke can feel the sword callus on Lexa’s palm against her own. She hopes the Commander’s skin is too tough and scarred to pick up the beat of Clarke’s heart as it pulses all the way to her fingertips.

(Lexa runs hot. Her hand where it holds Clarke is just a little warmer.)
When they’re by the bridge she stops and pulls her hand away. It takes more effort than she wants to think about.

“Here?” Lexa asks, looking around. “Why? What are you showing me?” She casts her eyes around, taking in the landscape: the smoke from the village just visible above the trees on the hill, the wave and sweep of the grasses in the wind. The same wind blows tendrils of her hair free of her braids, and Clarke watches as Lexa push them out of her eyes with a hand. She’s wearing the same gloves Clarke remembers from when they rode into Polis, the ones adorned with tiny bones carved from scrap metal. It’s funny, almost -- Clarke can remembers how much it unnerved her, then. Now she has to twist her mouth up into her cheek to keep from smiling at the Commander’s flare for drama, the ways she keeps others focused on the imposing details so they don’t see the young girl behind them. Clarke keeps her head down as she raises a hand to point to the bridge. She isn’t sure she can keep... this thing she’s feeling off her face.

“I don’t see anyth...” Lexa trails off the moment she sees, eyes going wide. Then they narrow as she steps over to examine the rickety bridge and the way it sways over the ravine. She stares, standing like a statue. Then she whirls, her attention tracing the path the reapers must have taken (sacrificing the high ground) all the way up the hillside. There’s a cold, almost calculating look on her eyes -- one Clarke hasn’t seen since she woke up in Lexa’s tent and heard her claim she would keep her wood witch.

“My warriors told me you found the body of a reaper,” she says quietly. “It was here?” Clarke nods, and Lexa’s expression hardens. “We assumed they attacked from the East, not the North. The ravine ends some distance from here and we thought they went around it. We wondered why they were not spotted much sooner before hitting the settlements, but assigned the fault to the villages’ sentries.” She presses her lips together in a line. “The bridge is new. It isn’t on any of the maps at Polis.

“You know what this means,” she continues. “They were shepherded. Someone took them over the bridge. Someone decided to take the shorter route, knowing that speed and numbers outweighed the disadvantage of their position.” She looks grim. “The reapers didn’t attack the settlements. They were merely the weapon wielded by another.”

She jerks her head to look at Clarke. “You knew. How did you know?”

Clarke frowns at her in confusion -- Lexa knows she found the body here, she can see the facts for herself -- and a heartbeat later it hits home. This is why her attempts to communicate with Hern were so useless. This is why the soldiers told Lexa about the body she found, but not where she found it. It’s one thing to have a warrior’s training. It’s another to know strategy: an awareness of what positioning and distance mean, and how to use them in your favor.
Her mind is still reeling with the mistake when Lexa walks up to her and seizes Clarke just below her shoulders. Lexa’s fingers, covered in those damned gloves, tighten on Clarke’s arms. And Clarke is reminded: yes, all the trappings distract you from the fact the Commander is only a young girl. But that girl is Lexa.

“Who taught you to think like a commander of armies?” Lexa asks, soft and terrible. She searches Clarke’s face. Her cold look pins Clarke as effectively as her grip. “Who taught you to kill a man with one blow? I haven’t forgotten that. You don’t think I know you have secrets? Sharla offered to teach you to speak with your hands, but you refused to learn. Who does that? Who cuts themselves off from every person around them, unless they have something to hide? Something they were willing to suffer for, in order to protect?”

Clarke wrenches free. She stumbles back a few steps before she stops -- where else does she want to go? -- and forces herself to meet the other girl’s eyes.

“Do you understand how much I’ve given you?” the Commander asks. The look on her face is more open, now, and her tone might almost be called pleading. “How I have trusted you? Do you know what some people would give to be this close to me? The advantages they could --” She presses her lips together and looks away.

Clarke burns a little then, because yes, she’s hiding things, she’s keeping secrets. But she never asked to be taken into Lexa’s trust and inner sanctum. She never asked to be taken to Polis. That was all Lexa’s decision and her doing, and if she regrets it now, then --

“I missed you.”

Clarke’s head snaps up. Lexa is still looking away, and the wind almost snatches up the words, they’re so soft. But she continues:

“It made me realize: we can’t go on like this forever, ignoring your silence and your secrets. You didn’t ask for this, and I... I am trying to hold onto that, to allow you the space you need before you trust me. If only I could make you talk to me. If I could just,” she grimaces, “shake the words out of you. I’ve thought about it,” she says, sending a dark look briefly back over her shoulder. “Locking you up until you find a way to tell us who you really are.”

Clarke’s heart hammers away in her chest. Her throat feels tight. It’s oddly similar to how she felt that fateful day she ate those roots in the forest, taking the chance on them instead of starving to death in the woods. She gambled, and lost her voice in the process.
Here’s where it all ended up.

“But I won’t do that.” Lexa sighs. “I am willing to take this risk. For now.” She sets her jaw as she looks somberly back at Clarke. “But not forever. You need to understand that.”

Slowly, Clarke nods. She supposes it was just a matter of time. She’s not sure what she will tell Lexa -- what she’s able to tell her, but. This is her life now. She’s all but accepted that already. If that means going to Nyko’s friend, the woman with ink-stained fingers who tried to sign with her back when Clarke first started working in the infirmary, then... that’s the next step.

After so much subterfuge and secrecy, the thought of being truly known is terrifying. But there’s no immediate demand. Lexa said she has time.

“I did miss you.”

This time when Clarke raises her eyes, Lexa’s are warmer. There’s a heat that kindles inside Clarke in response, but it’s too much. She knows it’s too much. What Clarke feels doesn’t fit into an easy admittance, even if she could speak it out loud. She shrugs instead, forces an attitude of nonchalance.

The twist of Lexa’s lips grows into a true smile. “I know you missed me, too.”

~*~

They’re throwing a party for Lexa. Of course.

No one’s calling it that -- officially, this is the same end-of-harvest celebration Clarke has heard about since she arrived, mostly from children who were worried it wouldn’t happen this year. But from what she’s observed the harvest doesn’t truly end for a while. And yet, here everyone is in a flurry of anticipation. When she gets back to her hospital at Blue Cliff it’s deserted except for the worst-off of her patients, the ones that can barely walk around on their own or need a daily treatment to go about their day.
The atmosphere of the village itself is changed, too. People are walking around with more urgency, their gestures larger, their voices raised. They greet Clarke as she passes but they’re distracted with their own business as they chatter about the preparations: the food they’ll cook and who will perform and will everything be finished in time. It’s as if the life had been drained out of the village, and Clarke is only now seeing it come back into full force. As if having their Heda has reminded everyone that they did, despite everything, survive.

“Come on,” Hern tells her when the sun begins its slow descent. “There’s nothing more for today, we might as well go back to camp and get ready.” Clarke frowns -- not at him, but at the idea of abandoning their post when the day is barely half over. “I know,” Hern says. “But I promise you, no one’s coming back here tonight.”

“Not if they broke both legs,” Sanga mutters as he packs up. “They’d still drag themselves to Rock Line on their elbows.”

They both laugh at Clarke’s appalled expression. She only goes with them when they pull at her arms.

The apprentices’ camp is almost as busy as the Blue Cliff village. The ceremony is being held at the second settlement, the bigger one that Nyko tends to. Apparently it’s common for the two villages to come together for this celebration each year, and in this way, so there are no hard feelings about who will play host for the Commander.

Clarke hasn’t seen Lexa since earlier in the day. They parted ways when coming back from the ravine, Lexa heading off to camp while Clarke returned to her duties. Lexa’s not here any longer, though. Or Clarke can’t see her as they walk through the thicket of tents. She does look.

Lexa brought a small group of warriors with her from Polis, probably her entourage on the road. Clarke doesn’t know all the names or characters of the soldiers who initially came with the apprentices, but she’s seen them around camp and at the dinner meal often enough to know when she’s looking at a new face. She spots a few of them by the creek right where it cuts across the edge of camp as they wash off the dirt from the road. The tallest is a young woman, loud and laughing as she commands the group, utterly unselfconscious when she strips off her shirt. She’s facing the other direction, which leaves Clarke with a perfect view of the grooves and shadows of her muscled back.

Maybe she’s able to feel Clarke’s gaze, because the she turns to looks over her shoulder. The warrior doesn’t seem flustered by the attention -- if anything she preens a little, tilting her head to the side to that her heavy braids fall away for a better view. She meets Clarke’s eyes boldly, with similar appraisal.
“I wouldn’t,” Versi says. Clarke nearly jumps a foot in the air -- she hadn’t noticed the apprentice coming out to stand by her shoulder. Versi eyes the half-naked warrior by the creek bank. “That’s Bryn. Last season two apprentices almost crippled each other when they found out she was bedding both of them. Lexa had to get involved. Come on,” as she hooks her hand around Clarke’s elbow, “There’ll be plenty of others to choose from tonight.”

Clarke only has a moment to wonder what she means by choose from before Versi pulls her into the sleeping tent. She looks back to have Bryn throw her a broad wink before disappearing from view.

~*~

“Our little witch has met Bryn,” Versi announces as they approach the other apprentices.

“No,” Hern says, practically a scold. At the same time Sanga shakes his head and says: “Not Bryn.”

Clarke rolls her eyes at them both. She wasn’t... she was only looking. There’s no crime in looking.

But she can’t explain that to them, so she gives an exaggerated nod to show the message has been received. They go back to sorting through fabric and adornments the villagers bring in by the armful, happy to help the apprentices dress for tonight’s occasion. The young men and women all seem to be friends of Versi, who acted as Nyko’s right hand the way Hern has been Clarke’s over at Blue Cliff.

“Blue Cliff people are farmers, and their harvests are some of the latest and sweetest among the clans because of the valley’s weather,” Versi explains. She pulls out a narrow length of fabric dyed purple and red, huge tassels on one end. She shows Clarke how to tie the end around her waist so that the tassels fall against one ankle. “Rock Cliff clan can barely grow grass, but they tend the animals as they roam the mountain range. The air up there is purer, and their milk and cheese and wool is amazing.”

“Rock Line and Blue Cliff, almost one clan,” one of the village girls Clarke doesn’t know breaks in. Her words are lightly accented, and Clarke realizes some of the apprentices are talking to the newcomers in more words she doesn’t recognize than since first arriving at Polis. This girl is friendly, though, smiling so broadly her ruddy cheeks crease. “Except we are not boring.”
Versi shakes her head at Clarke. “Cinci is a goat-dancer. She thinks anyone who can’t climb rocks or fight off thieves with a stick is boring.”

“They are.” She stops Versi from tying a yellow-and-green length onto Clarke. “No, wrong colors! No, no, sit, I will.” Her hands are surer than Versi’s as she ties the complicated-looking knot that somehow manages to lie square and flat when she’s finished. Cinci is wearing -- Clarke counts -- six of these fabric pieces herself, and the effect is decorative and almost skirt-like without limiting her movement. Underneath that Cinci wears the same worn and patched clothes of almost every other Grounder. But these fabrics pieces are beautiful. Clarke takes one into her hand to examine it better: the color is true throughout, the weave tight and even.


She does. The pieces Cinci picked are beautiful, the colors and different patterns subtly harmonious. Clarke smiles and nods. Slowly, she reaches out to point to Cinci’s six pieces, and then counts on her fingers that the villager has only tied three onto Clarke.

“No more, you do not know how to wear. Tangle.” Cinci tilts her head to the side. “Shy? Or not talk?”

“She can’t speak,” Versi says, fiddling with her own and much clumsier knots. “Or I’d make her swear an oath on Heda’s life to stay away from Bryn. I will watch you, tonight.”

Clarke would strangle her if they weren’t in mixed company. She settles for putting her hands on her hips and stomping her foot, instead, hoping it gets the message across.

Cinci is watching them both with big eyes. “You keep her away from her (word)” she asks Versi, using a term that doesn’t sound like the Woods Clan’s language to Clarke’s now-accustomed ear.

“Lover,” Versi corrects her in the language Clarke knows. “Bryn is no one’s lover, she’s...” She screws up her face before saying another word Clarke doesn’t know, is pretty sure she’s not supposed to know, the way Cinci’s eyebrows shoot up to her hairline.

“Ah,” she says. Cinci turns around to place both her hands on Clarke’s shoulders. “Tonight is not for that kind,” she tells Clarke sternly. “Tonight is for,” and here she places a closed fist to the left of her sternum, makes a show of opening and bringing it forward, “better.”
Tonight is for --

Oh.

*Oh.*

Right. Of course. Small and isolated settlements at the edges of their territories, not a diverse gene pool to choose from within your own village, so when the two clans come together in celebration, they make the effort to really... *come together.* And that invitation is extended to their current guests, because why limit themselves.

... sometimes her life is ridiculous.

And here Clarke is, and she can’t even say: no thank you, she is not looking to get laid. She can only stand there and *feel* her face turning red as Cinci and Versi cackle.

Cinci brings out strings of metal disks next, pounded so flat and thin they make the sweetest shivering sound when they fall against each other. She loops them around Versi’s and Clarke’s wrists, and when Clarke takes one between her fingers she can see the faint remainder of what used to be raised on its surface: *e pluribus unum.*

“And another one,” Cinci says, flourishing a longer string. “Since you cannot speak, a different way to make noise, right? To draw the eye,” she says, knowingly. “Here, let me...” She teases out several pieces from the crown of Clarke’s head and begins to braid them flat against her skull.

Versi blinks at the two of them, her mouth bending into something thoughtful and wry.

Cinci’s fingers pause. “Does it look wrong?”

Versi shakes her head. “No, no. I’ve spent too much time among Woods Clan, that’s all.”

Which sounds like she isn’t, originally. Makes sense, Clarke decides. Maybe that’s how Versi was
able to pick up the Rock Line language so quickly, if it’s her third or more.

“Why do you say?”

“Braids are important,” Versi explains. “When someone else braids your hair your head is held in place, your neck is exposed. You’re vulnerable.”

Cinci scoffs deep in her throat. “Woods Clan is too much with war.”

“You would be too, if the Mountain ever bothered you or your goats,” Versi says sharply. “Anyway. Only two kinds of people will braid another person’s hair, even if neither is a warrior. Those whose lives are bound together, like -- well, usually family. But sometimes lovers.”

Cinci gives Clarke a solemn look, her clever fingers still at work. “It is true. This way, I offer you my love. Or,” waggling her eyebrows, “to keep you away from this (word) -- Bryn -- for tonight.”

Versi throws her head back to laugh. Clarke rolls her eyes so hard her accompanying head movement dislodges Cinci’s fingers, and the Rock Line girl has to start again.

Cinci has Clarke sit in front of her on the bedroll as she tackles weaving the chain of disks into her hair for the second time. It gives Clarke an opportunity to watch all the other apprentices get dressed for the celebration. Most of them are wearing the same colorful fabric and metal disks from the Rock Line clan, but a few have abstained in favor of a simply braided crown of grain stalks. It’s probably a Blue Cliff tradition if they’re the farmers.

Clarke has to agree with Cinci, it’s a little boring.

Some of them are still having their headpieces fitted, the tough stalks being woven together as they watch by a group of young people, with a few faces Clarke recognizes from her own village. They wave shyly when she looks over. One of the girls leans in close to another to whisper, and the two giggle as the others sit up and -- Clarke guesses -- demand to share in the gossip. Soon all of them, and a few of the apprentices, are cutting looks over at Clarke.

Cinci notices, calls out something in her language across the tent. The response she receives causes even more people to turn and look at Clarke, and Cinci raises her eyebrows.
“Heda visited you today?” she asks.

Clarke looks back at her helplessly -- okay, yes, she did, but something in Cinci’s tone is warning Clarke not to nod as if she’s taken the question at face value.

“Lexa checked in with both hospitals,” Versi answers for her.

“No,” Cinci says, but she lowers her voice. “They say the Commander visited her.” She points to Clarke for emphasis. “That they went off together.”

This makes Versi straighten and look at Clarke suspiciously. Clarke’s cheeks heat, but she holds out her empty hands and hope Versi understands it means she has nothing to hide.

Nothing to hide about what happened, anyway. But Clarke’s not sure she could put what she’s feeling into words, even if she did have her voice.

“It’s not what they’re thinking,” Versi says after a beat. “She’s the Commander’s healer, they work together very closely.”

Cinci scrunches up her face, addresses Clarke as she asks: “So, you are not --”

“They’re not.”

Again it’s Versi why answers, and both Clarke and Cinci turn at the sudden coldness of her tone. Anxiety makes Clarke’s palms sweat -- she hasn’t forgotten the way Versi has always talked about Lexa, or how she reacted to the gold paint, but she hasn’t been unfriendly, not yet, and Clarke had hoped it wouldn’t damage their friendship. But the way Versi just sounded --

“I am sorry,” Cinci says, and Clarke startles. The Rock Line girl looks truly contrite. “You told me, but I forgot -- you knew the Commander’s lover.”

Clarke sucks in a surprised breath.
“Yes.” Versi busies herself with tidying up some of the mess caused by the preparations, her movements jerky.

“You were close,” Cinci supplies, watching her.

“We were from the same clan. We came to Polis together.” Versi sits down on a bedroll, her expression pinched. “Costia was my best friend.”

Clarke stares at her.

“I am sorry,” Cinci repeats. “I know the pain gets smaller. But it doesn’t leave.” She reaches out to pat Versi’s knee, and Clarke knows she should offer some similar gesture of comfort, but she can’t seem to move. “Does it help to talk? What was she like?” Almost wistfully: “We know how the Commander loved her. She was beautiful?”

“She wasn’t.” Versi rubs a hand across her mouth. “She was nice-looking, but she wasn’t -- I’m much prettier, everyone always said so.” She doesn’t sound like she’s bragging. “It didn’t matter. Everyone loved her best, anyway. We all did.”

Cinci picks up Versi’s hand to give it a squeeze, but remains silent.

“She was quiet,” Versi resumes after a moment, and the softness of her voice seems to create a bubble that shields them from the gaiety surrounding. “She was... calm. Always. She listened. If she got upset it was at herself, for not understanding something. Or sometimes at others, for not trying hard enough to understand. But she never got tired of trying, or gave up on them.”

“A good person,” Cinci suggests, and Versi gives a sad, watery little chuckle.

“The best,” she says. “No one was surprised when Lexa favored her. I told you,” with a small shrug, “everyone loved her.”

Oh, but Lexa wouldn’t just have loved her like the others. Clarke knows that, and from the defeated look in Versi’s eyes the other apprentice does, too. Maybe everyone else admired Costia’s calm and gentleness, enjoyed it and loved her for it. Lexa would have craved it. Where else could she have
found that peace, that generosity of spirit, that lack of expectation or demand?

Not from you, something whispers inside of her. She thinks of the man she killed the first night she knew Lexa, of trying to kill Lexa when she heard what happened to the dropship, or even the way she’d made Lexa chase her through the marketplace. Because even when Clarke has been happy -- and she was happy that day, so happy -- she’s never been calm.

And she’s only quiet for lack of any other choice.

“When Azgeda murdered her,” and Clarke’s eyes fly up to Versi’s face, “it felt like -- like a mistake. I don’t think Costia made an enemy in her whole life. When they killed her it felt so... wrong.”

“It was a shock.” Cinci puts her free hand across their joined ones. “To kill, and not in battle, when she is not a warrior -- to do the things they do with the body --”

“Please,” Versi chokes out. “Please don’t.”

Clarke can hear the pulse of her blood thudding in her ears.

“I am sorry. We all know why they do. These things, I mean, and Azgeda.” Cinci pats their joined hands, her accent thicker and her syntax stumbling as she struggles to self-correct. “Not everyone knows why Commander did not kill them all.”

“I hated her when she didn’t,” Versi confesses in a whisper. “I thought -- at first I thought she was planning, working out how to... But then they announced the Coalition, and with all the clans, and I --” Versi shudders.

“It would be her right,” Cinci continues, slower. “To declare war.”

“But then there would be no Coalition,” Versi says dully. “Azgeda has stronger ties with... No,” as she shakes her head, “war isn’t what Lexa wanted for us. Her duty to us, to her people, is what she values most. Nothing is more important to her. Not even love.”

“It is incredible sorrow,” Cinci says softly. “But she cannot carry it always.”
“No, she will.” Versi straightens and wipes at her eyes. “It’s what made me stop hating her. Well, someone has to look after her, and Costia would be so angry if I didn’t try.”

Oh. Oh, so that’s why -- so, not a crush for Versi, either. Maybe she’d once had one on Lexa, maybe the embers were banked and still burning, but mainly it was...

“But no, she,” Cinci shakes her head, frowning. “I am sorry, I know Costia was your great friend, but the Commander cannot live with loss forever. She must, ugh, I don’t know how to say,” and here she slips into her own language, her words suddenly fluid and quick as she says something to Versi.

But Versi shakes her head. “We expected that, but no.”

“Not ever?”

“A few times,” Versi amends. “Only warriors with fierce reputations. And only nomads. No one with a clan to call their own.” She looks at Clarke -- it’s the first time she’s acknowledged that Clarke is still listening. Versi says directly to her: “No matter what happens, Lexa won’t love any of our people. Not ever again.”

It’s as if the muscles in Clarke’s face freeze into place -- not cold, but rigid, refusing to express any emotion. As if that can keep her from feeling any.

Cinci looks back and forth between them. “Too much talk,” she murmurs to herself. “Too much, and -- and tonight is not for talking!” She stands, shaking off the oppressive mood. “Tonight is celebration. Come, help me,” pulling at Versi, getting the other girl to her feet. Cinci practically drags the other apprentice away from Clarke and out of the tent.

Clarke’s grateful for it.

Clarke is tough. She thinks she’s proven that. She survived her father’s execution by the Council, a year in solitary, crashing back to an inhabited Earth, even losing her voice and her friends and identity. She’s rebuilt herself. She survived. Sometimes it takes almost everything she has, but in the end Clarke can take quite a lot.
She’s not sure she could have taken one more second of the naked pity on Versi’s face.

(next chapter)

It’s just a dance, Clarke tells herself as she reaches out to take Bryn’s hand. It won’t hurt anyone.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Clarke walks with Hern and Sanga to the festivities. They’re both wearing the colorful fabric and tassels from Rock Line, instead of Blue Cliff’s crown of grain. Sanga has seven of them tied to his waist -- Clarke counts twice.

“Rock Line is my birth clan,” he explains to her when he sees her do it. “My village is farther south, but I can walk the rocks better than anyone, and you watch me in the stick dances tonight.”

Clarke watches him to learn the trick of walking, the slight sway of the hips to keep the lengths of fabric from wrapping themselves around your legs as you go.

Hern has only one. It’s still too many.

“Stop it, it’s my eye, I can’t see it,” he says when they try to hide their laughter as they stop to untangle him for the third time. He ends up wrapping the whole thing around his waist and tucking in the end, and the usually stoic Sanga is in stitches.

The sun has nearly disappeared behind the trees when they reach the feasting area. It’s clearly marked by twin bonfires, and the three of them can hear the laughter and snatches of singing long before they reach the site. There’s no organization that Clarke can make out once they arrive. It’s just a happy mass of people hemmed in by the circles of light and warmth thrown by the bonfires on either side. Smaller pools of light come from torches and cookfires. She notices the food stands first - - her stomach rumbles with the whiff of food, and she realizes she skipped lunch. Hern apparently remembers it, too, because he pulls her in that direction, both of them waving Sanga off as he disappears into the crowds.

This food is amazing.

It’s not like food hasn’t been an almost daily revelation for her since coming to the ground. On the Ark she read books, even poetry, that waxed on and on about the beauty of food. She always knew
her own appreciation would be limited -- not only were most of the things they described out of her reach (animal protein, non-recycled water, spices), but intellectually she understood that any food created with machines or in the artificial environments of Farm Station, miles from soil and sun and natural atmosphere, could only be imitations of what her ancestors had known. And she’s been proven right over and over again, sometimes truly struggling to encompass the rainbow of tastes and textures now available to her. Food was always nourishing and good, but never before has it lit up her nerve endings like it does on the ground. When it comes to being impressed by food, the bar has risen high.

But this food is amazing.

Hern is a man on a mission, dragging Clarke from booth to booth and barely stopping to load her down with spoils before moving on to the next. Clarke had a vague anticipation, from watching archived movies, of seeing animals roasted on a spit as Grounders tear off whatever piece they want. Instead they’re handed slim skewers with delicately carved bits of meat, or roasted vegetables, or even fruits glazed with a thin sugary shell. She inhales the first one -- she adores venison and can recognize it by smell, now, it’s one of the few meats that isn’t fatty enough to leave her feeling sick -- and Hern shows her to toss the empty stick to the ground. The abandoned skewers crunch into splinters under everyone’s boots, and Clarke imagines they’ll become so much mulch with the next rain.

Clarke paces her eating from then on, trying to appreciate it all. Every food stall has its own unique offerings: different sauces or cooking methods, or groupings of ingredients which produce a different flavor when eaten together. No one trades or pays in any way for it. Instead the owners encourage patrons to compare their goods with their neighbors’ in friendly competition, boasting they have the better recipe or quality ingredients. (Or so Hern explains to her, since a lot of the talk isn’t in the Woods Clan dialect.)

Hern lets her slow down when they reach a different section. Here, large metal pieces hammered thin and flat are balanced over low fires. Blue Cliff cooks ladle batter right on, spreading it into a thin circle as they ask quick questions of whoever’s turn has come. In response to the question they place all kinds of things into the mix, and the end result is folded up into a neat square and wrapped in an empty corn husk before handed off. Hern steps up to order for both of them, and when he returns he gives Clarke something filled with egg, and crunchy green, and spices in a red paste. Then he ushers her over close to one of the bonfires -- the heat scalds her cheeks and crackles the ends of her hair -- to where they’re taking wrapped bundles of potatoes and shucked corn just out of the heat. The Blue Cliff cooks dress them with cheese and a creamy sauce, adding just a dash of herbs before handing them off.

It would be an overload to her senses, except before they began Hern handed her a large glass of something dark and sweet with the sting at the end of each swallow. She once snuck some moonshine with Wells -- it tasted like it burned, and it’s not until she’s downed enough of Hern’s drink to feel a warm fire kindling in her stomach that she makes the connection. Something in there is fermented. She knows the chemistry involved, and even a little bit of the biology, but nothing
prepared her for this... amazing feeling. She’s loose and light in all her joints, held up by the dancing light and the energy all around them. She’s so happy.

Or she is, until she catches a glimpse of a familiar face. The apprentices mostly dressed themselves according to their hosts’ traditions, but the warriors from Polis chose to represent Woods Clan ways. She’s seen a lot of faces with dark paint tonight, the designs sharp and clear without the blood and sweat of battle. She hasn’t seen Lexa wearing it in, oh. What feels like a lifetime.

The Commander is standing with Nyko and a few others Clarke recognizes from the Blue Cliff settlement as village elders or warrior-leaders. There’s no food in her hands, and her gaze never wanders from the faces of those around her to the more lighthearted festival-goers. She’s listening intently, nodding her head with a small frown. When the music starts, a handful of men and women starting out with a steady drumbeat, Lexa doesn’t even look up. She doesn’t seem to feel Clarke’s eyes on her, either. She usually does.

“Come on,” Hern says, pulling at Clarke. “Finish up so we can join the dancing.”

Clarke crams the last few bites of grilled corn into her mouth and swallows it down with the -- it’s probably mead, isn’t it? not like she can ask -- as she lets him lead her away. Just because Lexa doesn’t ever have fun, that doesn’t mean Clarke can’t.

There’s an area sectioned off for dancing, but it’s already occupied. A group of young people are facing off in two straight lines with sticks in their hands. The sticks are carved straight and smooth, each about as long as their holder’s arm and no thicker than Clarke’s wrist.

They’re not... quite... dancing with them. It looks a lot like that -- each person in a line moves in unison, but the separate lines move in response to each other -- but Clarke’s been on the ground long enough to know better. It’s beautiful, even balletic, the way the swing of a stick results in a leap, a back bend, a twist. But when the sticks meet each other, the force behind it is no joke: the crack reverberates through the clearing. And then there’s the way all the not-dancers move in almost perfect synchronization. Even Sanga, as Clarke recognizes the apprentice’s face among them with a jolt. She knows for a fact he’s been at Polis for close to two years, at least, and yet he has the same timing and finesse as the villagers who maybe never stepped outside of Rock Line territory. They must teach these drills very early, and often -- even while they call them dances.

They bring it to an end, sticks crossed high and over their heads, just as the music strengthens and solidifies into a true melody. The stick-dancers break apart to smile and sling arms around each others’ shoulders, walking off to clear the space.
“I’ve missed that,” Sanga groans as he spots the other two apprentices in the crowd, coming over. “It’s really been too long.” He takes the mead out of Clarke’s hands and drains it in long swallows. “What?” he asks when he’s finished, and she twists her lips at him. “I’ll bring you another.”

He’s back before the crowd has finished hashing out what the musicians should play -- there seem to be at least five favorites and no way of deciding them except via complicated hand game -- and hands over full mugs for Clarke and Hern both. This is something different, though, it’s spicier and the bubbles go right up her nose.

Sanga claps her on the back as she coughs. “That’s it,” he says cheerfully, “down it goes.” When she next raises the mug to her lips, he oh-so-helpfully tips it upwards so that she has to drink it faster.

_Oh, wow_, she thinks in the aftermath, when he takes back the mugs. There’s a feeling in her chest like the slow inflation of a balloon, fragile and buoyant. _I’m probably drunk, now._

It works for her, though. All evening she’s been trying hard to ignore all that happened that day -- Lexa’s arrival, the confrontation at the ravine, Versi’s stories of Costia. She’s concentrated on what’s in front of her hands and eyes in that moment, not the multitude of new feelings and suspicions brewing in the back of her head. This feeling, though, lifts her up above them, lets her leave them behind entirely.

She loves it. She _needs_ it.

She doesn’t fight Hern when he grabs her hand and pulls her into the dancing. She has no idea what she’s _doing_, but oh wow, the levels of not-caring are amazing. She laughs and trips over her feet and turns the wrong way, and it’s amazing, because none of it matters to her. Not like the fact that Lexa - -

Clarke rightens herself, takes in a deep breath. She’s okay. She just needs to focus on something else.

The dancing isn’t like she expected, and it’s nowhere near as organized as the stick-dancers. It’s roughly two groups on either side of the clearing. Each has a leader out in front -- she doesn’t see any way of deciding who, so she guesses it’s on a volunteer basis -- who decides on the moves. They’ll demonstrate, the group behind them follows, and then while the group repeats those moves a second time the leader will begin to demonstrate another round. When one group finishes, amidst whistles and catcalls and whoops, the other will answer with their own rounds of dancing.
It’s just hard enough to be fun. And if she misses a step or a turn, everyone’s looking at the leader or their own feet anyway. Even if they’re so good they don’t need to, they’re watching the other group. Clarke figures it out halfway through the first round: the two groups aren’t random like she first thought, there are definite eyes being made across the divide -- and multiple flirtations aimed at the same target. Seems like, if you wanted a partner for the rest of the night, this was where you scoped out your prospects.

Laughter bubbles up in Clarke, almost as heady as the alcohol that has her head spinning. There are a few people in the other group, she now notices, trying to catch her eye. It’s funny, but it stings a little, down deep beneath the rush of amusement. She’s more used to that than -- she’s pretty, she’s usually able to get people to like her -- she’s never --

She bumps into someone and holds up her hands in apology. They wave it off, but just beyond them -- when she turns she can see -- Lexa is finally looking over at her. Smiling a little. Approving.

Screw her. Clarke turns her head back to the front so quick she feels something twinge in her neck, picks up the dance in the middle of a move. This isn’t about making Lexa happy.

With her eyes front, she finally notices a half-familiar face in the other group. Almost exactly opposite her, across the clearing, Bryn stretches her arms back and over her head, nonchalant. She lets her eyes meet Clarke’s like it’s a mistake, and then grins.

Yeah, Clarke thinks, and she’s not sure in response to what, but: yeah. That’s right.

She smirks in response, shaking her hair away from her face.

The next thing she knows, she’s getting yanked out of the group of dancers.

“What did I say to you?” Versi demands once they reach the edge of the clearing. “What did I tell you?”

Clarke makes her eyes wide and guileless. The alcohol makes her over-confident, and she throws in a trembling lower lip.

That’s probably her mistake, because Versi’s grip tightens, and she scowls. “Oh, don’t try it. You know exactly what I’m talking about.”
“Versi, why did you -- oh,” Cinci slows as she nears them. “And is the little witch enjoying our celebration?”

“A little too much.” Versi looks back over her shoulder at the other girl. “Wait, where did you hear that she...”

Cinci shrugs. “If there’s a rumor about the Commander, it will be told at least once.” She bends her head close to Clarke’s. “I don’t know Woods Clan stories, but this one is so exciting -- captured and taken back to Polis, protecting the Commander from harm. You are a very little witch, though.”

Clarke sticks out her tongue.

Cinci only laughs. Her accent is thicker, even if her words come a bit smoother, and Clarke thinks she’s not the only one who’s been drinking Rock Cliff’s bubbles. “But you look very nice,” she says, touching the bracelets and jingling headpiece she gave Clarke earlier. “I think you have no trouble finding someone to admire, even if you are as powerful as they say.”

“That’s the problem,” Versi growls. Her arms are folded tightly, and if it wasn’t soft grass beneath her feet Clarke is certain she’d hear a foot tapping.

Behind them the music finishes with a flourish, and the crowd cheers and applauds. Clarke looks up into the sky and finds the stars are coming out -- how long has she been here? How long was she dancing? Much longer than she thought.

“My greetings, and my gratitude, to the peoples of Rock Line and Blue Cliff.”

Something snags in Clarke’s chest and she has the strangest urge to run, to get as far away from the sound of Lexa’s voice as she can, before... she’s not sure what would happen. Whatever it is, her fear of it is no match for the ache to look at Lexa’s face, and so she turns. The Commander is standing on a low boulder as she addresses the crowd, the night breezes tugging at the edges of her coat. Too bad it’s too dark for them to spot your gloves, Clarke thinks at her, but she knows it's unnecessary -- between the shadows from the fire and the darker ones of paint, Lexa’s face looks like it was carved out of nightmares.

“I am honored, tonight, to share your fires as you prepare for the oncoming season.” Her voice carries well. It helps that everyone has fallen so raptly silent, but the face paint helps Clarke
remember Lexa must use this skill a lot, crying orders and encouragement in the midst of battle. “I
know there is fear among you, and loss. I know you have suffered. I know you have not yet moved
past that pain.”

Her words seem to constrict the circle of light surrounding them all, drawing them tighter together in
the warmth of her understanding. They aren’t glib or easy words. Anyone can -- everyone does --
sense the empathy behind them, the way Lexa offers it like a gift. She knows their pain because she
has carried it, too, and that’s why she comes to them now with comfort.

Clarke thinks: I’m in love with her.

It gives her a second of vertigo, like she’s back standing in the center of the ravine. There’s nowhere
to run or hide, just the knowledge of it yawning beneath. Ready to swallow her up.

“I also know that you are strong in the face of the darkness that is coming. Once, a similar darkness
tried to blot out the world -- our people survived it, and so we stand here today. We can endure,” and
her voice grows quieter but no less clear, even with the sounds of crickets and rustling leaves, “even
the darkest times. Together, we shall see each other through to the sweetness of spring.”

The chant of Heda, Heda starts soft but gains momentum, until the entire crowd is lifting fists into
the air at her title. Even little kids. It’s exultant.

It seems to soothe Versi, who allows herself to be drawn away when Cinci whispers in her ear.
Leaving Clarke to feel...

She’s not sure. It’s like she’s still teetering on the edge of that drop, caught between letting go and
falling backwards to safety.

She’s just not sure.

Things are different, after. Clarke sees the food vendors pack up their remaining wares and dismantle
the makeshift tables. Children are sent back to their villages in the care of a few adults. The children
are cheerful about it, most of them ready to nod off where they stand. Their guardians, on the other
hand, all have the distinct look of someone who drew the short straw. Once they’re gone the Blue
Cliff people take off their crowns of grain, tossing them into the bonfires to result in sharp crackles
and a shower of sparks. Those that wear their hair long shake it loose until it spills over their
shoulders or out in a soft cloud. The Rock Line clan doesn’t seem to have a costume change, but
they look on appreciatively.

The music changes as well. Everything is put away except for the drums. Clarke expects the result of so many percussive instruments to be harsh, even overwhelming, but she’s wrong. They place the drums between their knees and use their hands like they’re crafting something delicate -- applying fingertips, the sides of their palms, the backs of their knuckles -- and the chorus they create is smoothly insistent, like a heartbeat.

And that changes the dancing.

Versi is the first Clarke recognizes among the new dancers, her face pressed close to a girl with short dark hair -- they turn, and Clarke blinks when she realizes it’s Cinci. Cinci sees her staring, pulls Versi closer as she winks at Clarke.

Clarke can see more than a few of the apprentices mixed in with the dancers. Some of them are smiling, leaning in close to talk in their partner’s ear. Some of them, like Versi, are much more serious, their eyes half-lidded and their expressions intent.

It isn’t always one person dancing with one other. She spots a couple trios, and even a foursome, their hands or arms all linked as they carve out a space of their own among the press of bodies. A boy-girl pair approaches Hern, holding out their free hands in an invitation that transcends the language barrier.

Hern looks at Clarke with a question in his eyes. She has a second of thinking how much of a hard time she could give him before she rolls her eyes and jerks her head in the pair’s direction. His answering smile is ridiculously huge, and he bounces off in their direction.

Clarke moves a little away from the throng of dancers. Not so far as to feel apart from the celebration, just enough to that the cooler night air reaches her through the heat and smoke of the bonfires. She leans back against a tree trunk with her eyes still on the people in the clearing. It feels good to rest against something solid, let the whirl of heat and alcohol spin a little slower.

“Don’t you like dancing?” Bryn asks as she comes out of the shadows to lean against the same tree. The trunk is wide enough for both of them, but she’s still very close. Clarke gives Bryn a searching look, head cocked to the side.

“Oh, I know you don’t talk. But it’s a simple question.” Bryn shakes her hair away from her face.
Her black hair, when not done up in braids, is styled in twists the thickness of Clarke’s pinky finger, perfectly tight and even after the evening’s activities. “Just nod or shake your head.” She leans in closer. “Unless everyone told you to be careful, and now you’re scared of me.”

Clarke purses her lips, as if considering. Then she narrows her eyes and blows a big, fat raspberry.

Bryn laughs, looking surprised at herself for it. Her expression warms as she looks down at Clarke -- she’s much taller. “It happens more often than you’d think. But I’ve learned to be careful. Nowadays,” and she settles further back against the tree, her arm pressing against Clarke’s, “I only talk to very brave girls.” She’s very warm, but Clarke shivers.

“You seem pretty brave. You saved Lexa from an assassin.” Clarke startles at the casual way Bryn uses the name, but when she tries to read the warrior’s face it’s too shrouded in shadow. “I thought you’d be a lot bigger when I heard that.” Clarke can hear the tease in Bryn’s voice even before she sees it in her eyes. Clarke turns to face the dancers, folding her arms in a grand show of non-amusement.

Bryn laughs low in her throat. “And you’re not afraid of me, despite your friends.” When Clarke turns at that Bryn meets her eyes with a knowing look. “Still, I’m not sure you qualify. Only one way to tell.” She pushes away from the tree but immediately turns back, holding out her hand. “Are you brave enough to dance with me?”

Clarke takes in the sight of Bryn backlit by the bonfires, the way it burnishes her skin and throws the cut of her muscled arms into relief.

She shouldn’t.

She really shouldn’t.

It’s just a dance, Clarke tells herself as she reaches out to take Bryn’s hand. It won’t hurt anyone.

She wonders if she’s just imagining a few stares when Bryn draws her into the crowd of dancers. Either way, she doesn’t care.

She stopped drinking a while ago, but when Bryn touches her it feels like the alcohol was just sleeping, now roars awake. She smooths her hands across Clarke’s shoulders and down her arms, and Clarke can feel it in every cell of her body. Bryn takes Clarke by the wrists and strokes her fingers down the center of Clarke’s palms before guiding them to her back. It’s like Clarke can still
feel the heat of her deliberate touches even before she flattens her hands against Bryn’s shirt, luxuriates in the play of muscles underneath. Bryn puts her own hands on Clarke’s waist and coaxes her closer, and Clarke feels untethered from herself in a way that’s a relief.

They move with the drums, but it’s almost an afterthought. Or an elaborate ritual that navigates the space between them by inches, every twist and dip bringing them that much closer. Clarke shifts and lets her head fall back, and Bryn follows, dipping in close as her mouth just barely brushes against Clarke’s temple, hot breath skating down Clarke’s neck. Bryn grins a brief warning before lifting Clarke up and into a circle, and that’s Clarke’s excuse, after, to sway forward, to switch her hands to Bryn’s shoulder and bicep, as if she needs the support.

“You’re even braver than I thought,” Bryn says softly, and one of her hands is in Clarke’s hair. She brings her head down but stops just out of reach, dark eyes dancing. Clarke tugs on her arms -- she’s not even thinking about what this means, her blood is roaring and hungry and she just wants -- but meets resistance. If she wants her kiss, she has to go to Bryn.

She’s tensing her legs to rock up unto her toes when someone places an outstretched arm between them, the tendons standing out against bared flesh where it ends in a clenched fist.

Lexa.

“Don’t,” she tells Bryn.

“Don’t what?” the other warrior demands. She releases Clarke, but meets her Commander’s stare head on. “She’s not your toy, Lexa, you don’t decide --”

“She is mine,” in a snarl, and Clarke can almost see Lexa’s hackles rise.

“What,” Bryn returns, clearly goading, “in this, too? In everything?”

A muscle twitches in Lexa’s jaw. She doesn’t look at Clarke.

It’s over, anyway. The fire in her limbs has turned to lead, and her head throbs. And not in a pleasant way. She feels too tender, like she’s been dancing too close to the fire and was scalded by the heat. But a quick check proves her skin is cool.
“You’re like a bear cub beneath a hive,” Bryn says. She’s too quiet to be heard outside the three of them. “Too hungry to walk on, too scared to knock it down. If you won’t enjoy the honey for yourself, let someone else have a taste.”

“I warned you, Bryn.”

Clarke startles because Lexa is... calm. Resolute. Fixed in her purpose. But she’s not on the edge of a sneer, like Bryn. She’s not heated. She cares, but she’s not. Involved.

Clarke is tired.

She turns on her heel and slips into the crowd. It’s easy -- she’s not the main show, and no one who’s interested in whatever Bryn and Lexa are doing thinks to stop her. She finds the path back through the trees easy enough. She heaves in deep gulps of air, as if that could chase away the clinging-spiderweb feeling of tonight’s disappointments and how it makes her stumble a little bit as she goes.

“Wait!”

Clarke knows who’s calling to her. It only makes her speed up.

“Wait -- stop. Please.”

Clarke does. It’s the quickest she’s ever done what Lexa wanted.

The other girl slows as she nears. It’s hard to think of her as the Commander like this, slightly out of breath and one braid coming loose. There’s a red mark circling one of her wrists, and Clarke recognizes the sign of someone grabbing her and trying to hold her to one place. Anger flares hot and sure beneath her breastbone, and then turns to ash just as quick. Whatever Bryn was angling for -- a confrontation, a fight -- Clarke must have wanted it a little bit, too. Or she wouldn’t have taken Bryn’s hand.

“I’m sorry,” Lexa says. “I didn’t mean to -- will you come back? Please?” She’s hesitant -- when was the last time Lexa was hesitant with her -- as she reaches out, hooks her fingers lightly around
Clarke’s where her hands hand at her sides. “We can still salvage the night.”

Clarke’s heart gives a single pound of useless, stupid hope, but one look at Lexa’s face cures that. There’s nothing but well-meaning encouragement on her face as she continues: “You should have seen how many people were watching you, they only held back because... I’m sorry, I should have made it clear to them that you -- Bryn only chose you because she thought that we --”

Clarke jerks her hand back. She knows, distantly, that she shouldn’t be so upset. But it hurts.

“No, I don’t mean...” Lexa draws a breath. “You deserve more than to be used to make a point. Please choose someone else.” She looks pleading. “Choose anyone else.”

It’s not a plan. It’s not intentional. Clarke just steps to her, invading Lexa’s personal space.

“Yes, I mean it, and I won’t interfere if you do,” Lexa says, a rare moment of misreading Clarke’s intentions. “I know you could have your pick --”

Her words end as Clarke reaches up and presses her mouth to Lexa’s.

Lexa’s so shocked Clarke thinks she can almost taste it. Her muscles are rigid, locked tight beneath the trail of Clarke’s fingers down her neck. She doesn’t move; it’s like Clarke’s touch is a spell out of the stories, like she really is a witch who managed to turn the Commander to stone.

And then there’s a moment.

It’s so small, almost nothing -- the slightest bit of give, of softness. Clarke senses an opening and dives for it, stepping even closer until she’s pressed up against Lexa’s warmth. She pushes her hands up beneath Lexa’s braids, cupping the other girl’s jaw and brushing her thumbs along her cheeks. Lexa gasps a little at this, falling forward, and her lips part. She sighs out and Clarke gentles, angling her head just so, pressing in with light, entreating kisses. She can feel Lexa’s breath coming quicker, the eagerness in her like a banked fire.

“Stop.”
Clarke hesitates. She doesn’t draw back, but she opens her eyes. The look on Lexa’s face makes her instantly sober: the Commander is in front of her, removed and forbidding.

Clarke flinches, and Lexa relents. But she still shakes her head.

“I’m sorry,” she says. Her tone is final.

It’s so unfair.

Clarke didn’t ask for this. She didn’t ask to be separated from everyone she knew, stripped of her voice, and thrown in among people she never imagined possible. She didn’t ask -- she didn’t want -- to feel this way about the girl ultimately responsible for deaths of everyone else on the dropship. She knows better, and she’s tried so hard to stop it.

But here she is. In love with the last person she should be. Someone whose own heart has been broken, possibly beyond repair.

Someone who refuses to love her back.

Clarke doesn’t have enough left in her to feel surprised when Lexa reaches out to cup her cheek. She takes her hand away a second later and holds up her fingers to the moonlight so that it catches on the wetness there. “You’re crying again,” she says.

Clarke closes her eyes and feels the alcohol roll back over her in a wave. She sways, and overbalances.

She’s barely aware of Lexa catching her and, after a slight hesitation, shifting to catch Clarke’s legs across her other arm, lifting her up.

Clarke dips in and out of awareness after that. She doesn’t remember if she managed to walk part of the way back to the apprentices’ camp, or if Lexa carried her all the way. She wakes up -- a bit -- for the sensation of being laid gently onto her bedroll, Lexa’s voice saying: “She’ll be fine in the morning. No, let me.” Lexa has to ease open Clarke’s fingers where she’s knotted them into Lexa’s coat before she can untangle them from each other. Clarke burrows into the cool fabric of her pillow and swallows past another sob.
But Lexa doesn’t leave right away. First she takes Clarke’s booted feet into her lap and undoes the laces, gently removing them one by one. Then she unties Cinci’s knots, working them loose until she can take away the beautiful pieces of fabric from around Clarke’s waist. Then she collects the jangling strings from Clarke’s wrists, her fingers hot and rough where they brush up against bare skin.

The similar string at Clarke’s forehead is easily worked free, but Lexa doesn’t stop there. She brushes Clarke’s hair away from her face and then begins to undo the braid that anchored it, every now and then taking a moment to comb her fingers through the loose strands to work out any tangles. She’s very thorough, and Clarke thinks that by the time she’s done it’ll be like the braid was never there in the first place.

It’s the last coherent thought she has before drifting off, lulled by both the alcohol and Lexa’s presence. She blinks in and out, and when next she manages to open her eyes Lexa is gone.

~*~

The alcohol makes Clarke sleep fitfully. It’s like a net thrown over her limbs, keeping her trapped in dreams as part of her stays aware.

Sometime during the night something wakes her. A rumble, deep in the ground. The shiver of impact as it ripples outwards.

Clark forces her eyes open. Everyone is asleep in their bedrolls, or spending their night in someone else’s. No one is up.

Her eyelids fall shut as if weighted. Just before she falls back into sleep she hears it: the delayed 
boom, like thunder cracking across the distance.

She doesn’t know it yet, but it’s the sound of gravity; the inevitable crash to Earth.
“Do you think it’s possible to grow another heart? One that can feel things as the other did, as strongly as it did, before you felt it die inside of you?”

Chapter End Notes

Housekeeping:

1. “All have the look of someone who drew the short straw” -- because even if you’re not particularly or at all inclined to sex, to miss out on the second half of the party is to miss out on all the gossip, really what else can you do in winter besides talk about who slept or fought or danced with whom. And can you imagine having to babysit on the night it gets out the Commander has a new girlfriend? Like, of all the parties, that’s the one you miss? I would personally be bitter forever.

2. The leader-follower style is pretty common (in variations) for group improv dancing, but Jsetting is the only one I know that splits an eight-count like that. (Jsetting itself is a very specific dance style, so they’re not doing that, but that’s part of where I got my inspiration.)

3. I miss Chinese street food. Candied hawthorn apples (or cherry tomatoes) and jianbing especially, so I threw those in there.

4. I have elote whenever the opportunity presents itself but that didn’t keep me from throwing it in there, too.

I am SO BEHIND on responses to comments, apologies all over the place. I blame the busy-ness of the holidays -- speaking of which, happy 2017 everyone, we fucking made it -- and other writing: if it’s something you’d like to see and haven’t yet, you can read the first scene of TWQR’s sequel here: https://entirelytookeen.tumblr.com/post/154948797877/the-red-king-awake-first-scene.

But yeah, I’m getting to those comments, you watch. See you in two weeks, hope you take care of yourself until then.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

~*~

The first stab of sunlight to pierce the gloom of the tent makes Clarke curl up like a prodded bug.

“Up and out,” Nyko barks from the entrance, holding open the tent flap. “I want everyone packed and ready to travel by noon.”

Clarke forces herself to sit up. The sight of her pillow is like a pair of open arms, beckoning her back to sleep. She resists, but it’s a tense moment.

When she blinks away sleep Nyko is looking right at her.

“The Commander and her personal Guard left before the sun rose,” he says. His face is inscrutable. “We’ve been ordered to return to the capital. Say your goodbyes and give your final orders.”

She has a blissful moment where she doesn’t remember.

And then she does.

She -- and there was dancing, and Bryn -- and Lexa -- and she --

By the time she’s finished reliving each detail, like swallowing hot needles of humiliation, Nyko has moved on.

Clarke buries her head in her hands and thinks, I’m going to be sick.

~*~
She isn't sick. She doesn't have the time.

First, she has to unearth Hern. He’s tangled up with two semi-naked -- or maybe naked, she tries to be polite and only look out of the corner of her eye as she picks out whose shoulder to poke -- bodies on the far side of camp. He gets dressed as soon as she wakes him. Clarke tries not to hate him for the grin of pure delight that keeps tugging at his mouth, but it’s difficult. Her whole body hurts.

He still has the Rock Line fashion statement that was giving him so much trouble the night prior. She raises an eyebrow when he stuffs the length of fabric into his jacket pocket.

“What?” His shameless smile gets even bigger. “Souvenir.”

They spend the next few hours shoring up the temporary hospital at Blue Cliff, making sure the supplies are as stocked up as possible, the bulk of their patients still on the mend, and those requiring long-term assistance given designated caregivers. Clarke sees the looks she gets, she hears the whispers. She doesn’t have time for that, either. She pushes away the shame that wants to curl around her heart and focuses on her job.

She’s so good at it, she almost forgets they’re on a deadline. Hern extracts her from the hospital at the last second, prying the arms of her young helpers off of her as they say goodbye. They’re the only ones who don’t look at Clarke like she’s an unexploded bomb, so it’s possible she’s clinging back. The two race to the main camp just as the sun is about to reach its zenith. They might have missed the wagons setting off, except Versi throws their packed belongings at them both with a nod. Hern gives a cheerful thanks in return, but Clarke can’t bring herself to meet the other girl’s eyes.

It’s the same as the journey they took to get here: the rumbling carts, the steady pace, the piles of hay serving as a prickly cushion against the bumps in the road. The only real change is her eagerness to spend the time with other apprentices. She tucks herself into a corner and turns her shoulder, instead, making it clear she wants to be left alone. She thinks she’s lucky, and most of them write it off as recovery from drinking the night before. It’s another day and a half to Polis, and Clarke has very few distractions except her own thoughts.

~*~
Unexpectedly, it works in her favor.

They return in the middle of the night and that works for Clarke, too. Her heart thuds loudly in her chest as they ride up to the base of the tower, but her fears are unrealized and no one except the stablehands are waiting for them. Clarke hugs the apprentices goodbye -- Hern rubs her back, says “until next time” -- and makes her way up to the quiet of her own room.

It’s empty, to her relief. She wondered if... but no.

She makes herself unpack before climbing into the softness of her own bed, so welcome after days spent in a bedroll on the ground.

Sleep doesn’t come.

Okay, she thinks as she stares up into the darkness. You know what you have to do.

It’s all she thought about on the way home. Because that’s what this is, now: her home. Her work. She’s lost so much -- so, so much -- but she still has a reason to get up in the morning, to keep working hard, to look forward to what the next day might bring. And not just that, but a life -- friends, people who care about her happiness. Maybe, someday, people who will love her.

But it can’t be Lexa.

It won’t be Lexa.

She’s made that clear.

Clarke has to accept it.

It hurts. It hurts so much that for a moment, now that she’s alone and with no one’s eyes on her, the pain wells up so sharply she almost gasps. She bites down on her lip to keep the stinging in her eyes from becoming tears.
But there’s nothing she can do about it.

At least she has nothing to be ashamed of. She did what she could, and she isn’t -- she *refuses* to be - - ashamed of how she feels.

Lexa doesn’t want her. Clarke’s not going to make herself crazy, or sleepless, going over the possible whys or why nots. It’s just the reality of things. It won’t keep her from getting up tomorrow and living the rest of her life.

But she gives herself one night -- this night -- to curl up with her face pressed into her pillow to muffle already-silent sobbing. She’s willing to drown in regret and bewilderment for one night if it means a future where she’s been washed clean of might-have-beens.

~*~

She feels better in the morning. A little fragile, maybe, but more certain for it -- all the contradictory impulses in her have found a consensus. She gets dressed and makes her way to Lexa’s room, more than ready to fall back into their routine.

She doesn’t knock anymore, hasn’t since she learned not to give Lexa that few extra seconds to pull herself together in the morning. But when she pushes the door open she meets resistance.

Clarke can feel her eyes go wide when Jollett peers around the edge of the doorway, her arm braced to keep it from opening any further. The other girl’s face is somber, even drawn.

“Heda says your presence is not expected,” Jollett says quietly. “Not for today’s audiences, and perhaps not for a while. You are to spend this time with your tutors. She will send for you when you are wanted.”

Clarke stares at her, mouth hanging open. Not *expected*? When she’s *wanted*?

Does Lexa thinks she’s some kind of... some lovesick *kid* who can’t control herself around --
She doesn’t notice she’s stepped forward with her hands drawn into fists until Jollett’s own hand comes up to block her way. Her palm is open in a flat refusal to Clarke’s intent, but her expression is regretful.

“Not today,” she whispers, “Just do what she wants. It’s not you, she’s been like this since returning from the settlements. Maybe try to talk to her tomorrow.” There’s a faint sound coming from the room beyond, a thump like overturned furniture, and Jollett flinches. “Maybe not,” she mutters, and pulls the door shut.

~*~

Lexa doesn’t want to see her? Lexa can’t even be bothered to welcome her home? Fine.

Fine.

Clarke throws herself into her studies. She spends hours with her new language teachers, who also dip deeply into the customs and traditions of each of the clans. It’s all delivered by rote, and Clarke expected to be able to recall it at a moment’s notice -- which makes her head hurt as she longs for a notebook and pen, but it’s not like she can let everyone know she’s literate for the sake of a few notes. She works doubly hard in the evenings with Nyko, who, if he’s heard anything about the changes in her schedule, has the good sense not to bring it up.

She’s also introduced -- re-introduced -- to Sharla, the woman who can talk with her hands.

Clarke does not look forward to it. When she’s told to meet Sharla after lunch, and where, her stomach is in knots. But she promised: she promised Lexa she would learn, and even if the other girl is being... like this... that doesn’t mean Clarke goes back on her promises. She just hopes she can lie as convincingly with her hands as she used to with her voice, once the big questions start.

But, to her surprise, they don’t come. Clarke expects Sharla to work with a translator, someone to speak the words aloud as she signs them -- instead, when the older woman comes to collect her, she’s alone. She greets Clarke with a wave, and then does something both deliberate and intricate with the fingers of one hand.

Clarke gives her a perplexed look, and Sharla repeats the gesture. A greeting.
It takes a couple tries, and at one point the other woman has to physically position Clarke’s wrist the way she wants it, but Clarke gets the gist: this won’t be like her other language studies, measured and careful, an intellectual exercise more than a skill. This is something she’s expected to use, starting now.

The very next lesson picks up where Clarke initially refused to follow, all those weeks ago when they first met in the infirmary: Sharla goes through a few motions which clearly indicate I am or my name is, and then: thumb and forefinger tucked against her palm, held downward, and Sharla runs the heel of her right hand against her left inner wrist in a gesture that almost looks like a takeoff, the three unfolded fingers winged outward.

... right. A semi-literate society, at best. No alphabet for signing out names, just images and concepts. Sharla’s “name” is probably two or more regular signs broken up and uniquely paired; a singular sense of who she is.

Clarke repeats the signs for my name is, clumsily, but then looks at Sharla with what she hopes is understandable helplessness. Sharla laughs to herself and shakes her head, repeating her own sign a bit slower.

Oh -- she just wants Clarke to know how to “call” her. At least for now. Well, Clarke can manage that.

True to the tone of Sharla’s teaching style, she doesn’t escort Clarke into one of the rare empty rooms, like Clarke’s other tutors. Instead they go to a section of rooms somewhere around the middle of the tower, redolent with the smell of boiling nut shells and paper treatments. Clarke’s been here before, that quick spate of days where she tried other apprenticeships and to forget the fate of everyone who came with her to the ground. The apprentice who guided that day startles as he recognizes her, gives a quick wave before he’s pointed back to his work. He sits in rows with the others crouched over rough reams of paper, the grey mountains echoing across their cheeks like a whole range.

Sharla leads her farther back to a smaller room with fewer people. There are no apprentices here, only older men and women with smudges across their hands and faces, like Sharla’s own ink-stained fingers. The ceiling of the room is high -- Clarke can see where the floor of the upper level was knocked out to make the space, the edges still trailing abandoned wires -- and rigged with mirrors. The setup is too complicated for Clarke to follow, but she can see how sunlight is caught and redirected throughout the room and onto specific spots -- individual workspaces. Sharla goes over to
her own, and Clarke sees the final touch: a piece of smoked glass diffuses the beams from the mirrors overhead so that it spreads evenly over the unfinished map pinned to the surface.

Sharla sits down at her workspace after pulling out a stool for Clarke as well. There’s a bunch of instruments Clarke doesn’t quite recognize -- things which might be a compass, a straightedge, a ruler, etc., but only if she squints. There’s a jar of dark and viscous liquid next to a row of paintbrushes, some of them with just a few hairs at the tip. And Sharla lifts up a box, opening the lid to reveal a charcoal pencils in various states of width and wear.

Clarke’s hands twitch. It’s purely involuntary.

When was the last time she drew something? It must have been her cell in solitary -- where else could she get the supplies, the expanse of space? When was the last time she had that kind of quiet?

Sharla notices the direction of her focus and offers her one. She makes Clarke use the sign for it, but it only takes one correction before Clarke has the pencil in her hand.

She can only stare at it at first. It feels like something that belongs to another life.

Meanwhile Sharla is continuing to set up her space. The final component is a piece of scrap paper, folded over and over until it’s frayed and worn. The ink is faded, but Clarke can still read the arabic numerals grouped around symbols for -- she’s guessing -- roads, rivers, trees. She wonders what their unit of measurement for distances is.

As Clarke watches Sharla double-checks the position of a bend in a charcoal river using her instruments, nods to herself before laying it down in ink. She then looks to Clarke, points to the river, and makes a sign.

Once Clarke has it down, Sharla picks up another piece of paper, again clearly scrap, and makes some space to lay it in front of Clarke. She makes a few gestures, and it’s her attitude rather than familiarity with their meaning which communicates: now you draw it.

That’s a lot easier than signs. Clarke knows this, and even though the surface of the paper is a lot rougher than she’s used to, she copies the same curve and sweep with just a little bit of effort.

Sharla’s eyes go wide, impressed, and then she grins. There’s a light in her expression that goes past
shared need and into shared passion, and Clarke grins back.

Clarke spends the afternoons with Sharla after that. It’s an interesting way to learn. Most, if not all, of the senior cartographers are versed in the signs Sharla uses and use them whenever they engage in brief, distracted conversation. Mornings are clearly the busiest in this room, when the light is best, but they all have so much work in general Clarke can see why Sharla’s full attention couldn’t be spared. She prefers learning this way anyway -- trying to communicate, and then resting, picking up more and more vocabulary with each day. They cover the words for landscapes quickly and move onto: window, floor, girl, woman, sun, etc. It’s restful. It’s nothing like the interrogation Clarke first expected. She wonders how much of that is Lexa’s doing.

Lexa doesn’t summon Clarke, and Clarke doesn’t see her. Not even the way she used to, back when Clarke was just an apprentice, catching glimpses around corridors and inside rooms. It’s like that for almost five days.

And then Lexa just shows up.

Clarke gets about a second’s warning -- the step of familiar bootheels in the outside room, the low tones of agreement from a voice she recognizes almost innately -- and uses it to compose herself where she’s sitting beside Sharla. She straightens on her stool and tells herself not to be an idiot, and not to give anything away.

So she doesn’t raise her head when the door creaks open, and greetings to the Commander ripple through the room. She can see Sharla raising a hand out of the corner of her eye, but the older woman doesn’t stand, so Clarke doesn’t see why she should.

She keeps her eyes down on her scrap paper instead. She doesn’t always get one -- considering the labor that goes into making paper, she’s not surprised that even the rougher or less homogenous pieces are carefully collected and just as carefully distributed. She tries to use each as thoughtfully as possible, filling up every corner before looking for a fresh start.

She can feel Lexa looking at her.

Maybe she’s being silly. Maybe if she looks up she’ll find it’s all in her head, that Lexa is as absorbed in the details of the new maps being made as Titus seems to be, asking questions, raising concerns. Maybe Lexa’s silence is very intense focus where her focus should be.
The back of Clarke’s neck prickles.

Titus and Lexa make a sweep through the room, going from workstation to workstation. Clarke’s proud of herself for not looking over the whole time. She’s congratulating herself on not allowing Lexa to distract her when, just as the pair makes their way over to Sharla, her eyes catch on the topmost right part of her paper.

... she’s an artist, it’s how she vents her emotions. Give her a piece of paper, a pencil, and some spare time, of course she ends up drawing whatever faces are currently occupying her mind’s eye. Even those faces which have apparently banished her from their presence.

And if she’s not feeling kind toward a particular face, the doodle is not going to be flattering.

She moves quickly, ripping the corner off and tucking the fragment deep into her right fist as she shoves her hands onto her knees, safe beneath the table.

Titus goes over to Sharla’s free side, her left, and continues his questioning. There seems to be some kind of territory dispute over how one area should be marked.

Lexa stands by Clarke.

Clarke doesn’t get it. What, is Lexa trying to test her? Does she really think Clarke has such poor self-control she has to hide her with the map-makers, and now she’s seeing how far she can push it? Okay, Clarke kind of jumped her with that kiss -- her cheeks heat at the memory -- but she’d been drinking and there hadn’t been anyone else around. It was different.

She doesn’t understand what Lexa’s game is, standing this close to her now.

It’s not going to get to her, anyway. She picks up her pencil and bends her head as if absorbed in the way Sharla showed her to gradient different types of trees.

She has to be imagining the small huff of annoyance from Lexa.

“What about --” and then Lexa is reaching across Clarke’s space to point to something on Sharla’s
map, ignoring all personal boundaries and politeness as her arm blocks Clarke’s view of her work. Clarke has to bite down on her tongue to contain her annoyance, but she leans back a bit and waits.

Lexa reaches across again, and Clarke wonders if Lexa notices that she ends up standing closer to Clarke each time.

The third time she does it, she hesitates as she’s pulling back. Clarke still refuses to look up, but it’s hard to miss Lexa’s lean fingers lingering on the freshly torn edge of Clarke’s paper.

*Just go,* Clarke thinks at her. *You made it clear what you wanted and I gave it to you. I’m giving it to you.*

There’s no reason for Lexa to seem so unsatisfied.

Titus is wrapping up his questions. “Was there anything you wanted to add, Heda?”

“No,” Lexa says with a small sigh. And then, contradictory, she signs for Sharla. She doesn’t have the flow Clarke has seen from Sharla or even the more experienced signers among the map-makers -- her presentation is a little too static -- but she appears to know what she’s doing. Clarke catches the signs for *teacher* and *thanks.*

When Sharla signs back to accept, she nudges Clarke with her elbow. Words aren’t needed to communicate that she expects Clarke to behave herself.

*Thanks,* Clarke sketches quickly. It requires both hands.

Lexa is lightning-fast when she reaches for the tuft of paper trapped between Clarke’s fingers. Clarke closes her hand over it just in time, but Lexa manages to pinch the edge of it between her fingertips. Clarke forgets her prime directive and meets the other girl’s eyes.

Lexa is imperious as she stares down. “Let me see it.”

Clarke looks off to the side, ignoring the command.
Lexa tugs.

“Heda,” Titus says in the background, sounding pained.

Lexa pulls the paper free with a triumphant little grunt. Clarke bows her head and clenches her fist against the impulse to punch the other girl in the mouth -- not that she thinks she could land one on Lexa, but it’d be beyond satisfying to just take the swing.

Lexa smoothes out the scrap and holds it up for inspection. Clarke’s shoulders hunch.

She can sense Lexa going still beside her.


“No, nothing,” Lexa replies. She sounds choked. She clears her throat. “We can move on.”

Clarke doesn’t care if she does see it. She deserves it. If she’s going to go around treating people like they’re forgettable, she deserves to stumble onto random sketches of herself goggle-eyed and her tongue sticking out. Clarke has nothing to be ashamed of.

That’s what she tells herself after they leave and she sits, unseeing, at Sharla’s side until the older woman dismisses her for dinner.

She has lessons with Nyko after, this time in the infirmary’s pharmacy. It’s well past dark by the time she stumbles back to her room and finds the wrapped package on her bed, containing a book filled with loose leaves of smooth paper and a fresh set of charcoal pencils.

~*~

She thinks about dumping them out the window. She’s not going to be bought.
And then she thinks: *Who am I kidding?*

It’s harder to draw by candlelight, a lot more frustrating, and Clarke thinks about saving her spoils until visiting the map-makers tomorrow to make use of their setup. She can’t wait, though, she’s undoing the twine holding the bundle together as quickly as she can without tearing the paper.

She loses... she’s not sure how long. The candles are lower by an inch or two by the time she sets her pencil to the side. Her left hand is speckled with black dust. She blows some of the same dust from the single piece of paper, carefully.

She’s drawn Jake.

She drew him almost constantly that first week or so in solitary, wanting to surround herself with him, wanting Jaha and the others she was sure monitored her to be confronted with his face. Then she had a dream about him -- nothing special, the a memory of a time they talked about school -- and it became too painful. She was never going to have that again, even if she did get out of her cell. It hurt to bring him into her mind’s eye, and after they routinely washed away her drawings, she never replaced them with ones of Jake again.

She stares down at his face now for the first time in over a year.

Someone clears their throat, and Clarke looks up to see Lexa in her doorway.

She’s standing awkwardly, a large object balanced on one hip. “I thought you would be asleep, I was going to... I wanted you to have this, as well.” She licks her lips. She’s out of her formal clothing and in something looser, her hair unbound like Clarke hasn’t seen it since their trip to the marketplace. “May I?”

Clarke stares at her, enjoying her discomfort, but it’s hard to conjure up the same ire she felt this afternoon. She nods, and Lexa closes the door behind her.

She puts her newest present on the table first: a small bound trunk, the brass at its hinges and lock a much-diminished gleam. Then she fishes beneath her shirt and draws out something on a string, which she also places on the table. A key.
“To keep whatever you create safe,” she says quietly. “I see you’ve already started.” She hesitates, and her hand seems to creep across the table of its own volition. “Would you show me?”

Clarke looks down at her drawing at Jake, and then back at Lexa. It’s like the moment when the scab rips from a mostly-healed hurt -- a surprise, but the rush of pain is almost a welcome familiarity. She can handle it. She hands over the sheet of paper.

Lexa is careful with it, balancing the clean back on her fingertips and turning it by only touching the edges. “You’re very good. I guessed you would be.”

Clarke scrubs at her charcoal-dusted fingers, but it’s settled into the skin.

Lexa sits, never taking her eyes from the picture. She places it down on the table between them. “Did you learn this from him?” she asks.

Technically Clarke learned it from a variety of teachers and tutors over the years. Her chosen academic path had been the sciences, but artistic “outlets” were encouraged. Still, Jake had been the one who praised her efforts, asked about her progress, and encouraged her to spend so many hours drawing when she could have been studying. So it doesn’t feel like a lie when she nods in response.

“He’s the one who tried to keep you safe.”

Again, Clarke knows what Lexa is thinking it not the truth: her father didn’t flee with her to the Dead Zone to protect her from irate villagers. It only took a few eavesdropped conversations among the apprentices to paint a fairly grim picture: radiation had caused some mutations, the kind she expected back when she first stumbled onto that group of kids playing in the woods. The survivors of the bombs dealt with it in the surest, most effective (if brutal) manner -- killing anyone affected in order to prevent genetic abnormalities from being further inherited. Only, generations of vigilance has caused suspicion against normal human disability as well, like Hern’s eye, or Nassa’s hearing.

Or a bewildered girl found wandering and lost in the wilderness, with no voice.

But again: Jake did try to keep her safe, he tried to sound the warning to keep everyone safe. So Clarke nods again, eyes filling with tears she refuses to let fall.

Lexa finally looks up, her own eyes soft. “You look like him.”
She’s not going to cry. She’s not going to cry.

“I understand, you know,” Lexa says, looking back down at the picture. “When you first arrived and refused to communicate, I was -- tolerant. Because I have also felt,” she swallows, “the need to cut yourself off from all other people, when the one dearest to you has been lost.”

Clarke closes her eyes. She ignores the two trails of warmth that drip down over her cheeks.

“It’s as if you died with them, isn’t it?” Lexa asks. “As if your heart has followed in their footsteps, and you remain: eating, and sleeping, and living, but somehow hollow. As if they took everything that you are with them.

“... is it possible to recover from that?”

Clarke still has her eyes closed, one hand over her trembling mouth as she struggles to pull herself together. Even without looking, Lexa sounds unlike herself -- so very quiet, and distracted, as if she’s not quite aware of what she’s speaking aloud.

“Do you think it’s possible to grow another heart? One that can feel things as the other did, as strongly as it did, before you felt it die inside of you?”

Next she gives a small sigh, and she seems to come back to herself as she says: “Your isolation couldn’t go on forever. Be grateful it lasted as long as it did. Not all of us are allowed the luxury.”

When Clarke opens her eyes, Lexa is looking back at her.

“You’ve heard me speak of Costia before. I suppose by now you’ve heard the full story from someone else, if not a few people.”

Clarke holds her gaze and nods.

“They didn’t just kill her. They tortured her. They put her through unimaginable pain, and all
because they thought she knew my secrets.”

Clarke doesn’t look away, doesn’t blink. It feels like the most important thing she’s ever done.

“That’s what it means to be loved by your Heda,” Lexa says with an awful gentleness.

You’re not my fucking Heda, is what Clarke wants, longs to be able to say, even as she acknowledges that it wouldn’t solve their problems. It raises more questions than it answers, and besides, Clarke can tell from Lexa’s tone that she doesn’t mean to be patronizing

“Even if that was something I wanted, for myself,” and here Lexa lowers her gaze to the table, to her own hand clenched tight into a fist on top of it, “it would be reprehensible of me to allow it. Again.” She seems to be struggling for a second, until she admits, as if in pain: “To be the Commander is to be alone.”

Clarke can’t hate her for it.

She wants to. A little. She wants to be able to throw it back in Lexa’s face: I’ve changed my mind, anyway, I don’t want you. She wants the ability to lie, to salvage what’s left of her stinging pride.

But only with a small piece of her heart. The rest of it just aches.

“Then again,” and when Clarke focuses on her again Lexa is... fidgeting? Rubbing the tips of her fingers into the table with terrible concentration, even though there’s nothing to draw her attention there. “Perhaps I don’t have to be. Entirely alone. I could have companionship.

“It wouldn’t be love,” she says baldly, and manages to dash hopes too newborn for Clarke to be aware of their existence, except in their sudden death. “It couldn’t be. But I...” Here Lexa raises her eyes, and Clarke sees she is harboring her own hope: shy, and hesitating, but there. “I could have... someone. If they understood and accepted what it means, to share so much of their life with their Heda. If they were also set apart in the way that a leader must be. A friend.” She holds her breath. “I would like a friend.”

So.
Not love, but partnership. Two people in isolation, either by nature or by chosen destiny, from the people around them. But bound to each other by mutual respect, and affection.

A Commander and a wood witch.

And Clarke won’t be at so much risk because it will be known -- Lexa will have it known -- that they aren’t lovers. And because people don’t look at Clarke and see an ordinary girl, a weak point. They see something supernatural. Lexa’s made sure of it.

(She’s not certain, but she’s willing to bet Lexa will make sure people know they aren’t sleeping together by sleeping with someone else. Not any time soon, maybe, but once the opportunity and inclination comes along. And Clarke will have to endure it happening.)

It’s not what she wants. But it is more than nothing.

It’s a future. Together.

“You don’t have to decide tonight,” Lexa says, rising to her feet. “Take your time. I won’t expect you at audiences again unless you decide. I... I understand that...” She visibly restrains herself from finishing that thought. “Please. Take as much time as you need.”

She leaves immediately, and Clarke has only her thoughts and the candlelight as company.

~*~

The next morning, standing in front of the door to Lexa’s rooms, she hesitates for only a split second before knocking.

Jollett opens it with a sigh of relief.

“She said to let you in if you returned -- please say you’re here to make her behave again.”
Clarke’s lips twitch from containing her smile, but she manages a solemn nod.

“*Thank* you. When I pledged my life in service, I didn’t think it meant I would spend it wrangling her bad temper.”

Oh, so that’s Clarke’s job?

But she can’t pretend she’s not happy to do it.

She made her decision last night before she fell asleep. And she’d thought, drifting off, that it would be difficult to relax into her re-defined role. She finds she was wrong as she strides through the outer rooms and right up to Lexa’s bed. It makes it *easier* to have all the boundaries laid out and cemented. No matter what she feels, or does, it won’t change Lexa’s mind. That means she’s free to hoist herself up onto the mattress next to the sleeping body lying there, to lay her head down onto the pillow. She was afraid all that love would churn inside her, unwanted and unclaimed; would have to cannibalize itself over time before she felt unburdened.

Instead she leans in to place the lightest of kisses on Lexa’s nose where it peeks out from under her covers, and Clarke is happy.

Lexa’s sleeping face scrunches up for a second before her eyes open. Slowly, she focuses on Clarke’s face so close to her own. “You’re here,” she says muzzily. She grows a little more aware as she comes awake. “You decided?”

Clarke rolls her eyes as if she didn’t spend half the night staring up into darkness and debating with herself. Like it was ever a question.

Lexa smiles. Her hair is a mess and her face is a little swollen from sleep. But the sheer happiness -- and even gratitude -- of her expression makes her shine. “You’re here.”
Maybe Clarke missed Lexa over their separation. She doesn’t see how that’s anyone else’s business.

She *definitely* missed the breakfasts served in Lexa’s rooms. Perhaps Clarke could have asked for meals to be delivered as well, but she’s been eating in the main hall out of pique.

That had been a mistake.

“There isn’t much in the schedule today, but I think it’s a good idea to bring you to the audiences,” Lexa says. She’s watching Clarke tear into -- Clarke’s not sure what this is, actually, she recognizes the richness of eggs and cream by now, the pops of flavor from vegetables and herbs mixed in, but she’s given up on trusting she’ll exactly what she’s eating. It’s enough when it’s delicious, and specially prepared for the Commander and her companion. If Lexa seems to get more fun out of watching her eat, chin in hand, than enjoying her own meal, that’s not Clarke’s problem.

“At your absence has been noted,” Lexa continues, drawing herself up. “Your return should put the rumors to rest.” She gets up from the table before Clarke can figure out how to communicate *what rumors?* with busy hands and a mouth full of egg.

At least she swallows it down, and the last of the meal, before Lexa returns with the pot of gold paint. As the handmaidens clear the dishes Clarke closes her eyes and tilts her face up, ready to resume this process.

She feels: the sweep along her eyelids into her temples on one side, and then the other; the prickliness of the untreated hairs in the brush Lexa uses; the stiffness of the paint before it warms and becomes malleable against her skin. It’s all familiar, and it re-orders her world.

The feeling of Lexa laying a hand against her face is new.

Clarke’s eyes fly open. Lexa is looking down at her, eyes hooded. The slightest frown mars her face.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she says quietly. “That you came, today. That you -- that this is something you still want.” She swallows. “But I feel as though you have been honest with me -- perhaps more honest than anyone I know, in your own way -- and I haven’t matched you.”

Her hand is trembling against Clarke’s cheek.
“I feel like you deserve that. As long as you understand it changes nothing, I think... it’s the least I can do.” Her thumb sweeps, once, under Clarke’s eye. “I can’t go back to the person I was. But if I - - if I was still someone who could--”

She takes in a deep breath, and the look on her face makes Clarke hold hers.

“Heda?”

Lexa snatches her hand away like she’s been burned, almost stumbling backward as she turns to Jollett. “Yes?” She’s terse, her hands twisted into each other behind her back.

“There’s a --” Jollett looks back and forth between the two of them, once, before her expression smooths out into bland inoffensiveness. “A scout has arrived with an urgent message.”

Lexa hands squeeze together so tightly they whiten, and then drops them to her sides. “Send them in.”

She walks to the outer atrium, not looking back at Clarke.

Clarke, sitting at the empty table, sighs.

When the wait for Lexa to return becomes longer and longer, Clarke accepts she’s not going to get a second shot at hearing what Lexa wanted to say. She gets up and follows in the Commander’s wake, her long skirts whispering around her ankles as she walks.

She can see she’s been forgotten. Whatever the scout said has Lexa in a flurry of preparations, handmaidens scurrying as she gives them orders to put into action and messages to carry. One of them ushers Nyko in through the door just as Clarke is walking up.

“Heda,” he greets Lexa. His gaze catches on Clarke, and he nods to her as well. She’s nodding back just as Lexa turns to see her. Clarke thinks the other girl stiffens.
“I’m leaving,” Lexa says abruptly as she swings back to Nyko.

He raises his eyebrows. “Tonight?”

“Now. As soon as possible. Anya has asked for me at her camp, and you know what it must have taken for her to do that. I know you wanted to speak with me this evening, so I sent for you.”

Anya. Why does that name feel familiar? Clarke wracks her memory. Has she ever met an Anya here in Polis?

“I just wanted to mention the state of the winter stores,” Nyko says, looking concerned. “Do you want me to cancel today’s classes, or should I follow behind?”

“Neither,” with a wave of one hand. “The first snows will fall any day now; I need you to stay here.”

“Ah.” His frown deepens, but he nods. “So you’re taking the witch on her first solo outing.”

There’s a pause. Clarke knows that pause, she hears in meetings every time Lexa is about to be inordinately stubborn -- even for her. Her mouth drops open in outrage before she sees Lexa’s twist up in defiance with a: “No.”

Clarke stares, but Lexa refuses to meet her eyes.

“Then with who?” Nyko gapes at Lexa as well. “You can’t go without a healer!”

“I have before.”

“Not to Anya’s territory! And, may I remind you, the last time you visited her you ended up almost dying on my table regardless.”

“Because we were so close to the Mountain,” Lexa argues back. “This concern is -- elsewhere. Anya was explicit.”
Nyko glares at her before throwing up his hands. “Fine! In the meantime, I’ll get everything together in preparation for the next conclave. *Just in case.*”

He stalks out the door without waiting to be shown out.

Clarke folds her arms. Lexa must be able to see her in her peripheral vision, because her shoulders twitch.

“We’ll be riding too hard for you to keep up,” she says, not turning around. “You’d be a -- a liability, I’m sorry. And you heard why Nyko has to stay.”

Oh, of course, *she’s* the liability. And getting shot in the back is such a minor risk to take -- *again.* Clarke exhales sharply through her nose.

It makes Lexa turn and look at her, at least. “I’ve weighed the possible risks and made my decision.” Her eyes narrow. “It’s not your place to question it.”

Clarke is so offended she drops her arms. The *gall* of... she tosses her head back with a shrug and makes for the door herself. Right, not her place, who is she, she’s just the person who dug a bullet out of Lexa and then stayed up all night making sure the Commander stayed alive, she’s no one.

“No, that’s not --” When Lexa sees her words don’t stop Clarke’s progress out the door, she follows. “That’s not what I meant. You know that. You know you’re... important to me.”

Nice try, but Clarke’s not falling for it. She shrugs hugely as she walks.

“If you’re going to deliberately misunderstand everything I say --”

Clarke speeds up. As if it’s any use trying to talk to Lexa when she’s in this kind of mood.

“You’re acting like *I’m* the one being irrational --”
Clarke turns the corner and marches straight into the sanctuary of her own room. She knew Lexa wouldn’t follow her in without an invitation, though she could never have guessed how satisfying it feels to shut the door in her face.

“I told you, I’ve made my decision,” Lexa says from the other side of the door. Clarke walks over to sit on her bed, taking off her boots before curling up on top of the mattress. She moves silently, determined not giving the other girl any kind of sign she’s listening. “This isn’t -- there has to be a final voice, and it has to be mine.”

Clarke sits and lets the silence grow.

“I am not losing this argument,” Lexa mutters, and Clarke wonders who she’s trying to convince. “It’s impossible. I can’t lose an argument to someone who doesn’t talk.”

Clarke picks up a boot from the floor and hurls it at her closed door, where it lands with a satisfyingly loud thud.

“I meant for you to hear it,” Lexa snaps, and then stomps off down the corridor.

~*~

Lexa returns about an hour later, judging from the passage of the sun as Clarke watches it out her window. She’s still sitting on her bed when Lexa opens the door. She could have changed out of her witch clothes and washed her face, but part of her was reluctant to let go of the happiness she felt when she was allowed to step back into the role.

Lexa stands in the doorway for a few moments, but Clarke doesn’t turn her head.

“I’m coming in,” Lexa says, quiet but certain. Clarke sets her jaw as she steps over the threshold.

Clarke isn’t looking at her -- she doesn’t want to give Lexa the satisfaction -- but she can hear from the smooth rustle as Lexa walks across the floor that she’s wearing something new. She itches to look and see what it is. She won’t, though. When Lexa comes up to the edge of her bed, Clarke looks out the window.
“I’m not leaving you behind,” Lexa says. “I’m leaving you here, but -- it’s only for a little while. Not like before.” Clarke can hear the tick in her throat when she swallows. “I won’t do that again.”

Clarke tucks her chin into her chest and reminds herself that if she cries now, even if out of sheer frustration, she undercuts her entire message.

The feeling of the mattress dipping surprises her into looking at Lexa. The other girl looks so tired. “I meant everything I said before. I value you, I do want us to work together. But you must trust me to know when it’s too dangerous for you to be a part of something. This is one of those times.”

The new thing she has on is a cape. Not the one she wears for audiences sometimes, crushed velvet in a color that makes Clarke think of what the skies must have looked like when the bombs set the world on fire. This is heavier, the fabric coated with something that feels slightly slick against her fingers -- probably waterproofing. The collar is of pure white fur, with a sheen on it like nothing she knows, and she finds herself reaching out to sink her hand into its plushness. Lexa doesn’t take offense, places her own hand over Clarke’s. Intertwines their fingers.

“Do you trust me?” she asks, searching Clarke’s face.

She does. It’s so strange, considering where and how they started. But she does.

Impulsively she reaches out with her other hand, uses both to pull Lexa closer. The other girl resists, eyes widening -- Clarke doesn’t blame her, considering what happened last time she did this. But in the end Lexa allows it, until Clarke is able to put both arms around her and her head on Lexa’s shoulder.

Lexa’s a little stiff in the hug, doesn’t seem to know what to do with her hands. She finally places them cautiously between Clarke’s shoulder blades. “I’ll be careful,” she says. Her breath ruffles the fur of her coat, tickling Clarke’s cheek. “I promise.”

~*~

Lexa can’t stay much longer, but she urges Clarke to stay dressed and in her room. “Titus will send someone for you in a few hours,” she says before leaving. “The audience is still being held under his
direction, and he’s agreed to have you attend.’’ Only a slight tightening around her mouth betrays how much Titus must have resisted that idea. “You’re an important part of this. Even when I’m not around.”

Clarke can’t remember the last time she sat around with nothing to do.

She finally pulls out the paper and charcoal pencils, but it’s not the same as last night -- there’s no impetus running through her veins and down to her fingertips to draw anything in particular, and she can’t bring herself to idly sketch on such a rare and prized resource. On the gift Lexa gave her. If she uses it, she should use it right.

An idea descends on her with such swiftness it leaves her breathless.

She could tell Lexa her story. The whole truth.

She could draw it.

It could work. This business with signing -- she thought maybe she’d have to lie forever, because how is she supposed to explain orbiting the Earth using the language of a people who still ride horses? It’s not like writing would work, either. She’s not sure how good Lexa’s English reading comprehension is, anyway, and she can’t imagine how to explain how she knows that language right from the start. (Regardless, would Lexa even know the word “spaceship?” Would she have context?)

But if Clarke drew it in pictures, that could work. And it would be better. She could show Lexa: the hundreds and hundreds of people on board the Ark, how they live, how much they want something better. The faces of the people who had come down with her on the dropship -- they’d practically been children, some of them had been. She knows Lexa, now, what will move her, make her understand that a mistake was made, and Clarke is not her enemy. No matter where she comes from.

She wants that, if they’re going to have the future Lexa described.

She draws the Ark first. She surprised by how much she feels, sketching the familiar twelve stations in the vastness of space. She thought she’d done such a good job of accepting that she was a new person, now, with a new life; she’s not expecting the echo of sympathy in her for those still trapped inside. She feels it even more when she carves out a corner of the darkness for the little blue marble of Earth -- she wishes she had colors so that she could show Lexa how beautiful it is from so far away, how it was revered and missed by those orbiting it for generations.
The knock summoning her to the audience comes just as she’s finishing up. She stores it in the locked box Lexa also gave her, where Jake’s portrait lives, before being escorted to the throne room.

It feels wrong to take her place on the raised dais without Lexa. At least Titus isn’t sitting on her throne -- the cognitive dissonance there would be too great. But Lexa’s usual seat has been taken away, and Titus sits in something significantly less ornate if still ceremonial. She can tell he dismisses her presence as soon as he notices it, relegating her to the background and the shadows closer to the balcony while he conducts the audience.

Clarke doesn’t mind it. It’s interesting to be up here, for once, without much attention paid to her. And Titus is doing a good job. Nothing like what Lexa would do -- he doesn’t connect with petitioners the way she does, listening carefully to their points and discussing her own thoughts, even when she’s about to deny them their wishes. Titus is more... removed. That’s possibly because most of the cases are being reviewed for a future presentation to the Commander, and Titus is either reminding them of the law of the land or dismissing the most frivolous suits. She wonders, though. She thinks part of it is just how he is.

She’s more than ready to go back to her rooms after this long and emotional day, and it’s a relief to see Titus begin to wrap up the proceedings.

Everyone is on the verge of being dismissed when a two warriors stumble through the double doors, unannounced.

They’re stumbling because they’re driving a third person before them -- a man covered in dust and dirt with a rough-woven bag over his head. His hands are bound behind his back, and from the muffled groans beneath the bag Clarke guesses he’s been gagged as well.

His captors are winded from dragging their prize this far, but victorious. Clarke’s seen this kind of preening before -- the younger warriors love to exhibit before their Commander, and her nod of approval or recognition can put them on air for days. Never mind the fact that Lexa’s only a few years older, if that.

Clarke watches as they scan the room for Lexa, their faces falling as they realize her absence. Instead they have Titus, scowling as he rises to his feet.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he demands. “Today’s audience has concluded; you are required to give notice before appearing. You can’t just barge in.” He seems nonplussed by the addition to their
“We heard of a bounty,” one of the young warriors, the boy, protests.

“For anyone who to bring Heda a Mountain Man who can walk the earth,” the girl adds.

Titus sighs. “Remove the bag. If it’s really one of the Mountain Men, you will be rewarded. If not,” darkly, “I will have your Firsts take it out of your hides.”

Clarke straightens. She wants to see this. She wants to see who on the ground seems so determined to kill Lexa, and she’s curious -- if they’re affected by radiation the way everyone says, what other abnormalities could have emerged?

But when the two warriors push their prisoner to his knees and remove the bag, Clarke’s heart drops all the way into her stomach.

It’s Charles Pike.

Chapter End Notes

I skipped a week! It was a bad week -- and an over-long chapter -- so thank you so much for your patience. I'm going to try to make up for it by hopping back on the schedule. Which means the next chapter should be here on the 30th, fingers crossed.
She’s always liked Pike. He wasn’t like the other teachers, coming from Farm Station -- he didn’t care as much about correct form or procedure. “The emphasis here is on practical skills,” he would tell them, and decide that day’s class would be on the observation deck, or that they had to pay an impromptu visit to the Last Tree. His homework would be a length of rope they had to tie into five different knots, and then to give him a story about why each would be the best for whatever scenario they imagined. Or he would give them a portion of whatever nominally-nutritious plant had to been over-harvested in the gardens, and several days to cook it into something delicious to share with the class. He was patient, and even-handed -- he gave the sense of being as steady as the rocks he showed them in his classes.

She doesn’t see much of that in the man in front of her. His face is ashy and gaunt, his eyes roaming wildly over the throne room as if anticipating attack from every corner. She takes an unthinking step backward, deeper into the shadows. Not that she’s very recognizable like this, face obscured and painted.

... Charles Pike is on the ground. Which probably means Farm Station is on the ground. Which means --

No, she can’t know that for certain. Maybe Farm Station was jettisoned, or maybe they volunteered to detach in a second attempt to see if the ground was habitable. She can’t know. She can’t know.

But that doesn’t stop her heart from throwing itself about like a wild thing in the cage of her chest.

Her mom could be alive. Her mom could be here.

Ten minutes ago she thought she’d never see Abby again, that she’d live and die without with her mom. Now the longing for her is so strong it makes Clarke shake.

“Speak” Titus commands. In English, and Clarke has a superbly bizarre moment of not computing
the meaning. It’s been so many months with only the Grounders’ languages. She dreams in it. Most
days she thinks in it.

Pike’s head dips as he struggles for composure. He looks like he’s been dragged through hell
backwards: stubble on his neck and cheeks, chapped lips. He’s struggling to keep his eyes open
against the flood of torchlight. “May I have some water?” he grates out.

Titus looks like he wants to refuse, but Pike’s voice is reduced to a rasp. Titus motions, impatient,
and someone steps forward with a glass and jug. Pike takes it in both hands and drinks at lightning
speed, straining for more. After his second glass Titus waves away the attendant.

“Now,” he says sharply, “tell us how this is possible. How are you able to walk among us?”

Pike takes a second. He’s kneeling, the hands of the warriors on each side pressing down on his
shoulders. His own hands rest on his thighs, opening and closing into fists. “I don’t -- I don’t
understand the question,” he admits. “My name is Charles Pike. We landed -- I’m not sure how long
ago, I lost track of the days --”

“Stop,” Titus hisses. “Answer the questions I ask, Mountain Man. I want to know why the sun does
not make you sicken and die like the rest of your brethren.”

“I’m trying to explain to you,” is Pike’s dogged reply. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, I’m
not from any mountain, I came from -- please,” and he switches gears so quickly Clarke almost
gasps, prostrating himself on the floor of the throne room, “please, if you lead these people, you have
to help me. We were captured. They chained us up like animals. And then people began to be
disappear, taken away in the night and never seen again. I knew our only hope was to escape and
look for help, but your soldiers found me in the woods --”

“If you do not answer, you will be imprisoned.” A vein stands out on Titus’s clean-shaven head.
“For your sake, Mountain Man, I hope you become more cooperative before the Commander returns
and gives me leave to make you answer.”

“Please,” Pike begs as Tower guards step forward to haul him to his feet. Clarke can see tears in his
eyes. He casts them about as if searching for a sympathetic ear, spots her in the corner -- and looks
away without a hitch. “Please, listen to me, you have to help them --”

Titus nods, and one of the guards lands a sharp blow to Pike’s cheek. Clarke thinks it’s just meant to
quiet him, but she can see his beleaguered body gives up as his eyes roll back into unconsciousness.

He’s dragged off, and Titus dismisses everyone else as the audience officially ends.

Clarke goes back to her room, numb. She sits on the edge of her bed, staring into the shadows of her room, unseeing. Remembering.

-- captured --

-- taken away in the night --

-- chained us up like animals --

She's able to make it to her wasbasin before she’s violently sick.

~*~

Clarke barely sleeps that night. Every time she closes her eyes she sees Pike, begging and helpless, or the faces of people she knew on the Ark contorted in suffering. When the chilly dawn light creeps over her bedspread she gives up the pretense and gets ready for the day.

She needs to know more. She can’t -- there has to be something she can do, but she has to know what’s happening.

She has to get to Pike.

She’s still dithering over how when Nyko knocks on her door.

Clarke opens it for him, already dressed. She’s surprised -- she usually sees him in the evenings -- and it doesn’t help to see the thundercloud of a scowl on his face.
“I’m giving you a task,” he says, brusque as he shoulders past her into the room. “I don’t want complaining; serving the Commander means you will sometimes be expected to do the things no one else will.”

She stares at him.

He sighs. “No, I apologize. The apprentices have disappointed me this morning, but that’s not excuse to take it out on you. I won’t accept any excuses from you, however.” He sighs again. “I need you to tend the Mountain Man. I don’t have the time, and the others are too scared. They fear if he comes to know them, he’ll have the Mountain take his revenge on their families -- wipe out their villages with their fire that falls from the sky.” He shakes his head. “I knew you would be stronger-minded than their suspicions. Besides,” he adds, “you have no family to punish.”

... it can’t be this easy, can it? It feels like that should be a warning: if she’s learned anything on the ground, it’s that you can’t trust a victory that doesn’t come with a fight.

But Nyko is watching her closely. She has no other option besides nodding her acceptance. He breathes out in visible relief.

“I’ve already put together a kit. If there’s anything you want to take with you, do so. You will be in the (word) most of the day. They should deliver your meal shortly; I will return after you’ve eaten.”

Her brain keeps poking at the unknown word -- "prisoner-room"? "captive-house"? -- as he goes out.

By the time her breakfast arrives, she’s ready.

~*~

It’s dungeon. That’s the meaning of the word.

Not like the dark, dank prisons she’s seen in archival cartoons. This looks... she’s beginning to
suspect this building used to be a bank, or have a bank inside it. Because this reminds her of the spaces she’s seen in other kinds of archived movies: spy flicks and thrillers where the protagonist took a code or special key to some impossibly-fortified building, and she was led to a small room divided into even smaller rooms. Each would be soundproofed and private, and she could investigate the contents of whatever bag or box they had given her therein.

It’s like that, only in the wake of looting and almost a hundred years of disuse. All the cubbies where secure metal boxes lived have been emptied; the soundproofing that lined each cell is torn, its stuffing pulled out; the thick plexiglass doors that locked each client inside hold a spiderweb of internal cracks. They can still serve their purpose, though.

There are four cells in total, each a few feet from the other to create the illusion of privacy. In one of them she can see Pike, huddled on a makeshift mattress in the corner. And in another --

“Greetings, your Highness,” and Clarke starts -- this is the closest she’s heard the stoic, no-nonsense Nyko be outright venomous. His words drip with derision. “And how is the royal blood of Azgeda this fine morning?"

“Bored,” comes the answer in a low, gravelly voice. This man is outright lounging in his cell, reclining on his bed with his hands behind his head. He sits up and Clarke takes in his features: craggy face, beak of a nose, fair-ish hair to his shoulders. She thinks he can’t have been locked up for long, with that remaining muscle mass, but then the contents of his cell contradict that. There’s a low stool and small table, a well-worn bowl and set of utensils. There’s an air of permanency to his set up, a contrast to what they’ve provided for Pike. “I don’t suppose Lexa will allow her pet prince to take a turn in the air today.”

Clarke narrows her eyes at him. She’s heard people use Lexa’s name but... it feels different when he does it.

“You won’t be seeing the sun for a while, Roan,” Nyo says grimly. “Not after last time.”

“She should have never allowed a Second to be part of my guard. How am I to blame for that?”

“No one forced you to put his own blade into his ribs. He’s recovering nicely, by the way.”

“I knew you wouldn’t be talking to me, otherwise.” The prisoner focuses on Clarke. “Who is this?”
“No one to concern yourself with.” Nyko moves past him and Clarke follows suit, grateful to move out of range of this man’s gaze. Even the dark blue head wrap, part of her witch’s clothes and now pinned and folded to hide everything but her eyes, doesn’t feel like enough shelter from his attention.

She’s covered up because of Pike. She’s still not sure how she wants to play this -- she’s keeping her cards close to her chest for as long as possible. If he recognizes her, it’s possible he could get them both killed.

(Nyko didn’t comment, except to mutter “I suppose that’s one way to protect yourself” when she appeared after breakfast.)

The guards who followed them from the entrance unlock the door to the next cell. Nyko goes in first, inspecting the insensible Pike. They’ve chained his hands to the wall.

“Look,” Nyko says. They cut away the bottom of Pike’s pants to expose the calf of his right leg, and Nyko points to the weeping abscesses which have been somewhat cleaned out. “Idiot ran through a field of gopher grass. You won’t have seen it before, usually you only find it up North. Take note on how the seed pod has hooks, and burrows into the hide or skin.” He frowns. “We’ll have to build up any of the muscle that was damaged. What with Roan off his routine, we can keep everyone else on schedule by giving his walks to this prisoner instead, rebuild whatever was lost. Titus wants him in the best physical shape possible. No, I don’t know why,” he says without looking at her. “But that’s the order. Titus wants him strong and healthy. Able to take whatever is thrown at him, were his words.”

Pike jerks awake in his chains. He’s disoriented, confused and in pain, but that doesn’t stop Nyko from pressing him back down onto the mattress with a hand at his throat. “Quiet,” he snarls. Clarke almost startles to hear Nyko speaking English -- none of the apprentices ever did. Who learns it? For what reasons? It’s clearly not used in Polis, but --

The Mountain.

They kept calling Pike a Mountain Man. Clarke thought it was because he’d had a gun, and they’d managed to take it off him.

The people who live -- inside? under? -- the Mountain, the ones who tried to kill Lexa, speak English. It’s the enemy’s language. That’s how all the warriors know it.
Clarke is so absorbed in these thoughts she misses the next exchange between the two men, and she’s brought to attention by Nyko snapping his fingers by her face. “Don’t lose your nerve now,” he growls, before turning back to Pike.

“You see this girl?” he demands, back to English, gripping Pike’s chin in his hand to direct the other man’s gaze to Clarke. “Don’t think she will help you. Don’t even try to talk to her -- she can’t talk back. Touch one hair on her head and the Commander will roast you inside your skin. Understand?”

One of Pike’s eyes has been blackened and is swelling shut, but Clarke can see fear in the other when he nods.

“Good.” Nyko steps away, brushing his hand against his clothes as if he touched something filthy. He nods to Clarke, says in the Woods Clan language: “Don’t worry, I told him what would happen if he hurt you. You’re safe.”

He leaves the door to the cell open as he goes. Clarke looks at Pike, curled defensively into the cell corner. She hasn’t felt less safe since she woke up on the dropship.

~*~

The wounds on Pike’s leg are not in great shape. A few -- she guesses these are what Nyko talked about, spiky and hard -- seed pods were missed the first time around have to be dug out now from healing flesh. Pike passes out from the pain -- and, she suspects, from hunger. The morning meal they brought him is mostly uneaten on the metal tray, and when she pokes at it, she finds grain cereal filled with mealworm eggs and cloudy water. Apparently the guards didn’t get the same lecture from Titus. Clarke walks it back to them and drops it at their feet with a clatter and a meaningful look.

They bring a replacement tray with a much better meal in minutes. She’s not about to wake Pike for it -- sleep is really what the body needs, and it makes it easier to finish without him twitching as she works. She finishes up, disposes of the swabs covered in blood and pus, and scrubs her hands clean. Then she settles in the corner of the cell to wait, taking her place in a chair the guards brought along with the new food.

She has to stay here for most of the day. The threat of infection can materialize in an instant, and Nyko wants her to check for fevers or any signs of it moving to the blood. She has a lot of time to think. And to plan.
Clarke is not sure what the larger plan here may be, but she has a better idea on what she wants to happen next.

She reaches into her shirt and removes the things she collected when Nyko told her to take what she wanted with her into the dungeons: a charcoal pencil, and a few sheets of the precious blank paper Lexa gave her.

Pike doesn’t sleep for more than an hour. When he wakes up she hands him the fresh water.

He drains it noisily, his chains clinking when he moves his hands. There’s another one secured around his waist she hadn’t noticed until now. No wonder they aren’t afraid to leave the door open, and her with him.

“Thank you,” he says when he finishes. He blinks. “You probably don’t understand me, I -- I’m sorry. It’s just been so long since I’ve had any kindness.”

Clarke puts her finger, very slowly, to where her lips would be is she weren’t almost completely covered by her scarf.

Pike frowns. “Do you... do you --?”

She holds up a paper where she’s written, as clearly as she could with shaking hands:

*Keep your voice down, or the guards will hear us.*

Pike wants to know who she is, why she wants to help him.

Clarke refuses to say.
“How do I know I can trust you? How do I know you’re not another trap?”

You don’t.

When she finishes writing that Pike stares at the words. She keeps the papers just out of his reach. Wouldn’t do to have him grab them and show them to anyone else. She taps further up the page on her previous and still-unanswered command: *Tell me what happened to your people.*

“We got separated,” he begins, reluctance in every line of his face. “There was a -- an event, I don’t know how to explain it to you. There are twelve... groups of us. When we arrived, my group couldn’t find the others.”

The Ark is down. The Ark is on the ground.

She wants to know *why*, and *how*, and *who*. But she doesn't want him to know who she is. So she takes a deep breath and writes another line on her paper:

*Who captured you?*

“I don’t know,” he says, helpless. “People like you? But they didn’t call us Mountain Men, or speak to us at all. They used the children to lure us into a trap,” he says, his expression shuttering. “They were the first ones off the Station -- I mean.” His mouth draws up right. “They were playing. Children do that. And then they started to disappear. We could hear them calling for us. When we ran after them there were... nets.”

She has to make herself detach to write: *Are they alive?*

“I don’t know,” Pike bursts out. Clarke raises another warning finger, looks over her shoulder to check the hallway. The guards don’t come around the corner. They’re safe. “I don’t know,” he says again when she turns back, quietly. “They separated us from the children. At first we obeyed because we were afraid of what would happen to them if we didn’t. Then others began to disappear.”

*Tell me everything you remember.* Clarke tries not to break the pencil in her eagerness.
But Pike shakes his head. “That’s it. We managed to cause a distraction -- again, I don’t know how to explain it to you,” and Clarke wonders which one of them had contraband drugs on their person to slip into their guards’ food, “but we knew if we all escaped, they’d come after us. If it was only one person, they might let him go. I,” and his hand shakes as he brings it up to his chest, “was chosen. I didn’t want to leave them, but they -- they decided I had the best chance of survival.”

Possibly the only chance. You didn’t end up on Farm Station because of your high marks in class, including Earth Skills.

“I went searching for the rest of our people. Instead, I found yours.”

Clarke pounces on that: How do you know we’re different from the people who captured you?

She doesn’t want to think about how easily she includes herself in that “we.”

“Small things. As I explained, none of them spoke to us, and definitely not in English.” He frowns. “But their language was different from yours. The two kids who brought me in -- what they spoke isn’t what I heard our guards use to communicate, those days we were held captive.”

What else?

“I don’t...” His grown grows deeper. “Many of them wore masks and I didn’t see their faces. They looked like something out of story to scare children.”

Masks? Clarke hasn’t seen anyone wearing masks.

“Scars,” he says suddenly. “One of them lifted his mask to eat, and I saw scars on his face. Not from a wound -- it looked deliberate.”

That tickles something in the back of her brain, but it doesn’t take. She frowns and shakes her head.

“I don’t know what else to tell you.” Pike’s head falls into his hands where he sits. Quietly, so that
she’s not sure he meant her to hear: “I don’t know what else to do.”

... the Ark is on the ground.

It can’t be too far from where the dropship landed. It’s been months since that launch, and the Ark travels at blinding speeds -- but over a much greater distance. From the perspective of the Earth, the Ark will have barely moved.

She still remembers -- vaguely -- how she traveled to Polis, the position of the sun as she rode on Lexa’s horse. And the river.

Before, there was nothing to go back to. Now...

She writes something down. Pike is lost in his own desolation, and she has to tap the floor to make him look up.

*You’re going to find the rest of your people.*

They spend the next few hours discussing what it will take to make the journey -- her memories are not nearly as detailed as Pike would like, Clarke can tell. But that works in her favor: she tells him her info is secondhand, that she’s heard stories of people like him in the woods. Young people.

“That’s the dropship,” he says, hope sparking in his eyes. “We sent them down when... are they still alive?”

Clarke pretends she doesn’t know.

Pike has to get to the others on the Ark. If Farm Station is being held prisoner, there just isn’t time for her to wait until Lexa gets back. More people could be dying each day.
Clarke will make it up to her. Her drawings explaining the Ark and her own arrival on the ground -- they just have to be amended, that’s all, Clarke will add the bit about Pike and Farm Station at the end. Once she explains, Lexa will understand.

“But how am I supposed to get out of here?” Pike demands.

Okay, that part Clarke doesn’t have down. Not yet.

She’s relieved from her shift late in the afternoon by one of the newer apprentices, probably one still too scared of Nyko to say “no” to him. He crouches in the corner on Clarke’s chair and watches Pike with wide, unblinking eyes, like he could be attacked at any moment.

She can see Pike wants to say something to her as she goes, but he clenches his jaw and stares at the wall instead.

Clarke is lost in her thoughts, scrambling to organize the whirl of them, when a voice breaks her concentration:

“You’re the wood witch. Aren’t you.”

Clarke pauses, turning her head to the man in the first cell. What did Nyko call him?

He’s standing much closer to the pockmarked plastic divider, leaning with his shoulder to the adjacent wall. It seems like he’s been waiting there. For her.

“I heard about you, even locked up in here. You’re quite the sensation.” He cocks his head to the side. “Funny, I heard you couldn’t talk.”

There are scars bracketing his face: angled curves set against each eye, with a diamond-shape gap in the middle slashed through. Very purposeful. Something done with deliberation, and skill.

Scars.
“If that’s true, then why has the Mountain Man been talking to you all day?”

Roan. His Highness. *Prince Roan of --*

And Nyko said gopher grass was found farther north.

“Well, maybe he likes to talk to himself,” he says softly, eyes never leaving her face. “I couldn’t make out what he was saying, in the end. And surely, Lexa wouldn’t make a pet out of any friend to the Mountain.”

Azgeda has captured Farm Station.

“I wonder why he’s so quiet when talking to himself,” Roan says as she continues on, her heart thudding in panic and discovery. “Who would warn him to keep his voice down?”

Clarke flees the dungeons.

~*~

Nyko excuses from all other duties under his direction, and Sharla has gone home for the day. That leaves her riding lessons. Lexa stopped supervising them during their tiff, but a stablehand came to fetch Clarke every afternoon, even then. She saves them the trip this time and makes her way to the stables on her own, head buzzing like she fell face first into the Tower hives.

She’s still not Storm’s favorite person. But the mare is obliging whenever Clarke appears in her stall. It doesn’t hurt that Clarke makes sure to swing by the kitchens for a handful of carrots beforehand.

They ride around the paddock, watched by an experienced stable worker who calls out suggestions when Clarke is in earshot. She’s gotten much better. Though she doesn’t think she’d fare as well on a different, worse-trained horse.

Focusing on the physicality of it, the strain in her thighs and arms, helps her shove down everything
until after she’s washed and returned to her rooms, where food is waiting for her.

Clarke sits down and finds she can’t bring herself to eat.

Azgeda has captured Farm Station.

And they haven’t told Lexa. Why? If they’re so worried, like their ambassador -- Rison -- said, about Mountain Men walking the earth --

No, wait. Pike said the guards never called them that. That the guards never used English, even though they must have heard the Arkers speaking it.

Maybe only Woods Clan warriors learn it.

But surely they would have recognized it. And Lexa had told them...

So they’re keeping their captives a secret. Why? Why? And what are they doing with them, where do they disappear to?

She flashes back, suddenly, to Lexa at the ravine, coming to the same conclusion Clarke had: “The reapers didn’t attack the settlements. They were merely the weapon wielded by another.”

The reapers. The Mountain’s creatures.

And Sanga, days before that: “Technically, we’re in Azgeda’s territory now.”

It’s as if she can see the edges of the truth but not the shape of it. She can make out all the separate points, but not how they connect: Azgeda, the Mountain, and the Ark.

It’s maddening.
But it’s also clear: there’s something brewing, here.

And she needs to tell Lexa.

Pike needs to go and warn the Ark, see if they can save Farm Station. But Clarke needs to stay here and make Lexa understand what’s happening. Or have Lexa help her understand what’s happening. Both.

Roan doesn’t bother her. He’s locked up, clearly mistrusted. Besides, Clarke’s going to tell Lexa everything, anyway. Once the illustrations of her story are finished it doesn’t matter what Roan knows, or thinks he knows.

She still burns the papers she used to communicate with Pike in the fire, watching until she is sure they’re nothing but ash. She also stays up long into the night drawing until her hands are dark with charcoal and ache like she’s been using them to fight.

~*~

They’ll take you for a walk outside the tower. You’ll escape then.

Pike stares at her across his bowl of gruel. They don’t even give him utensils; he has to slurp it from the bowl. “How am I supposed to do that?”

Pretend to be weaker than you feel. Overpower your guards.

“That would be easier with a weapon.”

No doubt. But Clarke hasn’t seen any she could sneak into his cell on short notice, and she’s taking enough risks as it is.

You’ll make do.
She’s seen Pike fight. All of the Arkers are trained in self-defense -- more as another approach to much-needed exercise than as a useful skill, but some people enjoyed it, held tournaments for friendly competition. Top prize usually went to one of the younger contestants, but Pike always held his own.

“All right. Say I get away from my guards. Then what?”

*Rub dirt into your clothes.* Hopefully that will distract from their relative newness, the more military style that Arkers favor. *Keep your head down, but act as if you belong.* Polis brought all types to the city. She’s seen them herself -- in the market, and in audiences with Lexa. Its citizens are used to a little strangeness walking the streets. *Make your way east, to the city gates.*

Clarke knows the way, now.

“And that’s it? There’s no guards there, or a checkpoint?”

There is.

Clarke draws in a deep breath. *You have to learn a few phrases in our language.* She spells it out phonetically for him, corrects his pronunciation when he misinterprets, gives hints about what to do with his tongue or teeth to make the sound come out right. She drills him, over and over, in the phrases he will hear and how he has to respond: greetings and goodbyes, please and thanks. All the banalities which will make him part of the landscape.

Plus the “*State your purpose*” he will hear at the checkpoint, and perhaps on the road if stopped by a Woods Clan warrior. She teaches him the response that will keep him alive, and tells herself it’s not a betrayal, it’s a necessity for this to all come out right:

“I’m on a mission for the Commander.”

~*~

She knows it will work. No one in Woods Clan would falsely represent their Heda in such a way. No one would dare.
If they did, Lexa would make them answer for it.

... she’s pretty sure it will work.

Before she leaves that day Pike reaches out as if to grab her hand. He’s brought up short by his chains, but he lets it hang in the air between them. “Thank you,” he says after an awkward pause. “I don’t know why you’re doing this. Maybe it’s all a set-up to get me killed, but... if not... thank you.”

Clarke bends back down again to write, and for so long she sees Pike shift with curiosity and impatience.

Her final message to him reads:

*Something is happening, and it’s a threat to all of us. There is an enemy working against all of us. I need to find out who it is. You need to go to your people and tell them what’s happening -- explain to them there is an enemy, but it’s not my people. Whoever it is, they want to set us against each other. If we’re at each other’s throats, they win.*

When she holds it up for him to read he’s quiet for a long, long time, his eyes on the paper. Clarke is itching with impatience, sure the guards will come and look for her at any second, but instinct tells her to stay in place.

“Keep fighting at all costs,” he says softly. He looks back up into her eyes. “If this works, then I owe you. I didn’t think anyone on the ground would help us. But if this works... you’re right. We’re a stronger force united.”

She leaves after that, walking by Roan’s cell to quickly give him a chance to talk.

Nyko spots her in the halls on the way to her riding lesson, stops her. “It’s been almost three days and no signs of fever in the Mountain Man, you can go back to your other duties. Good job,” he adds, and her stomach curdles with guilt at his approval.

It shouldn’t. She can’t afford to be weak like that. She has to be strong.
She goes through the next few days in a fog, performing her duties automatically. She does well, but she knows other people notice the state she’s in. Sharla even comments on it -- or tries to, signing a phrase Clarke can’t quite follow. She catches *Commander, home, and safe.*

Clarke smiles her response and feels sick.

She’s lucky, in a way, because she doesn’t have to wait much longer. She hears the alarm shouted one day in the map-making room, and by dinner the news is all over the tower.

The prisoner has escaped, and can’t be found.

Chapter End Notes

Housekeeping!

1. Gopher grass is based loosely on foxtail grass, because nuclear fallout means never having to apologize for nightmare-style worldbuilding.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Pike’s escape casts a pall over the tower. Clarke is shocked -- it seemed, well, not a *small* thing while she was doing it, but something that would fall between the cracks and be forgotten. Instead it’s the drop of iodine slipped into litre of water: overnight the hustle and bustle, the constant comings and goings, are reduced to a quiet and eerie stillness.

She doesn’t understand it. It’s just one prisoner. It wasn’t that important, was it? Surely people must have escaped the tower before. Surely, whatever they planned to do with Pike, there must be a fallback.

Surely.

Clarke’s uneasy, though. She sees Nyko’s dark expression whenever he visits for lessons, she hears echoes of Titus’s shouting as she moves through the halls, and she can’t help but notice the number of guards in the tower has doubled.

Pike’s release had been necessary. Farm Station was in danger, and the rest of the Ark needed to know that -- and know they weren’t alone on the ground. She needed Pike to join Alpha Station. It had been the right thing to do, breaking him out.

It wasn’t a mistake.

But it might be guilt that spurs her to work even harder at her daily lessons, to sit straighter when listening to her tutors and ask Sharla for more words. (Recall is harder than recognition -- she can understand so much of other clans’ dialects when spoken, now, but remembering the sign for a word, even if she learned it yesterday, can take her minutes at a time.) She even makes more of an effort with Storm, finding time in the early mornings to go down to the mare’s stall and take a few turns around their paddock. She can ride more or less unsupervised as long as she keeps to a gentle canter. There’s always a senior assistant in earshot, though, and one approaches her now as she dismounts.
“You’re doing well,” he says. “Heda will be impressed by your progress when she comes home.”

It’s the stupidest thing to make her feel embarrassed, but it does. She can feel her face heat when she places a finger across her lips, hoping her message comes across.

He stares at her for a beat before nodding. “You want to keep it a secret?” He grins. “A surprise.”

... so stupid. It’s not like -- it’s not even -- what is Lexa going to care, anyway? She could probably ride a horse at full gallop when Clarke was playing with brightly-colored blocks. She’s not going to be impressed by the fact Clarke can now stay in the saddle for more than thirty minutes, or avoid falling flat on her face when she climbs down.

Still, Clarke's face grows even hotter, and she nods. She’s not trying to hide anything, she just wants to get a little better before showing Lexa. Just enough to make it worth it. Maybe make Lexa smile, even though she rarely does.

The stablehand nods back, then points his chin over to the main area. “Might want to scamper up the tower, then.”

Clarke frowns, straining to see. What is he talking about--

Lexa.

Lexa’s back.

Clarke abandons Storm, knowing she’s supposed to walk the mare back and clean the tack herself but not giving a damn, because there is Lexa: dismounting from her own horse, her face in studied lines of care. She’s talking to someone -- not Gustus, Clarke doesn’t see him among the small contingent of warriors that must represent only a fifth of the force Lexa took with her -- and doesn’t see Clarke approach.

“-- should be here within two days, three at the most. She’ll probably exhaust their horses, so pick out half a dozen to switch -- oof,” as Clarke comes up behind to grab her in a hug.
The stable master's face twitches, but he manages to maintain his composition. “Yes, Heda. I’ll do that.”

“Thank you,” Lexa says, faint. She turns her head so that her chin is almost touching her shoulder. “You couldn’t wait one minute more?” But her expression is soft.

It seizes for a brief second as she turns in Clarke’s embrace, and Clarke might be embarrassing herself, but she also has eyes. And a brain. She takes a quick summary of the situation: Lexa, but none of her most trusted warriors, back days earlier than expected, and she was too slow getting down from her horse.

Clarke reaches up to grab fistfuls of the fur lining the collar of Lexa’s cloak at drag the other girl’s face close to hers, raising both eyebrows as high as they’ll go: Where?

“It’s nothing, it’s only that Anya is more than capable --” Except she shifts as she talks, clearly favoring her right side. Clarke pushes the heavy fabric of her cloak away and reaches, finding the telltale bulk of bandages beneath her fingers.

Clarke is so furious she manages to drag Lexa by her collar those first few steps, but then the other girl digs in her heels. “Stop, stop,” she cajoles, looking an odd mixture of irritated and guilty. She shakes her head. “I have too much else to do first. In an hour or two, then you can take a look for yourself. It will hold until then; my warriors are not incompetent with field dressings.”

Clarke wouldn’t dare to presume otherwise. She sets her jaw and looks off to the side, thinking of a promise that was made only a few days prior.

“I was careful,” Lexa protests. After a moment, she sighs. “Fine.” She reaches to take Clarke’s hand in hers, intertwining their fingers. “Lead the way.”

She lets Clarke pull her along and into the elevator. As it begins its lumbering ascent, she says: “There’s no need to involve Nyko, though. Is there.”

Clarke doesn’t look at her.
“Is there?” Lexa asks, finally sounding (to Clarke’s mind) properly penitent.

Clarke lifts her chin, and Lexa gives a sad little sigh.

~*~


Versi, who wanders over as they walk in, is the one who helps Clarke wrestle Lexa into one of the beds and divest her of her cloak and boots. Lexa finally protests, a little red in her cheeks, when they go for the edge of her shirt. She tucks it up herself so that the bandages are exposed and Versi and Clarke undo the wrappings. The cut beneath it is shallow but long, wrapping almost all the way around the bottom and side of Lexa’s ribcage, as if someone was trying to angle a blade in and under.

It wasn’t cleaned as well as it could have been, and Clarke tells herself Lexa deserves the pain as she sets to carefully washing away the crust of blood that’s already formed. Versi stands by her elbow ready to assist or dispose of bloodied swabs.

“I take it negotiations didn’t go well,” Nyko says, as he deigns to come over and supervise.

“They didn’t happen at all.” Lexa is lying on her back, trying to control her reactions as Clarke works. “Not with me. After the attacker was killed, Anya offered to take my place. They’re probably finishing as we speak.”

“Offered?”

Lexa huffs out what might be a laugh. “I don’t know why I let her get away with it.”

“A Second’s loyalty dies a hard death.”

“Mmm.” Lexa’s eyes flutter shut. “She’ll arrive soon enough with her report. It will be good to have her in Polis.”
Nyko grabs the back of a chair and drags it across the floor, sitting up near Lexa’s head while Clarke and Versi work.

“Titus sent a messenger,” Clarke hears Lexa say to him, low and close. “We met her on the way back. It’s true?”

“I don’t know what message Titus sent.”

“So give me your version of the story.”

Nyko pauses. “Two warriors brought in a man,” he finally says, “badly injured. He spoke the language of the Mountain, and his clothes and manner was like theirs: no tattoos or other clan markings. But he walked in the sun and did not burn.”

Lexa keeps her eyes closed. “He escaped.”

“Yes He overpowered two young warriors, bare-handed. They’ve been questioned. They admit they were lax in their duty, and assumed his injuries were much worse.”

Lexa jumps inside her skin, hissing, when Clarke starts her stitches. “Sorry,” she murmurs, and then opens her eyes as she turns to look at Nyko. “And then?”

“Heda. He should have been stopped before he reached the city gates. At the very least, at the gates themselves.”

“But he wasn’t.”

Nyko bunches his hands into fists. Clarke notices how the tendons strain in his arms, the tension bulking up his shoulders and back. She forgets, sometimes, that Nyko is a warrior as much as a healer, if not more. “No,” he grits out.

Lexa leverages herself up into her elbows. “Titus said when he was questioned at the gates, the
Mountain Man spoke *our* language. Well enough to get past them."

“That is what we have learned, Heda.”

“Titus also surmised,” she says, watching him closely, “that if he could speak our language before, he would have done so. He would have used it to escape detection before ever being captured.”

“That is my guess, as well.”

“So.” Lexa lets her head fall back, looking up at the ceiling. “That leaves us all with one conclusion.”

“Yes, Heda.”

And then Lexa gives grim voice to the fear that has permeated the very air for last few days, the one Clarke didn’t fully understand until now: “There is a traitor in the tower.”

~*~

“Thank you,” Lexa says as Clarke finishes re-bandaging her ribs.

Clarke gives her a brief smile, curls her fingers into her palms so that Lexa can’t see how they’re shaking. Or how shaken she *feels*, having overheard Nyko and Lexa’s conversation.

She did the right thing. It will work out, in the end.

“Oh, we’re not finished,” Versi says, standing over Clarke’s shoulder. Clarke looks up at her in confusion.

“We’re not?” Lexa asks, clearly feeling the same.
“Has it really been so long?” Versi’s smile is falsely bright. “Whenever I have to patch you up, you have to drink the tea.”

Lexa -- Clarke marvels -- flinches. “No.”

Versi’s smile only grows. “Yes.”

... okay, Clarke has no idea what’s going on, but judging from the dread on Lexa’s face, she likes it.

“Versi.” Lexa licks her lips, wary. “You know I don’t -- I haven’t had to since --”

“Yes, when was the last time?” Versi taps her chin in a studied performance of thought. “Oh, right. Three years ago. You didn’t take a healer then, either.”

Lexa blanches.

Perfect, Clarke thinks. Here is the only possible weapon to wield against someone like the Commander -- something she doesn’t like, but knows is good for her, and so she won’t be caught acting like a child in refusing -- and Versi had it in her pocket all along. Bless her for sharing.

But when Versi goes to check their stores of dried herbs and supplies, her face falls. “Hmm. We seem to be out.”

Lexa climbs to her feet with a speed that belies the fact she has over a dozen stitches in her side. “Well, I don’t have time to wait for you to collect more,” she says, hurried. “So I will -- be going.”

She doesn’t even limp as she strides away, Clarke thinks, which you kind of have to admire.

“We’ll bring you fresh tomorrow morning!” Versi calls after her.
Versi comes to Clarke’s rooms before dawn to fetch her, and together they make their way up to the orchards and gardens. Most of the trees are dormant for winter, although Clarke can see a few field-workers trimming, tending, and collecting whatever materials can be used from cold-hardy varieties.

She doesn’t feel very cold-hardy. Inside the tower is a bit warmer, but she can see her breath all the time now when outdoors. The first time it happened it startled her, badly -- it could be cold on board the Ark, but not like this. At least not anywhere she lived, where the climate controls were maintained. It’s so eerie to watch. It makes her thinks of spirits and other energies, leaving her body in a cloud.

Both she and Versi have thick scarves wrapped around their lower faces, which doesn't allow for small talk. Versi leads her to a corner of the orchards Clarke’s never been before. There’s a structure maybe ten feet in height that spreads out over the ground. She can see as they approach it’s just a wooden frame, with thick sheets of oilskin laid over top like skin on a skeleton. There are no bricks, except those anchoring the edges to the ground. The opening requires some complication machinations that Versi deals with, and then she quickly ushers Clarke inside.

Where it’s warm; the oilskin covering is just translucent enough to let in light but keeps the cold air out, and there are deep pits with sod banking down embers and, oh -- it’s a greenhouse.

It’s warm enough to take their scarves and hoods off, and Clarke follows Versi’s example. Next are the gloves, and Versi brings back a shallow basket as she shows Clarke how to strip the delicate white blossoms from the plant and place them inside.

They work in silence for a while, and then Versi says: “She’s happy with you.”

Clarke looks over, but Versi keeps her eyes on her work. “I didn’t think it would be like that. I heard how she was using you as... like a totem against all these attempts on her life. I know you’re not really a witch,” she says, briefly meeting Clarke’s gaze.

“I thought it was just a strategy,” she continues, looking away. “I knew she liked you, but I thought...” She folds her lips over whatever words would have completed that sentence. “I haven’t seen her like this, in -- in a really long time.”

Clarke waits, but there doesn’t seem to be anything else forthcoming. They finish up, and as they
climb back onto their feet Versi reaches out with the hand not holding the basket to take Clarke’s.

“It’s a good thing,” she says, fervent. “It is, I only -- everything I said before, you know it’s still the same, right?” She squeezes Clarke’s hand. “You know it can’t be anything more.”

It should be humiliating, these constant reminders that Lexa doesn’t feel the way Clarke does. That Clarke is, essentially, taking whatever scraps are offered. It’s so unlike her. She knows that. She marvels at it, sometimes -- shouldn’t she be angry? Shouldn’t she be ashamed, being so obvious when Lexa is just... Lexa? Unyielding and, well, not cold, but unmoved beyond a certain point.

Clarke might be all of that, except then she thinks about the alternative -- not having anything of Lexa, anything at all -- and it’s as if her heart closes up tight and small, a lump in the center of her chest.

So it’s easier than it should be, to meet Versi’s eyes and squeeze her hand back.

Versi searches Clarke’s face, and whatever she finds there has her looking faintly astonished. “And you can live with that,” she says. She releases Clarke’s hand. “I couldn’t,” she says in a whisper.

The cold air slaps at their faces as they exit the greenhouse and begin the steady climb back down the hills to the tower. Clarke stumbles and almost loses her footing at a harsh, brassy sound careening through the air.

Versi is also surprised, but only mildly. She turns her head east with a frown -- from this vantage point they can look down onto the city, see where the road leads from the forest to the city gates. The noise comes again -- it’s like a very non-melodious trumpet -- and then the sound of hooves trammeling the earth at a frantic rate just as riders emerge from the trees.

“Any’a’s here,” Versi says. She points out the leader, from this distance only a straight-backed figure on top her horse. Clarke can’t help feel that same niggle of unease deep in her gut, and the continuing suspicion that she should hurry up and remember how she knows that name.

~*~
“Anya’s here,” Versi repeats as she walks behind Clarke into Lexa’s chamber. That was new -- or, well, new to Clarke's understanding of things: that Clarke was now one of the people whose presence could usher others into the restricted spaces of the tower. The guards had all stiffened as they approached, but one look at Clarke’s face and they had relaxed to let them both through.

She’s pleased. It’s probably a new thing, one she hasn’t had a chance to notice before as she now lives almost entirely in these spaces. And it’s flattering to be given that responsibility, that trust. It’s more, somehow, than simply being allowed access.

Or that’s what she tells herself, and fights back the territorial urge to go and sit on the edge of the Commander’s bed, where Lexa is fighting sleep to sit up.

“Already?” she mumbles. “Her horses must be half-dead.” She lifts her head to spot Clarke, and a smile spreads across her face. “Good morning.”

Clarke gives her a smile, then looks away. She’s not going over there.

Versi does instead, carrying the teapot and carafe of boiled water she took from the infirmary when they dropped off most of this morning’s harvest. “Don’t make that face,” she says, and Clarke tilts her head up to the ceiling to keep from checking what kind of face Lexa is making. “It’s the fresh flowers. It’s not as bitter this way.”

Lexa doesn’t reply, but silence where there would usually be graciousness is just as telling, with her. Clarke watches Versi pour the water into the pot and place it on a table by Lexa’s bed. Versi then sits on the bed herself.

Clarke is not upset, because she’s not five years old and Lexa is not her favorite toy. She’s only... it’s unlike Versi. And from the sudden blankness on Lexa’s face, Clarke is not the only one to think so.

Clarke is dealt another surprise when Versi leans forward and begins to speak, quite softly, into Lexa’s ear. At first Lexa frowns, a deep line appearing between her eyebrows. Then as Versi continues -- too quiet and far away for Clarke to hear -- it slowly begins to smooth out, until she looks only thoughtful.

Versi’s done speaking in less than a minute. Before she rises to her feet, though, she leans in and presses a kiss to Lexa’s forehead, her other hand coming up to cup the back of Lexa’s skull. The two of them sit like that for a breath while Clarke stares.
Then Versi disengages and stands with the same smoothness, turning and walking away. She pauses as she passes by Clarke, reaches out to push a length of hair back behind Clarke’s ear.

“Take care of her,” she says simply. A bit of humor creeps into her face. “She needs a lot of looking after, and she’s your problem, now.”

Her leaving creates an odd sense of vacuum in the room. It’s not awkwardness -- Clarke wonders if, after everything, she might be beyond awkwardness with Lexa -- but it’s not very comfortable.

She moves through it by making her way to Lexa’s bedside and pouring out a cup of the newly-brewed tea, raising an eyebrow at the girl in the bed.

“Nothing,” Lexa says automatically. “Or...” She shrugs, and the neck of her sleep shirt is cut loose enough to fall and expose one shoulder. “Some... old memories. Things I’d forgotten.”

Whatever. Clarke doesn’t need to know absolutely everything about Lexa. But it’s with a certain satisfaction she holds out the cup of steaming, pungent liquid.

Lexa makes a face, but takes it. After testing the heat she downs it in a few swallows, and with a shudder. She hands the cup back absently and without thanks.

So Clarke pours her another one.

Lexa sighs, but seems to realize what she's being punished for as she then says: “Thank you.” She hesitates as she brings the cup to her lips. “Do you want to try it?” she asks, and offers with a hopeful look.

Clarke wrinkles her nose. The stuff smells like boiled dirt. She shakes her head.

Scowling, Lexa lowers with the cup. “The one time I want you to take what’s mine,” she mutters, and then more clearly: “Yes, send her in,” to the handmaiden who has appeared in the doorway.
Looking back, Clarke will wonder: if she had taken the teapot and left, then, or if she hadn’t pushed that second cup on Lexa. If she hadn’t joined Versi in teasing Lexa and making the tea in the first place. If everything that came after would have been different for it -- easier, happier. Or if some things are unavoidable.

At the time, though, she enjoys watching Lexa grimace her way down to the bottom of the cup in her hand, and the next thing she knows there’s a third person in the room, watching her.

She jumps a little at the sight of this woman: lean and muscled, with so many sharp angles to her face it reminds Clarke of a knife missing a sheath. Her hair spills across her shoulders and back, a mass of unruly waves and colors that, together with the paint across her eyes, she almost looks like something born of the darkness of the forest.

... she looks like Lexa, when Clarke first met her. It’s an odd thought. She forgets, mostly, what Lexa made her feel in the first days they met, that odd mix of fascination and trepidation. She doesn’t like being reminded of it. If she’s being honest.

“Who’s this?” the woman asks. Her voice do nothing to dispel the overall impression of hardness, and wildness.

“Welcome to Polis, Anya. I was afraid you might not be able to find us.”

Clarkes head jerks back in Lexa’s direction. Her tone is... new. It’s difficult to place.

The other woman -- Anya -- raises an eyebrow. “I know where Polis is. And that isn’t an answer.”

“If you know the way, then why has it been months since you visited?” Lexa asks, sitting up a bit straighter and... she’s eager, but with a playful antagonism behind it. If it were anyone else, Clarke would be tempted to term it “puppyish.”

“Because if you’re here, then I trust things don’t need my supervision.” She raises an arm to point at Clarke. “Third time, Lexa. I won’t ask again.”

“She helps me.”
Even Clarke can tell Lexa is being evasive, and from the way Anya rolls her eyes she’s not fooled, either. Clarke is uncomfortable, all of the sudden -- the atmosphere of the room has changed, and she’s excluded from whatever subtext or history these two are trading on. It makes her skin feel tight and itchy, and she reaches for the empty teacup intending to take it and make her escape. She can come back when it’s just her and Lexa again.

But when her fingers brush Lexa’s, the other girl startles. “You’re freezing,” she says with a frown, abandoning the empty cup among her blankets to take Clarke’s hand in her own. She chafes it between her own, adding: “Did you walk all the way to the orchards and back? It’s fine for Versi, she has time for the showers before breakfast, but we have to -- Jollett,” she raises her voice as she looks beyond Clarke. “Draw a bath for her. Otherwise you’ll never warm up,” she finishes quietly, speaking to Clarke as she gives her hands a final squeeze. She leverages herself out of the bed a second later. “Eat with me,” she says to Anya as she walks past the other woman. “I bet you didn’t stop for meals on the way here.”

Anya’s eyes, glittering and watchful, remain on Clarke for a pregnant moment. Then she relents and turns her back to follow Lexa to the tables the handmaidens have set up by the window and are already piling high with food.

This is the first time Clarke has bathed in Lexa’s quarters and hasn’t wanted to luxuriate it, savor every second of the warmth and comfort it offers. This time she’s anxious for the handmaidens to finish pouring in the water and leaving her be. She climbs in hastily to make them go away faster, and then holds her breath until the water stops sloshing and she can hear the conversation beyond the wooden partition set up for privacy.

“-- don’t believe them,” Lexa is saying.

“It’s an insulting lie. How can they speak their language, carry their weapons, set up a fortress so close to it, and yet claim they have nothing to do with the Mountain? They think we’re stupid.”

Clarke grips the edges of the tub. It can’t be -- oh, please, please don’t let them be talking about --

“What do you advise, then?”

A beat, then two, of silence. “I heard you collected a wood witch. It’s become a very popular story. People love to tell it: their great Heda, clever enough to catch one, strong enough to resist the temptations that would let her escape.”
Clarke can picture the face Lexa is making. “I tired of the ambassadors using these attacks as a reason to question my rule. If their convictions can be swayed by a child’s story, then they had no business coming to me with their “concerns” in the first place -- and they haven’t since. It may seem silly to you, but I’m pleased with the results.”

“Is that her?”

Now Lexa is silent, longer than Clarke would expect, before admitting: “Yes.”

“I see.”

More silence. “Is there a problem?”

“None of the witches in my childhood stories were that pretty.”

The chair scrapes against the floor as Lexa stands. “You, of all people,” she begins, and Clarke catches her breath because that’s not just anger in her tone, there’s hurt, “of all people, are going to accuse me of --”

“No.” Gently: “No, Lexa. I do know you.”

A thump as Lexa settles back into her chair. “What, then?”

“... I trust you’re being careful.”

“It’s never careful enough, though, is it.” However, Lexa doesn’t sound upset anymore. “What precautions have I neglected?”

“I would never presume to tell the Commander of the twelve clans how to best guard her person.”

“Of course. But if your Second was here, a lowly nightblood waiting for her conclave, I suppose you’d have advice for her.”
Quietly, almost too quietly to be heard: “Do you trust her?”

“Yes.” Lexa sighs. “But we can talk like this if it makes you feel better,” she says, switching to English.

The sound of Lexa’s familiar voice speaking that language brings back a flood of sense memories: exhausted and half-starved in the woods, looking at a figure high atop a pale horse and being ushered who knew where as she said --

*Anya would not appreciate the gift of yet another mouth to feed... while she deals with the invaders.*

And then, a second shock coming hard on that one’s heels:

*Anya dealt with them,* that day she learned everyone else who came down on the dropship was dead.

Anya’s territory is where the dropship landed.

Which means they *are* talking about the Ark. And this woman killed almost a hundred teenagers and children.

She killed *Wells.*

“Do you know who she is?” Anya is asking in the same language. Hatred boils up in Clarke at the sound of her voice, and she sinks deeper into her bath water to keep calm.

“We found her wandering in the woods next to Tondisi. She was like a child. Worse than. Whoever raised her never thought she’d leave the Dead Zone, she had no idea how to survive outside it.”

“As you say, Commander.”

“You were saying,” Lexa prods. “Your thoughts on this second wave of invaders. Do they know you
captured those other spies?”

“No. And the spies do not know that the rest of their people have arrived.”

Clarke’s heart kicks into a new gear, beating so hard it makes the water tremble.

“Good,” Lexa says, open admiration in her voice. “Are they still insisting they were separated from the others, and don’t know their fate?”

“Yes,” Anya says. “They lie as badly as the rest. They must have known we were advancing and made an alliance with the Mountain. It must have been a rescue. Why would an enemy spend so much effort to not leave a single body behind?”

Not a single --

So, then Anya’s people didn’t reach the dropship before --

They might all still be alive.

“I thought it was clever, as lies go.”

“It would have been. If we hadn’t found them sneaking from village to village wearing the clothes of the dead, trying to learn the territory. Of course, we would have caught them sooner, if we only,” and here she cuts herself off with a sound of disgust.

“Lincoln’s defection left you short-handed. You couldn’t have seen it coming.”

“Something made him go mad,” Anya says flatly. “To disappear like that, and so completely... I will find him. And before I kill him, I want to know what infected his brain to make him turn traitor.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t killed the spies by now, as well,” Lexa says, so casually, and a coldness spreads through Clarke that persists even in the warmth of the bath. “Are they yet proving useful?”
“Yes, I think so. One of them is very eager to treat with us. He calls himself Finn.”

Clarke’s breath lodges in her throat.

“He’s very... helpful,” Anya continues. “Very forthcoming.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. He claims they weren’t spying, or planning to carry back information to the Mountain. He says they were looking for someone.”

“You’re right: they are bad liars.”

“No,” considering, “this one is very convincing. Or was, until the rest of them appeared and started shooting their guns.”

“Who was he looking for?”

“He claims it’s just a girl who wandered off and became lost. That he’s afraid for her safety.”

“You don’t believe him.”

“I think,” Anya says slowly, “that she’s much more important than he wants to say. He was arguing once with one of the others, before we separated them. They used the word princess.”

Of course that stupid nickname for her would --

Finn’s alive. Possibly Bellamy, too.
Who else?

They’re alive. They’ve been alive all this time, while she’s been --

“That’s an old word,” Lexa says.

“It could be their leader. She might have been sent ahead, the advance scout.”

“Or it could be nothing.” Lexa sounds richly amused. “You see plots in everything. Remember the contingent from Glowing Forest?”

“They were plotting against you.”

“They wanted to divert the funds for the southern trade route to rebuild established roads, Anya. It’s not quite the same as designs on my life.” Her words are a indistinct, as if she’s speaking through a mouthful of food. “When you have something besides forgotten words and rumors, come to me.”

Their conversation lapses into quieter topics, and back into their clan’s language. They talk of ordinary things, could almost be mistaken for ordinary people, instead of the most feared leader in the known world and the woman who honed her capacity for violence.

When the handmaidens think to check on her they find Clarke white-faced and still in a bath of cooling water. They can probably see her red-rimmed eyes, but they can’t know for sure that she’s been sobbing her heart out, silently, both fists pressed against her mouth. They exchange looks. Clarke stares back them, wordlessly daring them to go and bring it to Lexa’s attention.

They don’t, and she’s dressed and made ready for the rest of the day.

~*~

Sometime close to noon, after several hours in the throne room, Lexa holds a hand up to signal whatever petitioner is next in line should wait. She stands and walks across the dais to Clarke,
putting her hands on either side of her face to force Clarke’s gaze up to her own.

Clarke meets Lexa’s eyes and wonders if the misery that’s knit itself throughout her body is visible on her face.

Maybe it is, because Lexa’s grip tightens. “You look awful. You should have stolen some of my tea after all.” She steps back, her hands lingering on Clarke’s face for just a moment longer than might be expected. “Go back to your rooms and rest. I’m cancelling your lessons.”

Clarke thinks: *I could have lived this life with you. I was ready for it.*

“Don’t give me that,” Lexa says gently. “You can barely keep on your feet. Go. Start fresh tomorrow.”

Clarke walks to her rooms in a fog. She pulls off her witches clothes, wipes her face clean of paint, falls into bed and a dead sleep. She didn’t think she was tired, before, she’s not so much tired now -- instead, it’s as if her brain has taken pity on her and shut everything down at once to give her a few hours of rest.

When she wakes up the sun is beginning to set outside her window, her mind is humming, and her mother’s last words to her are echoing in her ears.

Clarke disobeyed her. She *did* try to take care of everyone else: getting in Bellamy’s face, insisting they try and find Mount Weather. The one time she abandoned that principle -- faced with the choice of hiding in the dark with Wells and Finn, or running away and saving herself from the hatred in her heart -- she ended up lost. In every sense.

She can’t deny who she is: Clarke Griffin, daughter of Abigail and Jake Griffin. She was born in space, and the air that filled her lungs for almost the first eighteen years of her life was recycled oxygen. The entire course of her life -- and her parents’ lives, and their parents’ lives -- has bent on getting back down to the ground, and surviving. Thriving.

And she is going to miss --

No. No, she has to stay focused, or she might not find the strength of will to --
A sob shakes her, unexpectedly, and she curls herself inward to hug her knees, forcing her breathing to go slow and steady.

This is not just about the fact that she’s an Arker, and that a handful of months with no voice and no name don’t erase the reality of things. This is a disaster so complex, and so long in the making, that if it goes wrong... Azgeda and the Mountain, the Mountain and the Ark, the Ark and the Grounders -- this has the potential to hurt everyone, absolutely everyone she lo--

No.

Think.

Lexa is convinced the kids from the dropship made a deal with the Mountain, and that the Arkers are part of that alliance. Clarke could try to explain the truth with her clumsy, rushed pictures. It might even work.

It might not.

But the Arkers will know her. They could restore her voice with their medical knowledge and tech -- maybe. If that fails she can write it all out, Even if they don’t believe her, just her presence is proof that not everything is as it seems. That their own children might still be out there, alive; that the Grounders are capable of more than slaughter.

In the end, the Arkers are the ones with the guns and the bombs. They’re the ones at risk to do the most damage because of a misunderstanding. No matter what she wants, she owes it to everyone -- everyone -- to deal directly with them. As soon as possible.

Clarke needs to leave.

She has no idea how, and she’s not even sure where to... just look at how long she wandered in the woods with no knowledge of the land, before. There are a lot of details that need to be worked out. Tomorrow. She’s already exhausted again, her body leaden and sore. She can start fresh in the morning.
... except. There is one thing she should do tonight. That she \textit{should} do. To be safe.

And to be sure that there is no going back.

She’s clumsy with cold and grief, and it takes her several tries at the trunk’s lock where she’s dragged it out from under her bed before she gets it open. All her drawings are in there, untouched and unseen by anyone else. She hasn’t gotten very far: not even halfway into her story.

She thought she had more time. She thought she could wait until circumstances were better. She thought a lot of things.

She doesn’t let herself hesitate before throwing the drawings into the fire.

They burn down to ash as Clarke watches, her eyes stinging from the smoke.

\textbf{Chapter End Notes}

\textit{Housekeeping!}

Clarke and Lexa find chamomile tea as vile as I do, because I make the rules. (Come at me all you like in the comments, it’s gross and you KNOW IT.) Although the yarrow mixed in can’t make it tastier.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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The epiphany comes to her like breathing, sitting in the cartographers’ room by Sharla’s side.

She’s in a room full of maps.

The realization makes her blood pound so loudly in her ears she wonders no one else can hear it.

It’s such a dangerous idea. It’s more than accidentally ending up Lexa’s trusted confidant, more than releasing a prisoner when she feared misunderstanding put his life in danger. It’s such a simple thing: copying down lines from one paper onto another.

It would be deliberate, knowing theft. Even if all she does is remember what she sees and reproduces it with the tools she was given -- she’s still taking the information Woods Clan guards as close as treasure. She’d still be a thief.

But Clarke can’t ignore the benefit, and not only to herself and her need to find her way home. If she can bring maps back to the Ark it might make all the difference in the world. They wouldn’t be struggling to understand who and what they’re facing while metaphorically blindfolded and with hand tied behind their backs. They would know who, or what, to expect on all sides. More importantly, they would understand the scope of the mess they had landed in.

She knows the Council. They’re not going to play nice just because she shows up on their doorstep and says “pretty please.”

So she has to bring them proof. That she knows what she’s talking about. That this is not a few stragglers, unexpected survivors of the bombs who are easy to put off.

Clarke has to show them the bigger picture.
Part of her hates it. A big part. She hates how easy it is: all she has to do is indicate to Sharla she wants to try and recreate her work more faithfully, and that gets her access to whatever piece her teacher isn’t currently working on. Clarke spends hours copying certain sections of the map of Woods Clan’s territory as her stomach churns. Only onto scrap paper, of course. And Sharla takes it from her when she leaves with an apologetic smile, burning Clarke’s efforts in one of the braziers they keep lit and barricaded by bags of sand to fight the cold.

Sharla doesn’t know about the pencils and paper Clarke has in her own rooms. She can’t conceive of how Clarke sits down every night and recreates the maps using the scale and measurements she marked discreetly onto her forearm earlier, relying on muscle memory and her artist’s mind’s eye for the placement of villages, the thickness of trees, the winding paths of roads.

Clarke can barely conceive it. The first night she just sits there, numb, staring at a blank page. Wondering what Lexa would think if she found out. What her face would look like.

Then Clarke thinks of sharp-eyed Anya, who still has others from the dropship in custody. How she tortured them. Will continue to torture them, resolute in her belief they are the enemy.

She picks up a charcoal pencil and gets to work.

~*~

Lexa’s injury isn’t healing like it should.

It’s her own fault and Nyko makes sure she knows it, ranting about the unnecessary strain she placed on her body when she didn’t take care of it straight away, when she rode for hours back to Polis instead of recuperating at Tondisi.

“She didn’t cut me that deeply,” Lexa grumbles. She retired to her bed halfway through the day; this morning’s audiences left her pale and sweating. Clarke managed to get her out of her boots but Lexa refused to get more comfortable than that, instead meeting with advisors and staff as she reclines fully-clothed atop her covers. “And she didn’t hit anything important.”

“None of that is required for you to die of an infection,” Nyko barks in return. He scowls and paces
across the floor as Lexa rolls her eyes at Clarke. They both know he’s fussing because Lexa has ordered him to join Anya’s troops -- not until he’s finished whatever needs tending in the tower before winter fully sets in, but soon. “What happened to her, anyway?” he asks, still pacing.

“The attacker?” Lexa winces as she shifts. “Dead. Gustus had her cornered, and then she hurled herself onto his sword.”

“What was her clan?”

“Her tattoos were obscured with burns, and her face was too marked up to tell if there were old scars underneath.”

Nyko stops. “But you think it was Azgeda.”

“At some point I must acknowledge a pattern,” Lexa says, sounding more tired than she has all day. Her eyes drift shut, and she forces them open. Clarke watches her closely from the chair and table that the handmaidens have placed next to the bed.

“Why now? Why in Anya’s territory? That’s a much greater risk than infiltrating Polis.”

Lexa waves one hand in the air, her lids at half-mast. “Perhaps Nia’s bored. Maybe she wanted to take her last chance before the snows fall and she’s effectively trapped in her territory.”

“Don’t be glib.”

Lexa huffs out in exasperation. “I’m too busy to try and anticipate the mind of an insane northern Queen.”

“Our lives would be much easier if she were simply insane.”

“I know that,” Lexa snaps, at the end of her resources. Her face is drawn. “It was just before I was supposed to meet with the invaders. But why Nia would care about that, or why she would want to prevent it -- I have nothing, Nyko, and tossing about over nothing won’t bring me closer to understanding. I can only wait and see what she does next.”
Her unhappiness at this fact is painfully clear from the tightness around her mouth, the way she screws her eyes shut. Clarke feels like Lexa’s pain is her own, watching her. And: knowing what she knows, about Azgeda and Farm Station, that strange connection back to the Mountain. Thinking about the man in the dungeons smirking at her -- Roan. Prince Roan. Is Nia a mother or a wife? Is he the reason for this never-ending feud, or its aftermath? She can almost feel all the hands that could be tugging at her in half a dozen directions; her head full of conflicting loyalties and aching with it all.

She doesn’t realize how long she’s been staring at Lexa until she’s startled by a soft noise from between Lexa’s parted lips: the Commander has fallen asleep.

“You care for her.”

Clarke’s head comes up and around so sharply something twinges in her neck. Nyko is looking at her oddly.

“I didn’t think you would. I wasn’t sure you could, after...” He purses his lips. “You should learn to hide it better.”

Clarke lifts her chin. She hides it fine.

“Mmm.” He chews the inside of his cheek. “Perhaps it isn’t the worst thing. Considering -- well. Considering how many do not love her.”

*It’s fine, she wants to tell him. I’m leaving, anyway. I won’t be a liability.*

*And she doesn’t love me back.*

He comes to a decision and jerks his head at her. She follows him to a corner of Lexa’s rooms where thick fabrics have been hung on the walls to keep the drafts out.

“Did you wonder why the Commander’s personal healer always lives in your rooms? There are closer ones available.”
Clarke shakes her head in response and Nyko snorts. He pushes aside one of the heavy tapestries to reveal a door, opens it.

It’s not a secret passageway. There’s nothing so subtle about it, or deliberate. It seems, as she follows Nyko into the close and cluttered area beyond the door, as if it’s a happy accident. Long ago, the bombs that ended the world must have rocked this building to its core, shaking it on its foundations. All the glass windows were blown out, she’s seen that, and she knows sections of some floors collapsed and had to be repaired -- she’s seen the newer work in fresh contrast to the original building. These rooms were just never restored. Whole sections have caved in, making them unlivable and even dangerous to walk through (she has to watch her step and Nyko warns her about overhangs). But abandoned room leads to abandoned room leads to a doorway which is bolted on this side, which Nyko opens to reveal: her room.

Once Clarke is inside Nyko closes the door, bolts it shut from her end. Clarke has seen the door before, but when it didn’t open she assumed it led somewhere she wasn’t supposed to go.

Surprise, surprise.

“No one else knows,” Nyko tells her. “It’s knowledge kept among the Commander’s healers and passed between them. I wasn’t sure if... but you should know about this. I’m being sent away. If anything -- anyone -- tries to keep you in here, keep you from her...” He pauses. “You have this option.”

They stand together in the quiet of her room, sunlight filtering through her window.

“Not everyone in the tower cares for more than the continuance of the Spirit,” Nyko says. “If you care for her -- for Lexa -- then I will charge you to keep her safe while I am gone.”

What is she supposed to do. What is she supposed to do.

Clarke nods, and hates herself for it.
One day she walks into the cartographers’ room and finds Anya there.

She scoots into the shadows, hoping to go unnoticed as Anya leaves Sharla's station to walk out into the hallway. No such luck.

“Is this where she stores you when not in use?” Anya sneers as she walks up. She stops dead in front of Clarke, hands on her hips. Confrontational.

Clarke has no idea what she’s expecting, it's not like Clarke can sass back.

“Huh,” Anya grunts after a second, as if in reply to something Clarke said. “I’m surprised at her. Sharla is the best artist in the clan, to put you with her --” She cuts herself off, shaking her head. “She lacks discretion,” Clarke can hear her muttering as she stalks away.

When Clarke finally reaches Sharla’s table she finds all the information Anya was there to relay: the exact placement of the Ark, and the units of warriors that are camped around it.

It’s almost too good to be true.

Anya leaves the tower soon after, crude trumpet blowing as she leads her riders to the main road, and Clarke is relieved. The older woman carries the sense of a coiled spring inside her, and Clarke doesn’t know what would come out, or which way she should jump, once the mechanism has been sprung. She’s just glad Anya will be far away when it happens -- she’s gathered the warrior isn’t often seen in Polis, and to Anya's credit she seems more than eager to leave its safety for the front lines.

... for the the Ark, and Clark’e can’t forget that: all that admirable purpose and focus is aimed at Clarke’s people. If Clarke is lucky -- if they all are -- there won’t be too many other warriors to match Anya.

But there’s always Lexa.

Lexa wants to go back as well. But her injury is troubling -- Nyko has a right to be angry with her -- and as much as the Commander has a duty to her troops, she has a greater duty to keep herself well.
Clarke listens to Lexa giving instructions, sending out itineraries, makes her own silent plans alongside Lexa’s. The Commander is waiting for units from Delphi and the Lake People to arrive in Polis. She’ll leave with them for the Mountain in a few days’ time.

And that’s when Clarke will escape.

It’s the safest plan. Everyone will be so caught up in the Commander’s departure, no one will be minding the wood witch underfoot. Clarke will take Storm out as if for a lesson and make for the cover of the orchards, circling back around. Her tracks will be muddled in with the departing armies’, and if she’s lucky, anyone who decides to take an interest will conclude she’s only running after Lexa like a lost puppy. The troops themselves will be too concerned with danger ahead to worry about what might be trailing behind. Eventually she’ll have to slip past them, but that shouldn’t be too difficult... she hopes. She plans to circle around their encampment North of the fallen Ark and head for where their otherwise solid siege thins out, as they await reinforcements from Shadow Valley that have been delayed by icy rains. Again, none of them will be expecting someone to try and break free to the Ark, and so she’ll have the advantage. She hopes.

Clarke battles more and more anxiety each day. She wakes up feeling winded, her throat raw, her head aching. Her stomach churns until she can only pick at her food. She’s glad she burned her earlier drawings, because if she still had them at this point --

No. No, they’re gone, and there’s no turning back. Even if she wanted to.

She focuses on her maps instead. Only the one of the Ark and the surrounding territory has any real detail to it, but she tries to capture the terrains and placements of the other clans in broad strokes. It helps, working on them, to picture the faces of the other Arkers, the Council, maybe even Chancellor Jaha looking at them with incredulity and wonder, finally humbled: here is proof they don’t know everything, that in fact, they know next to nothing about life on the ground. That information is her weapon, not theirs, and she locks it up in the trunk each night like the treasure it is.

(Not just a weapon, something inside whispers: a shield. All of the twelve clans and even the far-flung nomads -- she’s doing this to protect them, too. And maybe, someday far away, that will allow Lexa to forgive her. She shoves that thought away, along with how she used to picture Lexa when she was finally told the truth.)

It’s hard to keep focused. Clarke finds herself spacing out in audiences. She gets lost in her thoughts and the next thing she knows someone new is standing in front of the throne, and Clarke missed the transition. She knows she isn’t looking over at Lexa like she used to, either. It’s similar to before -- only this time, she’s not afraid Lexa will discover what she feels. She’s afraid Lexa might see what she intends.
Clarke just manages to quash her flinch of surprise when Lexa stands to dismiss the latest petitioner.

“Titus,” she says, barely turning her head, “that’s all for the day. I’m going to see Nyko.”

“Are you feeling unwell, Heda?”

Lexa shrugs and turns away without an answer. She descends from the dais, but not before reaching out to wrap her fingers around Clarke’s wrist and gently pulling her along. Clarke usually changes out of her formal clothes and washes off her gold paint after audiences, but she walks with Lexa down the tower hallways, following her lead.

Was it ever a question? Of course she goes along.

“Problem?” Nyko asks when he makes his way over to the entrance of the infirmary.

“No,” Lexa says. She hasn’t released Clarke, and rubs her thumb against the soft skin of the inner wrist absently. “I want to go down to the market, and you’re my excuse.”

Nyko sighs. “Legend has it,” he directs at Clarke, “that every winter our Commander becomes a child again in search of a specific sweet made during the colder months.” He shakes his head. “When, oh when will someone free her from this terrible curse.”

“Stop,” Lexa says, mild. “If I’m going to campaign all through the winter, I can have one afternoon before we set off.”

“Alright. Release the witch, and I’ll be your guard.”

“No, I want her to come, too,” Lexa says, in her way of stating preference as if it’s already fact. “It will be her first campaign, and a hard one. I don’t see why she shouldn’t share the treat. Besides,” in an aside, turning her head to meet Clarke’s eyes, “you haven’t been eating well.”

At that Lexa releases her, and she and Nyko walk ahead discussing preparation. It leaves Clarke free
to stare at Lexa’s profile as regret reaches up to twist thorns into her heart.

If only she hadn’t -- if only --

The marketplace is busy. It’s cold, but at least the day is clear: the sun shining in a sky almost without clouds. There’s more trade in the mid mornings, and every now and again Clarke spots someone wearing a clan insignia other than Woods -- warriors who have arrived individually and now wait for the rest of their siblings in arms to travel with the Commander. Her stomach flutters at their hard faces, the ragged scars on their forearms. She can conjure up a picture in her mind’s eye of everyone who came down on the dropship, their soft skin that had never been exposed to the elements. It wouldn’t be much different for the other Arkers. She wonders what they think of rain.

“Here.” Lexa places her hand above Clarke’s elbow. It’s a familiar gesture Lexa often uses to get her attention, but Clarke is so lost in her troubling thought she startles. Lexa gives her a slight frown.

“What has gotten into you?” she asks -- gentle, but probing.

“Heda,” comes the unexpected reprieve of Nyko just behind them. “There’s a crowd today. She might not be used to it.”

Lexa wants to object, wants to cite the press and commotion they’ve both experienced in the audience chamber, Clarke knows it. But then the Commander draws back and takes stock: of the lack of organization, the flow of street traffic, the shouts and haggling that overlap into a lattice of activity. She twists her mouth into her cheek, clearly still unconvinced, but nods before turning back to her intended path. “Stay between us,” she instructs.

Nyko takes up their tiny procession at the rear, but not before he leans down to whisper to Clarke: “Hide it better than this.”

And that’s not her problem, but... The thorns twist even deeper, and Clarke bites down on the inside of her cheek so hard she’s not sure if that taste is blood or shame.

Apparently there’s more than one market stall making the treat Lexa has in mind, and she has a mind to visit them all. Soon there’s nothing in Clarke’s mouth but sweetness as Lexa hands her soft balls of sticky paste in muted green and orange, or delicate diamonds of drier nougat, all of them decorated with slivers of nuts. Some taste like vegetables or fruit, some are wet and glutinous, some crumble the moment they meet her teeth. The onslaught of new experiences is perfectly distracting, and even
the sugar overload can’t keep her from feeling better than she has in days. She catches the growing smile on Lexa’s face, watching her eat, and Clarke smiles back.

Someone shouts and raises an arm to point. Clarke turns her head. She has to squint -- someone is standing on a far wall with their back to the sun. She hears a distant cry, feels a flutter of panic.

The crowd jostles at the three of them so that Clarke stumbles. An arrow sprouts not too far above her head, landing in the awning of a market stall with a ffifi-thunk.

“Heda!” Nyko shouts, and everything becomes chaos.

Clarke sees Nyko throw himself over Lexa like a living shield, his around about her shoulders, just as the crowd surges between her and them. There’s screams and panic, pandemonium as everyone tries to run for cover. She’s carried back by the force of it, borne by the force of so many bodies in motion. She struggles, but it’s useless, and she can’t break through back to Nyko and Lexa.

She lets the crowd wash her like a wave into a pocket of relative quiet. The mass of people thins out and she has enough room them to steady herself on her feet, take a breath, take stock: she isn’t too far away from Lexa and Nyko. She looks up, searching: there are already Woods Clan warriors on the wall where the archer is, a body topples from the height stuck with knives like a pincushion.

“*No!*”

It’s a scream. One filled with a depth of such shocking despair that it directs Clarke’s attention like a string pulled taut. She looks over to see Lexa’s face as she stares at Clarke across the intervening space.

Just as someone wraps their arm around Clarke’s chest and upper shoulders, pulling her back onto the blade of a knife.

She knows what it is. She feels -- they’re pressed so tight together, he smells rank with terror and sweat -- it pierce her clothes and the pressure as it pulls the fabric, and then the scoring line of hot pain across her back. Close to her side. He’s aiming for her kidney: a slow and ugly death.

It takes a second. Less.
Time seems to stretch out as she waits for the liquid trickle that means blood, followed by... but it
doesn’t come. There’s more pulling at her clothes -- he’s trying to get the knife free to re-aim.

Clarke can’t believe it. He fucking missed.

Someone bumps them and they stumble together. Clarke isn’t thinking when she throws her weight
into the shift, it’s as if her subconscious mind rises up in the wake of this guy just tried to kill me and
takes the reins with the intent to survive. It works: they stumble harder, his grip on her shoulders
slips, and Clarke manages to stomp hard on his instep.

He chokes in pain. But he might have rallied, she could feel him taking a deep breath as his fingers
clanched into a fist in front of her face --

Only to run, melting into the stream of the crowd as it flows around them.

Clarke remains, her side throbbing, caught between pain and panic -- is he really gone? What made
him run?

Someone grabs her by the shoulder and drags her a few steps into a space between abandoned
market stalls, a bit of distance from the anarchy of the open street. Clarke puts up her hands, ready to
shield, to fight, but: Lexa.

“Where?” She grabs Clarke’s other shoulder as well, and with a force that almost shakes her.
“Where?”

Clarke lifts her arm and Lexa’s fingers find the tear in her clothes. She pushes them up and aside,
pulling at Clarke’s hip to get a better view. Her gaze is laser-like. “You’ll need care, but he didn’t
draw blood. Are you hurt anywhere else?” she asks, demanding.

Clarke shakes her head.

“You’re sure? Anything. Even a pinprick, they can use poison --” She draws in a hard breath
through her nose. “Bend your head. Now,” when Clarke doesn’t move fast enough.
Clarke gives herself over to whatever storm Lexa has swallowed and lets herself be manhandled. Lexa pushes rough, searching fingers into her hair, not caring if they snag on knots (and they do, but Clarke is too numb to wince). Then she pushes it aside to check Clarke’s neck, the tops of her shoulders, any place bare skin was immediately accessible. The rest of Clarke, from throat to ankles, is covered by thick and thankfully protective layers, except her wrists and hands. Lexa scrutinizes those as well before giving a quick nod.

“Look at me,” she orders, cupping Clarke’s face in both her hands. Clarke does so, her brain buzzing. Someone tried to -- and Lexa’s face --

“You’re fine,” she says, as Clarke focuses her eyes. Lexa leans their foreheads together, taking in an audibly deep breath. “You’re fine,” she breathes out. She drops her hands and straightens, a smile on her face almost dazzling in its brightness. “Good.”

Then she’s gone.

Clarke blinks again at the disappearing act. Wait, is that -- that’s it? That’s all she gets?

Nyko is at her elbow in the next moment, performing the same checks as Lexa, if slower and with less hypnotic command. He seems satisfied, brings his head up and looks around them. “Where did she run to?”

Clarke’s heart lurches. There’s an assassin -- and Lexa just left --

Nyko looks down where she’s knotted her fingers into his sleeve. “She’ll be alright,” he says quietly. “More warriors are on their way from the tower. The only threat was from above, regardless; no one can match her hand to hand. They never meant to land the arrow, it was all so that you --” Here he closes his mouth over his words, and the look he directs at Clarke is almost angry. “You must learn to stay close,” he barks.

He’s clearly worried over her. Over what could have happened to her. It’s nice. Someone should be, and Lexa is more interested in chatting with a very clumsy, very bad assassin, whom other people are tracking down anyway, than worrying over Clarke. No matter what she looked like when --

There’s a small commotion in the market just as it’s beginning to calm down from the explosion of panic and fear. Clarke’s skin prickles, but it’s only a few people running off, a couple concerned
looks in that same direction. It shouldn’t be anything.

... please don’t let it be anything, hasn’t enough happened today?

“Let’s get you back to the tower,” Nyko says in a tone that forbids discussion. They walk out into the main street together. A few civilians suffered from the mob panic -- banged heads and sprains only, it seems, as Nyko stops to check. He tells them to come up to the tower as well, until he and Clarke are shepherding a small crowd.

More and more people are rushing in the direction she saw before. She catches Nyko’s eye -- he frowns, but shakes his head. There’s no panic in the air, no cries for help. If anything, the people running about seem excited. It’s not anything to concern them.

She wishes she knew where Lexa has got herself off to, though. Not that Clarke is concerned. If Lexa can be so unconcerned in the face of someone trying to kill Clarke, Clarke can manage not having Lexa in her sights for the afternoon. Maybe the rest of it, and the evening, too.

Clarke is brooding over this possibility when a couple of young kids run by in a group. Their faces are lit up with a combination of awe and excitement she’s come to associate with one person, and as they pass by she hears a snatch of their conversation:

“-- didn’t just catch him. She’s killing him --”

Clarke turns and runs with them, past them, following the thread of energy through the crowd. Nyko shouts, but this once he can’t keep up.

Lexa has the assassin cornered in a cul-de-sac, trapped on all sides by ruins. The buildings surrounding are all but rubble and offer no shelter. He seems to have realized that -- he’s turned to face Lexa, the blade he tried to kill Clarke with in one hand, the other clenching and releasing, spasmodically. His eyes are wild as they search for an opening behind his opponent, but the gathering crowd is quickly closing off that route of escape.

It’s a very good place for a brawl. Clarke wonders if Lexa chose it; if she knows the city well enough to pick where she wanted to go, where she could herd the assassin as she liked and where he wouldn’t have the opportunity to hurt anyone else. Judging from his sweat-streaked face, his heaving chest, it seems like she did.
Lexa prowls the perimeter. She doesn’t draw her blade -- Clarke knows she has one, has two counting the stiletto Lexa likes to tuck into her left boot, why isn’t she getting them out -- but keeps her hands ready at her sides. She doesn’t approach. She waits.

Clarke watches as the man’s desperation overcomes his sense. He lunges. Lexa steps into his space, easy, like she’s dancing. Her forearm knocks the knife to the ground, her fist finds his stomach. He doubles over and she throws him onto his back. He lands with a groan.

It’s over in seconds. Clarke sighs out her relief.

Lexa scoops up the knife as she strides over to where he’s fallen. Tosses it into the dirt just in front of his face.

“Pick it up.”

The moment crystallizes and breaks, disbelief sweeping over the assembled crowd. Clarke feels her mouth sag open but can’t think past the buzzing in her brain.

He reaches for it, wary, in a defensive crouch all the while. He clearly anticipates a kick, jerking his arms back as soon as his hand touches the handle, stumbling out of reach. Lexa’s boots remain rooted.

He lunges again. It’s mindless -- he’s like a cornered animal, acting on instinct. There’s nothing in his eyes but panic.

Lexa hits him twice this time: a punch across the face, another to the kidney as he turns away. When his back curls in pain she brings her knee into his stomach. It’s all fluid and fast, oddly beautiful in the economy of movement, despite the brutality.

The last hit causes him to lose his grip on the knife. It drops and Clarke sees the moment Lexa catches sight of it, pauses, steps back.

“Pick it up,” she says again, a bit of anger bleeding into her tone. Her hands clench into fists and squeeze.
Oh.

Oh, she --

He’s not a good fighter. Maybe that’s why he was chosen for this mission -- he’s not a warrior, but you don’t need to be to slip a knife into an unarmed girl’s back. And it would have made it easier to get this far and insinuate himself into the crowds. Why should anyone keep an eye on him? He’s not a warrior.

He’s laughable against Lexa. The fact he has a knife and she doesn’t is the only thing that keeps this from an outright beating: a wholesale slaughter, a naked display of fury and bloodlust.

Which is what Lexa wants. Clarke can see it in the set of her shoulders, the vibrating energy of each one of her limbs. Lexa wants to beat this man to death with her bare hands.

... no, Lexa is going to.

And -- Clarke scans the surrounding area, the spectators leaning out of windows and climbing up the walls of bombed-out ruins for a better look -- in front of dozens and dozens of spectators, from Polis and different clans. All of them more than well aware of what has broken their Commander’s infamous self-control.

But that last thread of honor tying Lexa to herself insists he die with his weapon.

He’s still trying to stand straight, staggering with the effort. He coughs and spits blood, grabs blindly at the knife. Clarke thinks it’s a wonder he got it by the right end.

It takes longer to disarm him each time. Not that Lexa is trying anymore -- maybe she used that first opportunity to gauge his skill, how far she could push -- but as his hope of walking away recedes, his body seems to cling to what is left to him. When the knife falls this time, and him with it, Lexa is actually breathing hard.

Or maybe that’s for other reasons, because as she reaches down to grab the front of his jacket, hauling him to his knees, the rage is rolling off her in waves.
“If your Queen wants me dead, let her send a challenge of combat,” Lexa says. Her voice isn’t pitched to carry but it does anyway, the acoustics of the cul-de-sac making her clear to everyone gathered. “Let her try at me in battle. Let her send sneaking, gutless cowards like yourself.” She shakes him, hard, and his head rolls on his neck. “But try for me. Come at me. Face me.” She throws him back down to the ground. “Pick up your weapon.”

The assassin scoots backward. Some part of his brain seems to have clued in on the rules Lexa is using to play, because he shakes his head.

Lexa kneels, takes up the knife only to drive it inches deep into the dirt.

“Pick it up,” she roars.

... oh, shit, Clarke has to stop this.

She can’t shout for Lexa’s attention, and she’s not even sure that would break her focus. But Clarke striding into the fray, possibly being the one person who could switch Lexa’s concentration from her goal -- the visual might only make things worse.

No, she has to get Lexa to come to her.

Clarke wracks her brain, looking around for inspiration. Panting breaths draws her attention to Nyko, who looks just as unhappy as she feels watching the spectacle unfold. His face is knit with dismay.

There’s a cut on his jaw where the bone juts out from the neck. The blood is just beginning to ooze, and Clarke remembers his arms wrapping around Lexa, the way she struck back at him with full force trying to break free to get to Clarke, her face --

Clarke reaches without thinking and presses the cut open. Nyko hisses and jerks back, but not before some blood drips onto her fingers. Ignoring her mother’s voice and years of medical training screaming biohazard, biological biohazard she smears it into her hairline and across her forehead. Then, as Nyko stares, she gestures to herself, and then to Lexa.

Nyko’s mouth gapes open.
Clarke sets her mouth, and gestures again. To *herself*. To *Lexa*.

An expression creeps across Nyko’s face: that of a main caught on the knife’s edge between pressing necessity and utter humiliation. “What happened to you,” he says, tonelessly.

Clarke looks over. Lexa didn’t hear. Clarke jerks her thumb upwards. *Louder*.

“Oh no,” Nyko says. He tilts his head upward, as if looking for the strength to continue: “Something has happened to the wood witch.”

Lexa’s head snaps up over ten yards away, and the downward swing of her fist transitions smoothly into disarming the assassin. She turns with his weapon in her hand and strides over to the two of them. She tosses the knife to a guard Clarke recognizes from the palace without a word, and he and a friend rush forward to take her victim into custody.

“What’s wrong?” Lexa demands. “I checked her earlier, did I miss --” She draws in a sharp breath at the blood on Clarke’s face. The skin over her own features seems to tighten, until it looks painful, and when she reaches to turn Clarke’s head this way and that her hands are shaking.

“I can’t find a cut, do you see it? It might be under the hair, but it might have transferred from elsewhere,” Lexa is saying, so rapidly she’s on the edge of babble. “Nyko, can you --” she looks at him for the first time since walking over and stops dead. “Nyko.”

“Yes, Heda.”

“You’re bleeding.”

“Yes, Heda.”

“Is this...”
“I believe so, Heda.”

“You bled on her,” Lexa says, shocked and scolding.

Nyko catches Clarke’s eye where she’s still standing with a bent head. Glaring all the while, he grits out: “My utmost apologies, Heda.”

“I’m getting her cleaned up,” Lexa says, dismissive as she takes Clarke’s hand in hers and pulls her back toward the tower.

~*~

Lexa loses her certainty once they’re safe inside. She insists Clarke spent the night in the infirmary, explaining everything to Versi: what’s keeping Nyko, the need to put Clarke under surveillance. Versi nods in understanding, but her eyes are troubled as she leads them into a curtained corner for a small amount of privacy.

It’s as if one crack in Lexa’s emotional armor has splintered it all to pieces. She can’t bring herself to leave, even though Clarke smiles her reassurance every time Lexa asks how she feels. Lexa will stand, manage two or three steps away from Clarke’s infirmary bed only to return with another question, another fear of something missed. She brings Versi back to check Clarke for symptoms of concussion or poison. She doesn’t fret, as she stands and watches Versi work she twists her fingers together, over and over, until the skin strains and the knuckles crack. As if she needs to hurt something.

Versi tells her there are other patients that need tending, and Lexa nods. Clarke reaches out to separate Lexa’s hands and the next thing she knows Lexa slips them deep into her hair, cradling her skull as she presses her forehead to Clarke’s. Clarke watches Lexa’s eyelids tremble with her shaky breathing. She has the crazy feeling she’s about to be kissed, but Lexa doesn’t move from that position: just holds her like something fragile, and breathes.

The day weighs on Clarke like a hand pressing her down, and she’s happy to be tucked under the covers and allowed to sleep. Lexa sits by her beside, their hands tangled together. Clarke moves her thumb to just over Lexa’s wrist and falls asleep to the furious beat of the Commander’s heart against her fingertip.
When Clarke wakes up it’s the middle of the night, and Lexa is gone.

She checks Lexa’s rooms first, but she’s more than half anticipating the shake of Jollett’s head. Lexa wouldn’t leave her in the infirmary just to sleep.

The throne room, the map room, various rooms she’s spent idle afternoons with Lexa sharing a meal and a quiet moment -- they’re all empty. The whole tower is in bed. Only the guards are awake, and they open all doors without a word at the smeared remnants of gold paint on Clarke’s face.

She finally remembers where else Lexa might wander: where else she might confront a citizen of Azgeda.

The guards let her in even there.

Clarke hears the voices and slows her steps, walking carefully until she’s just behind the first sharp corner in the corridor leading to the prisoner cells. She can only see the torchlight reflecting off the plastic barrier, the side of Lexa’s face where her head is bowed.

“He believes she really is a witch,” Lexa says. “He begs that we don’t let her join the questioning, or see his face. He was prepared to die -- him, and the archer on the wall -- but not deal a witch afterwards.”

A short, raspy laugh. “My mother does work hard to make her subjects... suggestible. Amusing to think it would work against her in this case. Don’t you think?”

Lexus does not sound anything like amused. “He was too terrified to do his task with any skill. That’s what saved her.” A beat. “If it had been otherwise. I don’t. I wouldn’t have been able to --”

“Lexa.”

Clarke creeps forward silently for a better view. Lexa stands in front of the cell with a spine like an iron rod, her hands in fists resting just above her thighs.

“Lexa,” Prince Roan repeats, in that strangely gentle tone, “you know how this ends.”
“No.” Lexa’s head comes up. “I won’t allow --”

“She failed, and your witch is safe. But for how much longer?”

“For as long as I breathe,” Lexa chokes out. “Nia cannot be allowed to -- why is she doing this?” Her voice breaks a little, and Clarke’s heart with it. “She’s just a lost girl from the Dead Zone. She’s not a threat to your mother’s power.”

“Was Costia?”

Lexa slams her hand open-palmed against the plastic barrier with a crack that makes Clarke jump. “Don’t you even say her name.”

A few seconds trickle by before Roan says: “I apologize.” He sounds sincere.

Lexa is breathing hard as she takes a step backward. “It isn’t the same.” Her voice is hoarse.

“You want me to provide you with insight into my mother’s mind? If I had any, I wouldn’t be rotting in your prison. I wouldn’t have unknowingly accepted her assassin as part of my retinue and brought them into your tower, all the while thinking I was on a diplomatic mission.” He laughs again, and this time it has an edge. “I am arguably the last person you should ask about Queen Nia.”

The silence stretches between them, until Clarke hears Roan sigh. She hears a chair scrape, and then he comes into view as he steps forward to lean against the ancient plastic barrier. “We have a saying in the North: that a tree must grow deep roots to survive in our land. My mother’s roots run very deep, as do her plans.”

“She knew I wouldn’t have you executed, once I was sure you were unaware of... that you had no part in Costia’s death.”

Perhaps.” Roan nods once. “Or perhaps she was willing to make that trade. My life for your lover’s.”
The look Lexa gives him is nothing but raw sinew and steel. “She is not targeting my lover this time.”

“Lexa.” Again with that awful, terrible gentleness. “Did you think keeping your hands off of her would really save her?”

Lexa looks away.

“You play by the rules. It’s why I am reconciled to spending years as your prisoner rather than a free man in my mother's court. These are years I am almost guaranteed to survive.” He shakes his head. “But my mother is not interested in the rules. She only wants to win the game.”

“... a game. Hundreds, thousands of warriors on either side dead, and you call it a --”

“She wants your people, and she wants your power. The Coalition did not stop her. The fact she failed to stop it has only made her draw back and reconsider. She did not expect you to be so strong.”

“I am what I have to be. I will do what needs to be done.”

“Then why have you kept that girl by your side?”

Lexa is still standing with her head turned away. At this it dips deeper, her shoulders going rigid.

“You know the teachings, Lexa. You must live by them. To be the Commander is to be --”

“No.”

Lexa’s voice is raw, almost weak, but when she raises her head Clarke can’t see anything in her face but determination.

“No,” she repeats, stronger.
Roan is watching her carefully. If he’s surprised at her interruption, he hides it.

“Saying those words back to me doesn’t mean you understand them,” Lexa says. “Having heard them from Titus doesn’t mean you know their truth.”

“Titus has served --”

“Neither of you are Heda. Neither of you ever will be.” Clarke is not sure if she imagines, there, Lexa baring her teeth in defiance -- it makes her wonder just how resigned Roan really is to his fate, for all his conciliatory words. “I am the Commander. I alone understand what that requires.”

“So your will is law? You sound like my mo--”

“I serve my people. I give -- I will continue to give -- everything that I can for their sake. Of my life. My self.” Clarke can see Lexa swallow, but her gaze doesn’t waver. “I have already given more than I thought possible.”

And then, still and small, like the voice of a child who has just woken up in complete darkness: “But I must have something for myself.”

Roan’s attention sharpens, nostrils flaring as if he’s an animal that caught the scent of prey. He says nothing.

“I cannot...” Lexa falters, and her eyes drift to the floor. After a long and near-unbearable silence, during which Clarke digs her nails into her palms and thinks of what she would give to have a voice to fill it, Lexa lifts her head again. “No one is built to give and give of themselves, with nothing to take strength and support from in turn.” She has to shut her eyes to bring herself to admit: ”No one could survive it.”

Roan raises his hands, displaying them in the air for Lexa to see. Then he begins to applaud -- slowly, each clap of his hands distinct and harsh.

Lexa doesn’t flinch. But Clarke can see from the lines of her expression that she wants to.
“Congratulations.” He folds his arms again. “That must have been difficult, throwing off the yoke of Titus’s training. Now you better understand your position.”

“I am not throwing off --”

“And now,” he barrels on, “you understand my mother’s aims. She doesn’t care who you take to bed, or if you take anyone at all. She only wants to find what supports you. In order to cut it down.”

Lexa’s chest rises and falls with shallow breaths.

“She can’t reach you, you’re too protected. She can’t kill you, you’re too skilled. But she can cut off your light, your air, your love -- anything and everything that sustains you, and wait for you to wither and die. When she’s snapped up your wood witch she’ll move on to friends, advisors. If I know my mother, she even has a plan for dealing with your handmaidens.” Roan settles in more comfortably against the barrier. “Keep that in mind when you think of keeping a something -- someone -- for yourself.”

His little smirk at the end of his speech helps Clarke understand why Lexa has kept him in prison all this while, even if he was innocent of his mother’s plots.

“And while we’re on the subject,” he continues in a slithering, insinuating tone that raises Clarke’s hackles, “what sort of person would want to be yours, anyway?”

Lexa’s eyes narrow and her shoulders draw back in readiness.

“Don’t look like that.” He laughs low in his throat. “We both know what I mean. What do you have to offer anyone besides a life of might-have-beens, and pain? Who would take that bargain, Lexa? You have kept her by your side, but why would she choose to stay?”

“I don’t suppose someone raised in Nia’s court would understand. Not everyone is concerned with furthering their own agenda. Some of us understand sacrifice, and devoting our lives to a purpose greater than ourselves --”

“I see. You think you’ve found someone like you? Someone who places duty before self, who
values their people above personal happiness?” The smirk deepens. “Is that the lie that has let you look the other way?”

Clarke’s heart thuds so heavily in her chest she feels sick. It’s not a lie. It’s not a lie.

“I know it pains you to remember those times, Lexa, but cast back to when I was a welcome visitor in your territory. I saw you with... I have seen you, as lost as you have ever been -- may ever be -- to emotion. Even then, you were never one to close your eyes to the obvious.”

“You presume much,” Lexa says, biting out each word.

“True. Yet I’m still alive.” He unfolds his arms to indicate himself and then his cell with an ironic raise of his eyebrow, as if to acknowledge the difference between quantity of life versus quality. “I must be very lucky. Or perhaps smarter than I seem. After all, this is a city full of agendas and treachery. And we both know,” he says, all playfulness draining from his tone, “if she were just a lost girl from the Dead Zone, she never would have made it this far.”

Lexa stares at him, expressionless.

Then she turns her head to look at Clarke.

Clarke feels a shock run through her as Lexa meets her eyes, the crackle of electricity in her bones. She holds still. She holds her breath. How long has Lexa been aware of her? Since when did Lexa realize she was there, and listening?

There’s nothing in Lexa’s face to let Clarke know what she’s thinking. Clarke tries to keep her own features as blank. She wonders if this is what drowning feels like: the roaring in her ears, the weight in her chest like her lungs are filling up with water.

Lexa walks past and out of the dungeons without a word. Clarke stands in her wake, lost.

“A word in your ear, witch,” Roan says from his cell. “If you can see us, we can see you.”

She glares at him, curling her fingers against the cold stone at her back as he chuckles.
“Don’t be so shy,” he chides. “Come closer.”

She wouldn’t. But she doesn’t like the way he says it: a dare he doesn’t think she will take.

“So this is the little girl causing all the problems,” he says as she comes into view. “I think I understand better, now that I can see your face.”

He falls silent, considering. Clarke refuses to be cowed and straightens.

“Do you know what makes me laugh?” he asks finally. He doesn’t wait for her to signal her response. “Lexa digs her own grave. Other leaders are swayed by power, or gold, or pleasure. You don’t need to kill to control them.

“But Lexa? I told my mother from the first: she can’t be controlled. She isn’t political, or not how we in the North understand it. She’s practically a savage that way.

“You have no choice with Lexa but to cut the heart out of her.”

Clarke swallows. The look on his face is dispassionate, almost clinical. It scares her to death.

“My mother tried just that. It surprised us all when Lexa endured -- although I can tell you, those first few days...” He shakes his head, clucking his tongue.

Clarke no longer wonders at Lexa keeping him imprisoned with no evidence of a crime. If anything, she’s amazed he’s lived this long.

“But Lexa’s a smart girl,” he resumes. “She realized -- at last -- the weakness she had exposed. And so she let everyone know it no longer existed.” He smiles mirthlessly. “Have you heard her talk about love? A very convincing performance. Certainly the words many people want to hear from her. But I once made Lexa something of a personal study, and I could tell: her heart wasn’t dead. She’d only hidden it.”
The scream in the marketplace. And Lexa --

“I did wonder if anyone would be able to find it again,” Roan says softly, watching Clarke’s face. “You didn’t realize at first what you had in your grasp. Did you.”

She didn’t. She believed what Lexa wanted her to, that her refusal meant -- that Lexa didn’t even want --

But then she saw Lexa’s face.

“The real question is: what will you do now?” He switches his stance to that he leans more heavily into the barrier, weight on his forearm, forehead almost pressed to the plastic. “What’s your intention, witchling? Are you really what Lexa thinks?”

She is. Not exactly how Lexa thinks of it, but Clarke -- Clarke really is doing this for her people.

That has to count for something. Doesn’t it?

She realizes Roans is still watching her, silent but intent. She focuses on him, and he gives her an odd little smile:

“Or do your roots run even deeper than my mother’s?”
1. Lexa’s craving is for halwa, can you blame her

2. hold on to yer butts
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~*~

Clarke has a second’s warning, bolts upright in bed just before she hears:

“You should have stayed in the infirmary.”

Lexa puts the small saucer with the candle she’s carrying down on the table. The embers in the fireplace are more than half-dead, and when Clarke looks out the window there’s no hint of dawn. It’s hard to make out Lexa’s face in the light of a single flame, but the lines of strain tell Clarke the Commander hasn’t been to bed yet. It makes her angry, almost as angry as Lexa telling where she can and cannot be, Lexa still trying to hide, even after --

“For the rest of the night,” Lexa continues, dropping into a chair heavily. She puts her elbows on the table and slumps, something Clarke has never seen her do. “In case we missed something. If you were clear-headed enough to wander down to the dungeons, you should have known that as well. You’re a healer.”

Oh.

Clarke didn’t have it in her to be fussed and clucked over, not after hearing -- and then Roan -- she’d just needed quiet, and peace. An empty room where she could try and put all the scattered pieces together, recapture the feeling of being whole. But as soon as she crossed the threshold the events of the day hit her like a blow to the head, and she barely managed to change into a loose sleeping shirt before curling up beneath her blankets. She reaches down to draw them up around her shoulders, now.

“You would have been warmer there, at least.” Lexa hauls herself out of the chair before Clarke can motion for her to stay, kneels to rustle the embers back to life and feed them kindling until she has the flames licking around a nice piece of wood. Their light grows brighter and brighter in the room, and Clarke catches sight of a dark smear of dried blood on Lexa’s hand.

She jerks, and Lexa follows her line of sight.
“The assassin with the knife.” She says to Clarke’s unasked question. “He’s dead.”

She flexes her hand -- the blood dripped across her thumb and the webbing just beneath. It’s dry enough to crack and flake away when she runs her fingers across it. Not furtively, or like she wants to get rid of evidence: her expression is thoughtful. “He said he didn’t know who wanted you dead. Whoever hired him kept their face hidden and didn’t offer anything but instructions, and payment.”

The blood is rubbed off completely, now, with just a slight shadow to ever indicate it was there. Lexa rises to her feet and says, with that same mild look on her face: “It was Nia.”

She’s so sure. And Roan was sure.

“I’m certain,” Lexa says next, one of those times when she’s so tuned into Clarke it’s almost... and it’s not what Clarke needs right now, not what she wants. Not when she has so much to hide.

“Because of how it would have happened,” as if answering a question Clarke is not even sure she should ask. “In a place I think of as my own, and as safe. So that I was aware of every moment you were in pain. She knows how to hurt me the most.” She drags her chair a little closer to the growing fire, and also a little closer to Clarke’s bed. She sits on it backwards, in an unexpected bit of informality: folding her arms on top of the chair’s back. “It was the same with Costia, although the method was different.”

Clarke angles her gaze down to her blankets. She shouldn’t look up. She shouldn’t... she’s leaving. There’s no reason for her to pursue it, because she has no reason to dig into these dark places of Lexa’s past. No excuse to be greedy for it, to want that deeper knowledge. Or -- if she’s being honest with herself -- even if she has a reason to want it, no reason to take it.

She raises her head.

“In pieces,” Lexa says once Clarke meets her eyes. She’s laid her cheek on her arms. Clarke has never seen her look so tired. “A finger, a hand, a foot. Letting me know she was alive and suffering. They were found in boxes around the tower for days until Nia had the decency to cut off her head. I was more lax, then, about security. Nia’s spies left it in my bed.”

Clarke’s gorge rises. It’s not just what Lexa is telling her, it’s everything. The seething malice behind Costia’s fate, even years later and secondhand. How matter-of-fact Lexa is in telling it, when Clarke
wishes she would be angry, tearful, anything except have that soft, defeated look on her face. And she feels sick at herself, listening to this, allowing Lexa to remove this last layer of armor in front of her, when Clarke hides more with each passing day.

“I thought I was going to die.” Lexa says it simply. If there’s any emotion in her voice, it’s an edge of wonderment that she was proved wrong. “I know how it sounds, dying because of... But I truly didn’t think I would survive living like that. With so much pain.”

She turns her head until she’s looking straight into the fire. “There’s something that happens in battle. Your body saves you from pain until it’s safe to feel -- the worst of it, I mean. It’s only later, when there’s time to catch your breath, that you notice someone opened up your side, or your wrist is so swollen with bruises you can barely move your hand. Your body knows what you can and cannot endure.”

“I think it must be same for the mind,” Lexa continues, and Clarke can guess what’s coming before she says, “because the pain never lessened over time, like they promise it will. Instead I woke up one day -- a few months after her death, I think -- and I felt... not nothing. But very little.”

“It was such a relief,” she breathes, and her eyes flutter shut in remembrance. “To be so... empty of feeling. It allowed me to live, to -- to be who I am. Do what needed doing. I was grateful for it. I was more than content to live like that, for as long as the Spirit found it necessary to act through me.”

She opens her eyes, turns her head to meet Clarke’s: “And then there was you.”

Clarke stares at her, open-mouthed. Whatever she expected in the aftermath of the marketplace -- denials, more avoidance, maybe -- it wasn’t this.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before,” Lexa says. “You deserved to know why I pushed you away, why I was so... I did consider telling you. I tried.” For the first time she appears embarrassed, looks down at her arms as she clears her throat. “Perhaps not hard enough. In the end, it felt as if I could protect you better if I never said the words out loud. Not even to myself. Almost,” and she shares a shy, hesitating smile, “like a kind of witch’s spell.” Her smile drops. “I’m sorry. I know it was hard to think you were alone in this.”

Clarke holds back tears. This is so unfair. She’s not sure she wants to know this. Not now.

“I’m not sure how it started.” Lexa doesn’t take her eyes off Clarke. “I wish I could tell you. That I
could tell you everything, now -- you deserve that.” She shrugs lightly. “I didn’t realize -- or didn’t want to admit -- what was happening for a long time. And then I realized that, if I hadn’t had a chance to see your face, the day felt incomplete.”

Clarke has wanted this so badly, it made her whole body ache. But now? Now?

“I don’t...” Lexa sounds hesitant, maybe because Clarke was the one to turn away, focus on the feeling of the blanket gripped in her fist to steady herself. “I still can’t give you more than I already have. You see why.”

If Lexa had said something. Anything. Clarke wants to believe it would have changed things, that she would have made different choices...

No. If she’s being honest, it wouldn’t have mattered. There was only ever one way this could end.

“I don’t regret it,” Lexa says, low and intense. “I’ve put you in harm’s way, and I will find a way to make amends, I promise you, but I don’t regret this.”

Oh, of course. She only ignored it, and then denied it, and then tried to hide it from anyone who might look at them both and dare to suppose... How could Clarke possibly wonder if Lexa even wants this, what kind of silly child is she being.

“I don’t,” and Clarke startles, because while she was sulking Lexa stood up out of the chair and came closer. She kneels now on the floor, leathers creaking, one hand hovering just above Clarke’s mattress as if she wants to reach out but isn’t sure if she’ll be welcomed on the other side of that boundary. She curls her fingers into a helpless fist. “I don’t even know your name. But I swear, I don’t regret what I...”

She can’t even say the words out loud. She bends her head, and Clarke fights the urge to sink her hands into Lexa’s braids and draw that head into her lap, draw out the pain with gentle touches. One of them can’t speak of it because she’s too afraid, and the other just can’t speak. What a mess.

What a mess.

“I’m not afraid of your secrets.” Lexa doesn’t raise her head, and now Clarke is glad the other girl can’t see her face. “I’ve known you had them almost from the first, and I used to be wary of what
might come of them, but... Since then, I have seen you in service to your people. Our people. Working hard, and giving up so much of yourself so that their lives might be better.” She lifts her eyes to meet Clarke’s, gaze searching. “If anything of your past had the potential to harm them, you would have found a way to warn me.”

The last time it was this difficult to hold her head up, Clarke was watching her father say goodbye.

She doesn’t know where she finds the strength to keep her face blank, and to nod.

Maybe she really will be sick.

Lexa closes her eyes and breathes in deeply, as if taking succor from the affirmation. “I know,” she says under her breath. “I trust you.”

Clarke has to look away. Her hands are trembling. She twists them deep into the blankets so Lexa won’t notice, and is so intent on it she doesn’t notice the trickle down the side of her nose until Lexa reaches out again.

“No, don’t -- please don’t cry. Not again,” she murmured, looking a little panicked. “Please, I -- please.” Clarke can see the instant her restraint snaps and she places her hand along the side of Clarke’s face. Clarke can feel the tension ebb out of them both, right then.

“I don’t regret it,” Lexa whispers, still kneeling besides Clarke’s bed, a stubbornness in the set of her mouth Clarke has long familiarity with. “Maybe I should. I know this hurts you and... it frightens me, sometimes,” as her voice shakes. She pulls away, fingers lingering against Clarke’s cheek. “When I loved Costia, it felt like it transformed the world. When she died, it felt as if I had been lied to. Deceiving myself, perhaps. Believing this world is better than it is.”

She puts both her hands over Clarke’s. “The world is cruel. This life will test every weakness you allow. What I feel for you doesn’t change that.” She smiles, soft and sad, and brings her head down to rest on their joined hands as she looks up at Clarke. “It does make me strong enough to face it.”

~*~
The light is beginning to creep into the sky, soft and grey, by the time Lexa can be convinced to leave. Clarke thinks she must have been in agony, kneeling on the cold stone floor for so long after such a day, but it takes Clarke prodding at her in earnest before Lexa sighs and climbed to her feet. “I know, I know,” she says in response to Clarke’s unspoken, frantic worries about her health and her still-healing wound and her need for sleep. “But I feel better when I’m with you.”

Lexa has her own revenge before she walks to her own quarters, pushing Clarke down and tucking the covers in tightly. “If I’m sleeping in, so are you.” She pauses in the middle of it, hands on Clarke’s shoulders. “Poor little witch. Kept awake all night by an admirer.”

Clarke, trapped against her mattress by the blankets, rolls her eyes. Lexa bites back a smile.

“Someday you’ll be able to talk to me at length,” she said, tapping her finger against Clarke’s nose. “So let’s not forget: when that time comes, I’ll owe you an audience.”

Clarke wonders if biting the Heda’s finger is considered a serious assault against her person. Something of that must show in her eyes, because Lexa chokes on a laugh, presses the backs of her fingers against her mouth to keep it from growing.

“You can’t imagine,” she says, roughly, smoothing back Clarke’s hair, “what I would do to keep you safe.”

She exits quickly, shuttling the door behind her. It’s too much to take in just then for Clarke -- after everything else -- and before she falls asleep she has enough wherewithal to wonder what Lexa means by that.

~*~

She finds out the next morning.

A young woman walks into the throne room with her head held high, and Lexa immediately straightens. “Tris.”

There’s a note of surprise in her voice, and it makes Clarke take a second, closer look. Young woman
is generous -- she’s barely more than a child. But she’s dressed like a warrior and carries herself like one, and Clarke wonders, with a twist in her stomach, what the daily life is like for those who don’t serve as apprentices in the tower. And how early their training starts.

“I have a message from Anya,” the younger girl says, and Clarke can tell how nervous she feels, how intimidated, by the way she lifts her chin a little too high and keeps checking the exits out of the corner of her eyes. Not like she wants to break for them -- but as if the action itself soothes her, the routine of it grounding.

Like a kid with a teddy bear, Clarke thinks, and the twist tightens. It’s hypocritical of her, she knows: there was a girl about that age on the dropship. The Ark wasn’t much better in giving children a chance to be children.

“It’s just for you,” the girl -- Tris -- says, in the ensuing silence. Lexa watches her for a moment, fingers tapping against her lips in thought, before she raises a hand to dismiss them all.

With a jerk of his head, Titus signals that this includes Clarke and himself. She can’t help feeling anxious as she follows him out. Lexa can handle herself, especially with one half-grown-girl, and Clarke knows that. But after yesterday...

When the doors reopen it’s Tris, letting herself out. Her eyes flicker to Clarke’s face, and there’s a flash of -- something. Tris turns her head down to stare at the floor as she marches back down the hall.

Clarke stares after her feeling disconcerted. What was that? It happened too quickly, she couldn’t begin to read the emotion that sparked in the girl’s eyes, but...

By the time she returns to herself, shoving the niggling sense of discomfort to the back of her mind, Titus is dismissing the audiences-in-waiting. “Another day,” he promises. He opens his mouth to send her away as well -- Clarke can see he wants to -- but a voice behind him says: “Bring back our little witch.”

If she’s going to be anyone’s witch, it certainly wouldn’t be Titus. The only balm to her irritation is that she can tell he feels the same, even as he allows her to re-enter the throne room.

Lexa has lapsed back into thoughtfulness, leaning back in her throne as the two of them approach. She looks like something out of a painting, the curves and radiant lines of her throne framing her --
shoulders strong, head high -- the afternoon sunlight piercing the drapery behind her to pool at her feet. Clarke’s fingers itch to draw her, and it’s another loss she has to swallow down and banish as impossible. A small one, considering the last few days. But it stings.

“I have to join Anya at the front lines,” Lexa tells Titus.

“Ahead of the gathering troops? ... Very well. Once Nyko clears you for travel --”

“No.” Her tone is gentle, but resolute. “I will leave tomorrow morning.”

Titus’s lips thin in disapproval. “Heda --”

“When Anya was my First she taught me that clear, trustworthy messages sent over distances, or across enemy lines, were an indispensable weapon. We devised a system of codewords and warnings: phrases that couldn’t be anticipated by an enemy, each carrying a specific meaning. One of these messages is meant to summon us to the other’s side, but it’s only used when --” Lexa looks away, and Clarke can see how unnerved she is beneath her calm facade. A shallow crease appears between her eyebrows, and her hands spasms into fists. “I would leave this instant, but arrangements have to be made.”

“What could have happened?” Titus’s voice softens; the gentlest Clarke has ever heard him. “We’ve had no messages of an emergency, and Anya wouldn’t invite you into a situation she knew was unsafe. You’re sure it isn’t some kind of trap --”

“I’m certain.” Lexa rises to her feet, walking to face the window while one hand grips the throne. “Tris was under orders not to say *anything* else. Only Anya would presume to put a Second in that position.”

“True,” Titus mutters. He casts his eyes at Clarke. “I suppose you want your witch sent after. She’ll need her own guard,” he ends darkly.

Lexa hesitates. “No.”

Titus nods. “You want to her remain here? Good, I see you’ve taken my advice under consideration.”
“No.”

Clarke tries to read Lexa’s expression, but she’s angled her face away from both of them. The only hint to her state of mind is her white-knuckled grip on her throne.

But her voice is calm. “As soon as I am settled I will send Gustus back to Polis. By that time I want her packed and ready, and they will leave together.”

Titus looks back and forth between them, looking as confused as Clarke feels. “Where, Heda?”

“To a place of my knowledge and his. And no one else’s.” Lexa dips her head forward, casting it even deeper into shadow. “As long as her whereabouts are known, she won’t be safe.”

“Not until Nia is dead,” Titus says, like an afterthought, and Clarke feels the blood drain from her face.

Internally, she begs Lexa to turn and look at her, give her some reassurance, promise it’s not true.

The other girl’s back remains turned to them, ramrod straight. As the silence takes on weight, Clarke hears Titus say “I see,” very, very softly where he stands beside her.

This isn’t just while Lexa is outside of Polis. Clarke isn’t being sent on a mission, or some kind of winter vacation from her duties.

She’s being exiled.

Oh, she’s pretty sure Lexa doesn’t think of it that way. Lexa is probably telling herself... whatever fucking thing Lexa needs to tell herself, to excuse this, to make it feel like she’s watching out for Clarke. Keeping Clarke safe, as promised. In the only way to be really sure she is.

Oh, but it doesn’t hurt, does it, Clarke thinks at Lexa’s back, that this solves the pesky problem of my “secrets.”
All those questions Lexa has and their lack of answers -- sure, she trusts Clarke. But she’s the Commander. For the sake of her people she needs to be certain of Clarke. And what better way to do that than to send her somewhere Lexa knows she won’t be capable of getting into trouble.

Clarke doesn’t doubt for a minute, not for a second, that wherever she’s being sent is an unprecedented haven. It has to be: somewhere Nia’s bloody politics can’t touch Clarke, which means a peace and safety the likes of which Clarke hasn’t known since landing on the ground. Somewhere very few people must know about. Somewhere Clarke won’t ever be able to leave on her own, causing Lexa to rest easy.

It’s probably perfect, and idyllic. It might as well be a prison, and Clarke’s had enough of being imprisoned for two lifetimes.

She isn’t sure when Titus exits and they’re left alone in the throne room. She’s too focused on Lexa. Waiting for for Lexa to face her, see what this has done to her.

“You have lessons,” Lexa says. It’s a clear dismissal.

Shaking, Clarke leaves the room.

Lexa never turns around.

~*~

Clarke is so angry she can barely focus on Sharla’s map beyond it.

How dare she. How dare Lexa --

She knows she should be... not grateful, not... but practical about this. This isn’t what she wanted. But it’s a way to achieve that.
If Lexa sends her away --

*How can you do this?* Clarke wanted to weep, sob, scream out loud at her, anything to make Lexa turn and look. *How can you do this?*

-- then Clarke doesn’t have to escape. Not the tower, anyway. Which makes her job that much... so much... easier in the end. Getting away from Lexa, the handmaidens, the watchful eyes, the guards in the tower, it all felt impossible. Slipping away from one person, even if it is Gustus, on a back road no one is watching seems effortless in comparison.

She’ll have to be careful of Azgeda’s agents. They won’t be looking for her there, anyway, Lexa will find a way to distract them while Clarke supposedly runs to safety. (And she will. A different safety.) If they do find out -- well, Clarke can handle herself.

... not that *Lexa* believes that.

Clarke can’t even concentrate on her own, secret maps when Sharla sends her away for the afternoon. She puts them away in the trunk and paces the floor of her room, up and down, back and forth. Maybe if Nyko were here he would look into her face and know a way to diffuse this terrible rage, this hurt and helpless fury. But he left early this morning, his skills needed on the front lines. And instead it simmers hotter with every step until she thinks it must be etched permanently into her gut.

She’s so angry. It reminds her of playing chess with Thelonious Jaha: he never held back, never adjusted for Clarke’s or Wells’s relative inexperience, just sat at the other end with his chin on his fist and a slight smile that said *I know better than you, I am better at this.*

Lexa’s too prepared. She thinks too far ahead, leaving Clarke to scramble after her.

And just once, just once, Clarke wants to do something that surprises her, that she doesn’t see coming, that she won’t forget --

She stops dead in the middle of her room.

It’s such a bad idea.
And she wants it. Badly. Not just to unsettle Lexa -- not for that at all, actually. Just... because she wants it. Because she’ll never have a chance after this. And because -- in her meanest, smallest heart of hearts -- she wants to leave something of herself behind that Lexa will never be able to brush aside, or dismiss. She wants Lexa to acknowledge, this once, the fullness of what they are to each other.

And she wants Lexa.

~*~

It’s raining.

It’s something she notices as she walks down the hallway. The coverings on her own window are secured tight against draft, and the crackle of the fire was too loud to hear the raindrops. But the windows in the hallways are open, allowing air to sweep through the mustiness and mold, and the sharp edge of coldness from the falling water makes Clarke shiver.

When she knocks on the door Lexa is the one to open it.

“Come in,” she says, and paces away immediately. Clarke closes the door behind her. The guards just beyond don’t bother to turn their heads.

“I sent everyone else away,” Lexa says. She hasn’t changed out of her audience clothes, and she’s still wearing the high-necked coat. She walks to one end of the room before turning on her heel, the hem of her coat flaring out in a circle, and walking to the other. Her movement isn’t rushed, or frantic, but there’s a banked energy to the deliberation with which she places each step. “If you’re going to fight with me, it’s better that they don’t see it.”

Lexa stops, folding her arms. She might be the picture of uncaring arrogance, the way she holds her head high, except Clarke can see the strain in her knuckles where she grips her own arms. “Well?”

Clarke falls back against the closed door, her palms flat to its surface. She looks at Lexa and thinks, *I want you so much.*
But she can’t have her.

Or, not for long.

A muscle in Lexa’s jaw jumps. “I suppose I should be grateful you didn’t try to fight with me earlier.”

Clarke takes a step away from the door. Lexa doesn’t *quite* flinch. So Clarke takes another.

“I know you won’t believe me,” Lexa says quietly, “but I made this decision for you. Your safety.” She lowers her eyes to the floor. “If I could make decisions based on what I actually wanted...” The line of her mouth flattens. “That’s not my life.”

Clarke walks forward slowly, steadily, until she would be able to reach out and touch Lexa’s shoulder if she stretched a little. This close to the other girl and Clarke can barely breathe through it; how much she *wants*. It’s like walking through heavy rain.

It’s such a very bad idea. She knows that.

But Clarke wants this once.

She can go back to the Ark after that. She can face whatever happens after that -- if Lexa is able to forgive her or not. If Lexa chooses to *recognize* her after that. She can go back to being Clarke Griffin again. But in return, she wants this.

“I can’t...” Lexa’s eyes flicker to Clarke’s, and then her mouth. They almost dip lower, and it’s an obvious self-check when Lexa drags them back to Clarke’s face. Clarke feels her heart beat faster. Lexa swallows, gives a quick shake of her head. “I can’t tell what you’re thinking.”

Clarke takes a step forward.

Amazingly, *impossibly*, Lexa takes a step back.
Clarke pauses, considers. She tries to shake off the heaviness in her limbs and her head, focus on Lexa. The Commander’s mouth is in its stubborn set. Her shoulders are thrown back, spine straight as if ready to attack -- but that left foot retreating. Clarke looks closer at her face, and there --

She takes another step forward.

Lexa takes another step back.

“Don’t,” she says abruptly, as if interrupting Clarke mid-sentence. “Don’t do this. It's not a solution.”

Of course it isn’t. But Clarke’s not looking for a solution to this awful mess they’re in.

No, this is all much simpler.

The next step gives Lexa no more space to run as the back of her knees hit the edge of her bed. When Clarke continues to come closer Lexa’s eyes flutter shut, and when Clarke reaches up to put a slow, careful hand against the side of Lexa’s face, she squeezes them tight.

“You won’t change my mind,” she whispers.

Clarke waits. She waits until Lexa opens her eyes again, and then she waits until she’s sure of what she thought she saw in them, before: yearning.

Lexa wants this, too.

Clarke holds Lexa’s gaze as she nods once: terms set and agreed-upon.

There’s a long, interminable moment when neither of them move.

Lexa breaks first as she reaches out, hands splayed wide against the blades of Clarke’s shoulders to press her forward. She leans into the kiss like Clarke has the air she needs to breathe, the lack of
which already has her gasping. All that hesitance and restraint Clarke felt, back when she kissed Lexa drunk and bold in the forest, is swept away with a violence that almost makes Clarke falter. She regains herself in the next second, eager to match Lexa’s hunger, to exceed it.

Her hands are insistent in undoing the ties and fastenings of Lexa’s clothes when Lexa is still paced and considerate. Clarke gets the coat off easy -- she’s seen Lexa fasten it so many times, not letting herself acknowledge how her own eyes lingered on Lexa’s fingers -- and grudgingly accepts the two seconds where Lexa has to take her hands off Clarke’s body in order for the coat to be peeled off her arms and thrown to the floor. Clarke goes for her top next, but she’s never seen Lexa dress from naked, she has no idea how it’s resisting her efforts. She tugs harder.

Lexa breaks their kissing with what sounds like a laugh, or something like that if it wasn’t immediately muffled against Clarke’s mouth as she presses back in, helplessly. “Wait,” she says against Clarke’s lips, kisses her, kisses her again. “Wait for just a mo--”

It’s probably rude to cut someone off by kissing them, not that Clarke cares, when Lexa’s mouth isn’t on her Clarke’s whole body aches and she’s not sure how she survived it before. How she’ll survive after. She screws her eyes shut at the thought and pushes it away, determined not to lose the headiness of Lexa, of the flex of her spine and her muscles under Clarke’s hands as she drags her palms down to try and tug -- how does this come off, anyway? Does Lexa need help in stripping for bed every night?

... she better not. Clarke likes the handmaidens, she’d hate for them all to die in tragic accidents.

Lexa turns her head fully to the side to evade the next kiss, and Clarke might be upset, but Lexa’s groan low in her throat says she’s upset enough herself. She grabs Clarke’s wrists in the same moment, halting their lack of progress.

She leans their foreheads together, breathing hard. “I don’t leave until the morning. We have time.”

Clarke bites her lip. They both know that’s not true. And Clarke can feel each available moment go with an almost physical presence, bright and shining and beautiful as it slips away into what’s already past.

“I know,” Lexa whispers. She brings her hand up to Clarke’s face, tangles fingers in her hair. Her eyes shut and they’re so close her eyelashes brush Clarke’s skin. “But I want to... I want to remember. Everything.”
Everything they have now, savored in the instant they have it, storing up for the long hunger ahead.

Clarke finds part of her would rather drown in the sensation until she’s drunk. She’s not sure she wants to remember it with such clarity. She’s not sure she’ll be able to stand it.

But she nods, because she can’t imagine denying Lexa anything right then.

“Thank you,” Lexa breathes, and the depth of her gratitude is even enough to calm Clarke’s distant panic. She presses kisses to Clarke’s temple, her jaw, her shoulder, gathers Clarke into her arms and holds her, steady as the center of the universe.

~*~

Clarke’s had sex before. She knows what it’s like. It’s fun, mostly, sometimes frustrating, sometimes a little too sweaty and awkward or silly but always good, pleasure stretching her out from fingertips to toes until she’s loose and content, the way she never is, until the tension builds and starts over again.

She can tell it’s different for Lexa -- she should’ve anticipated it, and maybe she did unconsciously, but she never expected to get caught up in it herself. That the edges of Lexa’s intensity would trap and tangle her like a net, dragging her into something deeper, even something a little scarier than what she’s used to.

She might even be scared. Except Lexa catches her, pins her in place to keep from falling. “Breathe,” she says softly, and Clarke is trying, it would be easier if Lexa stopped kissing her like that, stopped pressing inside her.

If she stops Clarke will kill her.

“Breathe,” Lexa says again, softer, and never takes her eyes away from Clarke’s face.

~*~
“It’s not that far,” Lexa says.

Neither of them seem able to sleep. Not for long, anyway. Sometimes she’ll tuck herself into the crook of Lexa’s neck and close her eyes, feeling time expire in bursts. Sometimes Lexa’s breathing will get softer, even out, and when Clarke carefully turns her head she’ll find the Commander of the twelve clans asleep on her own pillow: mouth open where she dropped off in the middle of a sentence. She’s quicker to rouse than Clarke is when this happens. But there are always a few moments for Clarke to stare, keeping her eyes open until they burn, trying to imprint every sensation of every second on her memory forever: the hot weight of Lexa’s arm just under her breasts, or Lexa’s leg pushing between hers, Lexa’s fingers curling into her hair. She feels weighed down and drunk with it.

There’s an unspoken agreement that one always keeps watch while the other rests, making sure the night doesn’t escape them entirely.

“A few days’ hard ride, maybe,” Lexa continues. She slides her arm around from where it’s tucked against Clarke’s waist. Clarke makes a half-hearted grab at her hand to make her stay -- she feels hazy and half-asleep, lulled by the sound of the storm beating against the windows. It hasn’t passed, but it’s abated, and the steady rhythm of falling water makes everything feel that much removed from the everyday, as if the world outside of this room has been swallowed up. Lexa squeezes her hand once but still pulls free. She hoists herself up onto one elbow, drops a kiss on Clarke’s bare shoulder before gently combing her fingers through the hair at Clarke’s temple, drawing it out until the ends. “It isn’t the distance that will protect you. It’s the place itself: almost no one knows it exists. Even fewer know the secret to finding it.”

Clarke wishes, with all her heart, that Lexa would shut up. Or find something else to talk about. She hates her a little for bringing this subject into this space, and this moment. But Clarke supposes she wouldn’t be Lexa if she had the knack of letting things go.

Under Lexa’s careful hands the tangled and somewhat sweaty mass of Clarke’s hair calms, fans out over the pillow. Clarke feels fingers just behind her ear, piecing away a section hidden beneath the rest. “The one who rules there has no love for me, or our ways,” she says softly. “There may be more sacrifices required of you, once you arrive. But considering who you are and what you are capable of, I know she won’t deny you.” She pauses. “And she owes me a life.”

Clarke closes her eyes. It’s been a while since she felt this particular tension against her head, the pull-release-pull pattern, but she knows what Lexa is doing.

“But it’s because she’s so unlike us,” Lexa says, “that I know you will be safe. And I know...” Her
fingers falter for a second, and Clarke wonders if it will mean an irregularity, if she’ll be able to look at the place where the pattern is uneven and think: that’s how she was touching me when. Lexa resumes: “I know she will allow you to leave, if I can ever promise the true danger is past. If that’s what you wish.”

The tension disappears as Lexa allows her hair to drop onto the pillow. Clarke rouses enough to reach for her, open her eyes as she examines it. Lexa has secured the braid, thin and delicate enough to go almost unseen with the rest of Clarke’s hair, with a few strands twisted together and somehow knotted around, the ends woven back in. It feels secure to her curious fingers, like it’s meant to last for some time. Lexa gently takes it from her grasp.

“What I’m trying to tell you,” she says, tucking the braid back behind Clarke’s ear. “Your going away -- being sent away,” she amends, which is good, because Clarke might’ve pinched her if she hadn’t, “it doesn’t. This doesn’t mean goodbye. Not for always.”

Or so Lexa thinks. But Clarke knows things she doesn’t, and she knows the truth.

It is goodbye. It is the end.

But they have the rest of the night.

So Clarke rolls onto her back and pulls Lexa down onto her, relishes the feel of her under her hands: the scarred skin of her back, soft and unruly curls, the jump of muscles as Clarke tilts her hips. It doesn’t take much to distract Lexa from what she was saying.

When Clarke falls asleep again Lexa is curled around her back. Clarke can feel the sweep of Lexa’s breath against her neck, the rhythm of Lexa’s heart against her spine.

When she wakes up, Lexa is gone.

~*~

So stop sulking, Clarke scolds, whenever she catches herself doing just that. Or not sulking, but spacing out. Losing track of time, of her tasks. Herself. She’ll stop in the middle of something to
realize she went blank; she has no idea where she’s supposed to be going or doing, and sometimes she even forgets where she was coming from. Now that Lexa is gone Clarke feels like a ghost from the old Earth tales, haunting the tower. After all, the life she had here is dead, and done with. She’s just waiting to move on.

The braid Lexa left in her hair hasn’t fallen out. Clarke doesn’t have the heart to take it apart, just moves it aside when she picks out her tangles. She’s very deliberate in not thinking about it. But every time her heart quickens like it’s trying to bring her back to herself, to revive.

She misses Lexa.

Clarke isn’t sure if it’s better or worse that she’s gone while Clarke waits to leave. She goes back and forth, turning it over in her head as she stares into the darkness before falling into a fitful sleep. It would be worse if Lexa were here, she decides every night; Clarke would have to face her every day with the knowledge of what’s going to happen, smile lies to her at every turn. They probably wouldn’t have had that one night, either. Clarke doesn’t kid herself: Lexa allowed that to happen because she knew she could escape before Clarke woke up. The knowledge burns, a little, but being in love with Lexa doesn’t mean Clarke forgets how her mind works. Lexa only lets good things happen when she’s weighed the resulting sacrifice.

So it’s easier this way, Clarke thinks to herself as she finally closes her eyes. This way, they had a few hours of the closest they could come to honesty. And Clarke doesn’t have to deal with Lexa anymore, knowing. It’s the best of a bad situation.

But when she opens her eyes every morning to face another grey, formless day, she wonders.

She also has time to wonder about what brought them to this place, and if she could have avoided it. Maybe if Clarke had let that first assassin attack a drugged Lexa in her tent, the Commander wouldn’t have decided to take her wood witch all the way back to Polis. Maybe if Clarke had refused to continue the farce, rejected the costume and the paint, she could have faded back into the mass of apprentices to be forgotten. Maybe, just maybe, there was a point where they could have turned back from this. Spared Lexa, at least.

(Not Clarke. She’s traced it backwards, from love to despair and loathing to fascination and fear, and found an unbroken line of strong emotion without seam or crack. Some part of her has been moving toward this ever since Lexa rode out of the shadows on her white horse, and Clarke doesn’t think she could have stopped it.

She’s not sure she would have wanted to. If a year in solitary taught her anything, it was to own her
Obsessing over past events is an odd comfort. She can’t allow herself to think too far into the future. Her mind’s eye shuts after she pictures riding up to the Ark and being allowed inside. All she can think about now is what’s required, what has to be done -- by her -- to avoid messy, murderous conflict.

If she falters, even with one step, everything could be lost.

Clarke focuses on that as the days pass, and not on the fact that if she succeeds, Lexa will someday know the truth.

What might happen then, Clarke’s weary mind can’t begin to encompass.

~*~

Riding Storm is one of the few things that sweeps away the fog in her brain. She has to be present for the animal to respond to her, and focusing on the horse forces all other distractions from Clarke’s mind, gives her breathing space and an hour or so of peace.

Maybe it shows on her face, because when she’s finished leading Storm back into her stall and cleaning her tack, she finds the stable master watching her with folded arms.

“You ride her well,” he says, abrupt. “When Heda first told me, I didn’t think --” He cuts off with a nod, as if affirming something to himself. “We all miss her when she’s away,” he says. “If it helps, I’ll let the others know you’re welcome to take the horse out whenever you need.”

He turns and leaves before she can figure out a way to communicate her thanks, but the warmth the interaction kindles in her chest lasts her the long ride back up the tower, and even as she walks into her room.

Where Lexa is waiting.
Clarke stumbles, going blank. For a wild second she thinks she’s hallucinating Lexa, sitting there on Clarke’s bed like she never left the tower, but: her boots are caked with mud, like she hasn’t taken the time to wipe them clean. In fact everything about her screams haste, even emergency, in a way that makes Clarke stumble just as she’s about to leap forward in joy. Lexa still has her long coat on, and Clarke can just about smell the sweat on her from the desperate ride back to Polis. And her face is... oddly drawn, and tight. The skin beneath her eyes looks faintly bruised, and her eyes themselves are... are...

As Clarke’s brain stalls on understanding her expression, Lexa opens her mouth and says: “Clarke Griffin.”

Clarke stops breathing. Behind her she hears the door close, and she knows they’re not alone in her room. But she can’t look away from Lexa’s dark, unfathomable eyes.

“That’s your name.” Lexa doesn’t smile when she adds: “I told you I would figure it out.”

Clarke doesn’t know what’s going on behind her implacable expression, and that’s beginning to scare Clarke, because she always --

“Don’t you want to know how?”

Lexa reaches into her coat, pulls out something with just her fingertips. As if she can barely bring herself to touch it. When she holds it up between them all Clarke can see is a blank piece of paper.

“When the people from the sky -- your people -- came down to the earth, the thing that carried them cracked open. Pieces and possessions fell like rain, littering my territory.” Again, handling only the edges, Lexa turns the thing in her hand.

It’s a photograph. Clarke knows it like a piece of herself: it’s her, and her father. It used to rest on her mother’s desk. She can see lines where broken glass has scored the surface, a missing corner from when it was ripped loose of a frame.

“Anya found it. She couldn’t be certain it was you. You look,” and then the first waver in her voice, “different.” She seems to swallow it down, because when she continues she’s as steady as ever. “But I was certain.”
Yes. Even if Lexa had doubts, she’d recognize Jake from Clarke’s portrait.

“One of Anya’s prisoners told us the rest.” She places the photograph down on Clarke’s bedspread. “When he heard you were being held in Polis, he found it very important to make us understand just who you were and why you should be set free. Clarke Griffin. Daughter of Chancellor Griffin, the leader of your people.”

... wait. Wait, what --

“I suppose we’re not so different after all,” Lexa say. “Both of us born to an uncommon understanding of power, and its purpose.” A muscle in her jaw works. “Both of us devoted to the needs of our people.”

Clarke looks at her, desolate. She doesn’t think she could find the words, at this point, even if she could voice them.

And Lexa. The edges of her composure are wearing away, just enough so that Clarke can begin to sense what’s beyond it. She has a sudden flash of memory to the first time she and Wells snuck down to the cargo hold and put their hands against the outer doors -- the metal so cold it felt like it burned at first touch, and yet somehow nothing to the frozen vacuum of space beyond it.

Clarke’s hands still ache to place themselves on either side of Lexa’s expressionless face, draw her in close. As if she could share her own warmth that way, lend the heat of her blood and furiously beating heart to break Lexa free of the ice.

“And I’ve played similar tricks, in order to get close and learn more about my enemies.” Lexa stands. “But never anything so elaborate.”

Clarke’s unease ripens into the first flutters of panic. What does she mean, tricks? Surely she can see how this spiraled out of control -- she has to understand --

“I kept wondering why,” Lexa says quietly. “What aim could possibly be served by such commitment.” She swallows. “I did wonder if...” For a brief second Clarke can make out emotion in her eyes. It’s desolation. “I should have known better.”

She hooks the toe of her boot around something just out of Clarke’s view, half-kicking it between
The chest she gave to Clarke, its lock smashed open and beyond repair, lands in the intervening space. It tips onto its side, and out of it spill the maps Clarke has spent the past days copying from the cartographers.

Clarke doesn’t even think about it: she steps forward, her first instinct to reach out, connect, find a way to explain. Someone yanks her back by the shoulder, and with enough force to click her teeth together. The next thing she knows someone is at her back, holding her back with their hands around her wrists like manacles. She only has to turn her head a little to see the who has her: Anya.

“I do know better.” Lexa watches as Clarke resists Anya’s hold. “I have only myself to blame.”

Clarke suddenly registers Anya’s other hand clamped across her mouth, the short nails digging into her cheek. She tries to shake free on reflex, but Anya’s grip tightens. She’s panicking, confused, and the implication doesn’t dawn on her until Lexa steps in closer, boots coming down on Clarke’s painstaking maps.

“I want everything,” she says, radiating that burning cold. “Who she spoke with, and what she told them. What secrets she was told to ferret out, and why. Her plans for the maps. I want,” -- and here the slightest curl of her lip, the beginning of a sneer, or an animal’s warning snarl -- “everything they can get from her.”

Clarke realizes two things at the same time.

One: Lexa isn’t speaking to her, despite never taking those dark eyes away from her face.

Two: Finn -- she’s pretty sure it was Finn -- is the one who told them about her. And Finn knew her from the dropship. Before.

They think she has her voice.

Which means they think they can --
“Titus will get everything we need from her,” Anya says.

“No.” Lexa turns her head in something that’s almost a flinch. “Not Titus.” She’s quiet for a moment. “Let me have something to show for it before he finds out how badly I failed his teachings. Gustus will serve.”

“Yes, Heda,” and from the vicious pleasure in Anya’s voice Clarke knows she hasn’t been granted any kind of reprieve.

The scream she can’t give voice to manifests in struggle: even knowing it’s useless she kicks and twists in a kind of animal instinct, panic taking hold of her body and moving it for her. One foot connects with Anya’s legs, but she might as well be a child against the warrior. Anya shifts her grip so that she pins one of Clarke’s wrists high up against her back, the sudden pain shooting through Clarke’s shoulder enough of a warning.

“Titus will hear about it if she’s put in the dungeons,” Anya offers. Her grip is like iron. It doesn’t matter how much Clarke tries to thrash, she can barely shift an inch.

Lexa’s expression doesn’t shift, either. “Somewhere else, then. Just make sure you’re not seen.”

She doesn’t look at Clarke.

But Clarke doesn’t take her eyes off Lexa as she’s half-dragged away. She cranes her neck, keeping Lexa in her sights as long as she can.

She waits for it: that second where Lexa snaps, realizes what she’s done, what she’s doing. Takes it back. Takes Clarke’s face in her hands and sees the truth.

Instead the door shuts between them and Lexa is lost to view.
Chapter End Notes

I realized part of my difficulty in writing this chapter was that I didn’t want to separate it too much from the next chapter, so I've been working on that as well. Chapter 18 will go up on Friday.

Endless thanks to @gramjams and @weasal (meetwickedfaith on AO3) for a few beta notes and generally holding my hand through this one.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

So this is a WARNING: this is the chapter that earns the “torture” and “canon-typical violence” tags. It’s not graphic, but there is a good deal of pain and emotional distress.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*~

The first day, she’s not afraid.

Anya takes her a place she doesn’t recognize via the back stairs and crumbling corridors of the tower. It’s deeper in the recesses than she’s ever been -- where the tower sinks into the earth, maybe, judging from the smell of damp and the lichen crawling the stone walls. There’s a room, somewhere in the labyrinth of collapsed hallways and crumbling support beams, that looks like it's been used for this purpose before: there are hooks hammered high into the walls and chains piled in a corner.

Anya binds her hands. Clarke has an instant of panic, then, but quashes it. It doesn’t matter if her wrists are wrapped and tied together so that they can know what she’s doing with them at all times, or hook them high above her head so that she’s left exposed and helpless on the balls of her feet. It doesn’t matter if it leaves her unable to sign. She only has to wait. Clarke knows Lexa, she isn’t going to be left down here to rot forever. Not even for long. She refuses to believe that.

When Gustus enters the room as well his bulk nearly block all the light from the torchlit hallway. She’d forgotten how big he is.

“Well?” he rumbles, eyeing Clarke in her position against the wall.

Anya shrugs. “You know what she’s like,” a non sequitur. “Arms. Fleshiest parts first.”

Gustus gives a snort of what sounds like disbelief.

“I know. But she believes the pain alone will be persuasive.” Anya throws a mirthless smile over her shoulder at Clarke before clapping Gustus on the arm. Her parting shot is: “Give it time.”
Clarke's first days in solitary, when the pain of losing Jake used to tear her apart every morning anew, she had a trick. Long before boredom and lack of routine drove her to mark the walls and the passage of time, she would sit on her cot and focus on the far wall. Then she would unfocus, allowing her eyes to relax until all she saw was a softened blur. There was a girl on a bed somewhere, but it wasn’t her. Someone’s father had been executed, someone had been imprisoned and marked for death for trying to finish what he started, someone’s entire life was a lie -- but not her.

Gustus unsheathes a long knife in her range of vision. Clarke switches her gaze to the far wall.

Someone’s about to be in a lot of pain. But not her.

~*~

The second day, she’s still not afraid.

She jumps when a metal platter is dropped to the floor next to her, the food barely managing to stay on it as it clatters. But Anya did that on purpose, it doesn’t count.

“I suppose you’re proud of yourself,” Anya says. She speaks in English, and it helps -- no one speaks English to Clarke, here. She must be talking to someone else. “Our warriors have also been trained to remain silent when captured by the enemy. Even under duress.” She slams down a tin cup, water sloshing over its rim.

That’s what Clarke wants. Putting food in her mouth, chewing and swallowing, that’s all beyond her. Those are tasks performed by people whose arms aren’t laced with fire, every move they make tugging at something raw and tender. But she wants the water. She sits up from the grimy pallet they’ve given her. She has to be slow, and careful -- the bindings have cut off a lot of the blood to her hands and left her fingers swollen and almost too stiff to flex -- but she manages to bring the cup to her lips, and the gluey feel of her mouth is washed away at last.

It’s groundwater, sharp with minerals. She can’t gather herself enough to remember why it would make her want to cry.
“Lexa told me everything.” Anya shifts her weight onto her back foot, arms folded as she watches Clarke drink. “If you’re anything like the rest of your kind, you had no idea to live off the land. How did you get separated from them? Or did you think one girl might slip in, unnoticed, where a group of you could not?”

The others. If Anya’s here, where are the ones she was trying to get information from: Finn, and Bellamy, and whoever else? Are they still alive?

“You followed the refugees from the village you destroyed. Why?” Her voice is like a whipcrack, but Clarke refuses to flinch. “Was your interest in those children in particular?” Her eyes narrow. “Or were you following orders from the Mountain?”

Clarke holds herself very still when Anya crouches down low, coming closer to eye level.

“I heard you were desperate to escape before,” she says quietly. She tilts her head to one side, long hair falling over her shoulder as her eyes seem to strip Clarke’s skin from her bones. “That puzzled... us, at first, until we matched it to the rumors we spread about what happened to your first ship. You were upset then, weren’t you. No place to go back to? No knowledge your people were safe under the Mountain?”

Safe? Those are the people who made the reapers, and Clarke is supposed to think her people are safe?

“But you rallied.” Anya sits back on her heels. “You must have known the rest were on their way. And you realized the advantage you had gained, even if by accident: a place and a position, and an opportunity to get close to...”

Anya trails off. It’s almost as if the pressure drops in the small space; Clarke’s heart beats wildly, and she feels dizzy. She pulls the plate of neglected food closer, the metal scraping against the concrete floor. She should eat. As impossible as it feels, she needs to take whatever they give her. At least, until --

“I heard about the prisoner you released. How you taught him the phrases necessary to get past the city gates. He must have been important, to take that risk.”

Clarke’s hands start shaking as she shoves the rough slices of bread into her mouth.
“But perhaps,” low and smooth, almost crooning, “you knew, then, exactly how much you could get away with. The excuses that would be given, leniency granted. For you.”

Her mouth is too dry to swallow it down, but a few more gulps of water help.

“I think your people were in contact with the Mountain from the beginning,” Anya says, and Clarke almost chokes. “I think your initial explorations, those maps -- they were for those worms who burrow away from sunlight and hide in the belly of the earth. They grow greedy, don’t they? They want the land above, and you and yours were are key to taking it.”

She watches Clarke, and Clarke realizes she’s looking for any reaction, any hint of an answer. “It’s only a theory for now, and one I have yet to share with... others. But I think I’ll find that I’m right.”

Anya swoops in, leaning so close so quickly Clarke jerks back to hit her head against the stone wall. “They told you about her, didn’t they,” she hisses. “What did they say? That she was just a girl? That as much as she’d done, as strong as she was, she had to have a weakness somewhere? They don’t know the first thing about her. It was a lie.” Her eyes darken. “But I will eat the heart of everyone you love for making it true.”

Her hand shoots out to grab Clarke around the throat, hauling them both to their feet. She keeps Clarke pinned one-handed against the wall.

“I know you’re not a witch,” she says flatly. “Except I could believe it, the way you got her to turn on herself. Her purpose.” Her grip tightens, and Clarke batters uselessly at Anya’s hold with bound hands. “Maybe your people will call your death a good one, and maybe they’ll honor your strength and skill in this long campaign.” Through the black spots dancing before her vision, Clarke can see Anya’s lip curl into a sneer. “You and I know better. What you did had no honor. Once she gives you over to me -- every scream, every sob of pain she does not allow herself, I will take it from you. It will not be a good death, or a warrior’s death. You don’t deserve one.”

She drops Clarke to the ground.

“According to reports, your people have been in talks with the Mountain,” Anya says as Clarke gasps for breath, her lungs burning. “There have already been minor trades in weapons and supplies, and I’m sure whatever information you managed to pass along helped smooth the way.” She stares down at Clarke stone-faced. “I hope you feel it was worth it.”
That’s when Clarke realizes: Lexa isn’t coming. Or if she does come, it won’t be to help.

As she’s abruptly sick all over the floor, she begins to feel afraid.

~*~

She curls up on her pallet after, still tasting sick in her mouth.

“Lexa says you can start on her back,” Anya tell Gustus.

~*~

Lexa comes on the third day.

She brings a contingent of warriors with her, which Clarke never remembers her walking about the tower with. She’s also wearing a full face of dark paint, trails down her cheeks like the nuclear shadows of lost tears.

Clarke wants to snarl at her, what are you afraid of, but. Of course she can’t.

At this point it feels like the anger is what’s keeping her alive. She found it yesterday, when Gustus carefully ripped out the back of her clothing, clearing his workspace before he could begin his questions all over again. She can feel blood dripping down her back now, drying on her skin or gathering in damp patches. The work Gustus did on her arms pulls at where they’re secured above her head.

Every time she wants to vomit, or faint, she bites the inside of her cheek bloody and curls up at the heart of her anger.

Lexa doesn’t walk inside the room. She looks from the other side of threshold like she’s surveying a distant kingdom. “Report.”
“Nothing,” Gustus says bluntly. “And it will continue to be nothing, until you allow real force.”

“Are you telling me,” low and seething, “you can’t get answers from one girl? She isn’t trained in this. Before she came here, she couldn’t even ride a horse.”

Clarke sags in her bindings. Lexa’s voice hurts. Everything hurts.

“She is strong, Heda,” Gustus says, with obvious reluctance. “She still refuses to talk. She refuses even to scream.”

The sound of light steps, and then Lexa is gripping her chin and forcing her head up. She searches Clarke’s face with a stranger’s eyes.

Clarke stares back dully.

After a few moments’ perusal, the Commander’s eyes widen.

“She is screaming,” she says under her breath. “We just can’t hear her.”

Her grip tightens. “Sky girl,” she says. “You were separated from your people. Alone in a strange land -- a strange world. Unaware of its dangers.” Her eyes dart back and forth, and there’s a new element in them Clarke wishes she could focus on. “Something happened. Something that took away your voice.”

It’s hope, Clarke realizes.

Lexa sounds hopeful as she leans in close to ask: “Clarke. Is that what happened?”

Clarke lets her eyelids flutter shut, sagging slightly where she’s bound to the wall. A tightness in her chest that bands across her heart loosens, and she can breathe for what feels like the first time in days. She gives it a few seconds until she opens her eyes again.

She spits a mouthful of bloody saliva into Lexa’s waiting, hopeful face.
There’s an answering clamor as every warrior behind the Commander draws his weapon, shouts of outrage ready on their lips. Lexa holds up a hand and they fall immediately silent.

Lexa gives her face a cursory swipe with that same hand, shaking the mess to the floor. “You’re right,” she says, in a voice that’s only meant to reach Clarke’s ears. “I should have thought of it sooner.”

Clarke notices with a petty satisfaction that Lexa has smeared her own warpaint.


Clarke shakes her head.

“Something you ate?”

A nod.

Lexa’s hand leaves Clarke’s face, slowly. “Get whatever she can draw with,” she tells one of her lackeys. “And a healer.”

~*~

Clarke sketches the innocent-looking roots that set this whole thing in motion, shaking with equal parts relief and blood loss. She can feel Lexa’s eyes on her, but every time Clarke tries to catch her in the act, Lexa shifts her gaze to the paper beneath Clarke’s blood-encrusted hands. When Clarke is finished Lexa steps forward with precise care to lift it away, never coming too close.

“I don’t recognize this plant,” she says, before handing it over to the healer. It’s not anyone Clarke recognizes from among the apprentices, and his accent places him as Blue Cliff. He must be one of their healers, travelling with the influx of warriors on the way to Lexa’s war. They’re not in the main infirmary but what looks like an overflow space: the same beds and arrangement as the official area, with supplies stocked neatly in cupboards. Clarke wonders when the fighting came so close to the
city that they needed the extra.

He examines it for a few moments, forehead creasing. “It is an extraordinary likeness,” he says.

“She has many talents,” says Lexa, who still won’t meet Clarke’s eyes. “Is the effect permanent?”

The healer shakes his head. “I may not be familiar with this plant in particular, but I know of others that cause the same problem when not prepared properly. I can work from what cures we already have.”

“Do that,” Lexa said, moving toward the doorway. “Tend to her wounds while you’re at it. I await news of your success.” There’s the slightest stutter in her smooth movement as she reaches the door, but she sweeps out with her head and walls held high.

Clarke watches, but Lexa never looks back.

~*~

It takes four days. Four days of concoctions and white-knuckled impatience. It was so much easier to endure the inability to speak before Le... before everyone knew the truth. Now each time the healer comes to her cot with another treatment — one was syrupy-thick and warm to the tongue, one was clear and bright and cold as mountain water, one was filled with slimy lumps that made her choke, one was — her heart kicks into high gear and her hands sweat. Maybe this one. Or maybe this one. The healer forces her to rest and recuperate for a large part of the day after each attempt, and after the potion that made her retch and heave up everything in her stomach she sees the wisdom of it. Still. Maybe the next one.

In the meantime they clean out Gustus’s careful cuts, stitch and bandage the worst of them. She supposes she should be grateful for the last bit of dignity in the fact she can’t audibly cry out from the pain.

Four days, and no sign of Lexa.

In the end, it’s a potion of herbs brewed so dark and hot it’s almost a soup. If a soup was made from
rotting feathers and and too-sweet flowers -- or whatever tasted like that. Clarke takes her first sip and gags.

“All of it,” the healer murmurs.

Clarke glares. Pinching her nose, she tosses the entire thing back in two swallows, wincing. Her stomach roils, acid burning in her throat. She coughs and feels something loosen.

She jerks upright, pulse loud in her own ears. Experimentally, she clears her throat. There it is again - - the feeling of softening, a wearing away like wet sand before a wave. She clears her throat, and this time she can hear her voice -- her voice -- behind it.

Clarke takes a shaky breath. “Mochof.”

It sounds wrong. The words are correct, but her pronunciation is just off enough to make her frown. She knows what sounds to make -- she even dreams in their language now -- but her mouth isn’t used to the necessary shapes.

It seems good enough for the healer. “Inform Heda -- hmm,” he says, as one of the guards is already well down the corridor, weapons rattling with every step. “It seems they already have their instructions.”

The bottom drops out of Clarke’s stomach. Unconsciously, her fingers seek out the bandages on her upper arms. She's healing nicely. It seems a waste to open her up again at this point, but Lexa is nothing if not pragmatic.

As if conjured by the thought, Lexa steps through the door. She comes to a stop almost immediately, as if hesitant to come closer. She’s dressed simply: none of her more intimidating clothing, no warpaint. But her expression is as carefully still as a statue’s. The healer takes one look and departs.

They face each other silently for long moments.

Fine, if that's how Lexa wants it. “Hei, Heda.”
A ripple of something passes through Lexa’s eyes, too quickly for Clarke to identify, before she relaxes. “We can speak like this if you prefer,” she says in English. Her pronunciation, as always, is flawless.

Clarke just manages to keep from scowling. “Not if it makes it easier to make me your enemy,” persisting in the Woods Clan language, even as she wants to wince. Ugh, who’d ever think a tongue could feel clumsy?

Some of the iron leaves Lexa’s spine, letting her tip to one side and lean against the wall. “I do not wish to assume so.”

“Really?” She lashes out, and her voice scrapes in an unaccustomed throat. “No more theories about I spent months in here, surrounded by people, and never once made an accidental sound?”

“No.”

Lexa hasn't dropped her English, so Clarke concedes defeat and switches. “What about Anya?” she asks. There are still traces of rust in her voice, but the words do come easier. Damn Lexa.

Who raises an eloquent eyebrow. “She still insists you should be punished for the crime of infiltration. You can keep your life, but she asked permission to rip out your tongue. She also said she would roast and eat it in front of you. I’m sure she was joking.”

Clarke glares at her.

Lexa almost -- almost -- smiles, but her eyes drift to half-mast and Clarke watches the expression die, stillborn. Instead, the Commander of the twelve clans looks at the floor as she says, expressionless: “You know what I have to ask next.”

Clarke swallows. “I thought the people I came down with were dead, and the rest would never come down from the sky. It wasn’t until I saw Pike, the prisoner -- the one I freed --” and watches the skin tighten around Lexa’s eyes, “that I realized the truth. The thing we lived on, it came down in different pieces. He was on a piece that fell to the north. I wanted him to tell the main camp where the others were, that they were alive.”

She sits on his stories of Azgeda warriors and their disappearing Ark prisoners. Partly because she’s
not sure Lexa will believe her in this moment. Partly because she refuses to give up everything. Not after what they did to get it from her.

“When I heard negotiations between your troops and the Ark fell through, I knew I had to go back myself,” Clarke continues. “I had to tell them -- we had no idea anyone was here, alive. They don’t know about the Mountain or the clans. I knew if I could just explain --”

“Explain what?” Lexa breaks in, soft. “They have no respect for us, or our ways. Our lives. They look at the Mountain and see kindred. They look at us and see savages.”

“No, that's not...” Her head spins. “Where are you getting this? You’ve spoken with them?”

“Not personally,” Lexa says after a moment. “But I have reliable reports. Including how your people have already begun to align themselves with the Mountain, trading for supplies and taking up their cause.”

“I don’t believe it,” Clarke says. It makes her a little shaky to see the gathering storm on Lexa’s face, but she persists. “They’re not here to fight. We used to teach that war ended the world. We haven’t survived in orbit for almost a hundred years just to start killing again.”

“What about your original mission?”

“I... I don’t get what you mean.” Lexa can’t still suspect her of espionage. Surely they’re past that.

“The first group of sky people. What were you sent here to accomplish?”

Laughter, ugly with old bitterness, seems to climb its own way out of her throat. “You don’t understand. We weren’t warriors or emissaries, we were test subjects.” At the slight frown from the Commander, Clarke knows she isn’t making herself understood. “We were...” She casts about for an appropriate comparison when she remembered an old, old metaphor, one from books written in the world before. “Do you have any people who dig really deep into the ground?”

“Shadow Valley takes metals from the belly of the earth.”
“And the air down there can be poisonous, right?” At Lexa’s nod, she asks: “How do they know when it’s safe?”

Lexa shifts, getting comfortable. “By bringing small animals with them in cages. It takes less poison for a small body, so they die first if there’s danger. Sometimes they will lower it down first...” Her face shuts as her voice trails off. “I see.”

“It was the same for us. When they sent us down, the mission was just to survive.”

“Clarke.”

It’s the third time Lexa has used her name. It didn’t escape her notice the first or second times, but she was... distracted, then. This time, she notices. The hair on the back of her neck stands up, and the sensation of electricity beneath her skin doesn’t stop when she sees how Lexa is looking at her, how she’s moved that much closer.

“The animals put to this use,” Lexa says, choosing her words, “do not produce. They are not pets. They are not... valued.”

It doesn’t hurt as much as it used to, Clarke tells herself. She raises her chin in acknowledgement.

“Why not?” Lexa asks, searching her face.

“We,” and and she has to clear her throat again when her voice cracks. She’d thought it had recovered from disuse, but maybe not. “We were criminals.”

Lexa’s eyes widen. “What was your crime?” voice shading a little too close to disbelief.

She shouldn’t.

She really shouldn’t, but she can’t resist, and she --

Clarke allows the grin to bare her teeth as she revels in the near-poetic irony of it all. “I refused to
stay silent.”

Lexa blinks.

A second later she *breaks*, sagging against the wall as her whole body gives over to... she’s not laughing, but it’s caught somewhere between that and a sob; great violent breaths that shake her shoulders.

“It’s not --” Clarke gets her mouth under control. “It’s really not funny.”

Lexa does laugh then, softly. There’s an edge of hysteria to it, and Clarke feels it as well when she folds forward to muffle her own laughter against her knees. If a few tears slip out as well, at least her face is hidden.

The moment passes, and when Clarke sits back up Lexa is on the floor with her long legs stretched out in front of her. She wears a small smile she looks at Clarke with almost helpless --

Lexa’s expression smooths out so quickly Clarke is startled, her awareness of what she just glimpsed fading like mist burned away by the rising sun. The Commander is no less intimidating sitting on the floor of a spare room than she is fully outfitted for battle, if she wishes, and right now Clarke knows exactly who she’s looking at.

“You still have information,” the Commander says. “Their numbers, their weapons, their leaders. You could tell me all of this.”

Clarke lowers her eyes to her lap.

“You would be rewarded for it,” Lexa continues quietly. “It won’t be seen as a traitorous act. Not... not after having spent so long with us. After being one of us.”

“I’m not one of you.” If she were, Lexa never would have --

“Your people discarded you. You said so yourself. They all but left you for dead.”
“No, it wasn’t... They were trying to give us -- give everyone a second chance.”


Clarke’s hands have spread across her bandages without her say-so, skin of her fingertips prickling against the soft cloth. “You locked me up. You let Gustus cut me open.”

When Lexa’s returning silence makes her look up, Clarke finds the other girl staring into space, gaze unfocused. “Yes, I did.”

“Why?” Clarke forces out. She doesn’t just mean the misunderstandings, the horrible logic of it, and they both know that.

“Because we are what we are.” Lexa leverages herself to her feet, still gazing off into the distance. “And that is who I am. Who I must be.”

“That’s it?” Clarke swallows past the tightness in her throat. “That’s all I get? After everything we...”

Lexa finally focuses on her, eyes cold. “After everything,” she repeats, “that you have seen, and everyone you have met -- you still refuse to side with me, and help me fight this war?”

“The people on the Ark are not your enemy.”

Lexa nods, once, as if Clarke has said something entirely different. “So we are at an impasse.”

The whole conversation is surreal. Not because she’s using her voice again for the first time in months. What used to be between them was warm, almost alive with its own energy. An understanding beyond words.

Every word they share now seems to build a wall, piece by piece, and the Lexa she knows is vanishing behind it.
Clarke wonders if Lexa feels the same: if she looks at Clarke and wonders where her wood witch has disappeared to.

~*~

Lexa wants Clarke back in her original room, the better to keep an eye on her now that her injuries on the mend. It’s a subject of low-voiced and furious debate between Lexa and Anya, one where Clarke can’t overhear the exact details. But she gathers Lexa has also been careful to hide the revelation of Clarke’s true identity outside of a small circle, and doesn’t want her ongoing absence from that part of the tower to arouse suspicion. Anya looks ready to spit fire by the end of their discussion, but otherwise vanquished. Clarke is nastily pleased to see Lexa’s bull-headedness can rear up against her beloved mentor as well.

Lexa doesn’t say her farewells. She appears done with Clarke, at least for the night. She busies herself talking to the unknown healer before leaving, and he gives her a pouch of some kind of dried herb -- Clarke can smell it from where she sits, and the scene tickles the faint memory of its purpose. Lexa turns and leaves without a look back.

Anya and Tris take Clarke back to her room. It’s all very discreet; they don’t lay a hand on her. Anyone watching would think they were extra protection, a thoughtfulness on Lexa’s part in the wake of Nia’s attack.

That is, Clarke thinks, as long as they didn’t look at Anya close enough to see the contempt in her eyes.

She doesn’t speak until Clarke is already through the doorway: “My instructions are to keep you contained.”

Clarke turns to look at Anya. She’s speaking in English. Not loud enough to be heard beyond the two of them, but the subtext is clear.

“However,” Anya resumes softly, holding the door open, “if I hear you even listening at the door, I might decide to honor my greater duty: the protection of my people.”

She holds Clarke’s gaze until the door is fully shut between them.
Clarke doesn’t bother to take off her boots. She sits on her bed -- it feels like a lifetime since she last slept in it -- with her arms around her knees.

And waits.

~*~

The hours until moonrise are strangely empty. She feels drained of thought, or emotion, staring out her window into the darkness as the moon climbs higher and higher into the sky. The only thing that grounds her in her own body is the pain of her healing wounds.

Whatever subconscious cue is at work, when it happens Clarke comes back to herself almost with a snap.

She takes her boots off. They’re worn and comfortable enough at this point they shouldn’t make too much noise, but Anya’s warning has her taking even more precautions.

She moves across the floor slowly, step by agonizing step. She coaxes the hidden door to the passageway open in stages, stopping every other second to strain for noise beyond the door to the corridor or some other warning that Anya or Tris have become suspicious.

She holds her breath until she’s light-headed, but finally, finally, she’s on the other side and in the passageway. She locks it from that end.

By the time Clarke has traveled the passageway and reached the door to Lexa’s rooms her heart beating so hard she can feel the pulse in her mouth,. She leans her head against this side of the door for a second, takes the moment to desperately try and calm her panicked breathing. It doesn’t work. Either she’s right, and she’s safe. Or she’s wrong, and...

Her hand is reaching to open the door before she can finish the thought.

It feels like time shudders to a halt as it swings open, but...
Lexa is asleep.

All the breath leaves Clarke’s body at once, and she can’t stop herself from sinking to the ground. The bag the healer gave Lexa sags open on a nearby table, its contents speckled across its surface. It’s a very potent herb used for sleep, one Clarke remembers using sparingly for patients in the worst kinds of pain. And Lexa -- Lexa is small and still, her face slack in a way Clarke has never seen. She won’t wake up.

And part of Clarke wonders, as she drags herself upright, what battles Lexa has been fighting that kept her sleepless.

Not her problem. Not unless it has to do with -- no, she can’t afford to worry about how things might be progressing at the Ark. Not yet.

Her witch clothes are where they’re usually kept. She was afraid Lexa might have ripped them up, or had them burned, but maybe she was being economical and keeping Clarke’s inevitable replacement in mind. They’re crumpled, instead of in their usual neat folds. Not that she’s bothered at this point.

She changes quickly. She keeps her eyes on the figure in the bed as often as she can, but Lexa is dead to the world.

Clarke’s legs still shake as she comes closer and closer to the bed. Her eyes burn from keeping them open, trained on Lexa for even the slightest twitch of muscle. When Lexa sighs a little Clarke freezes in place, stays there without breathing for sixty counts of her pounding heart.

It shouldn’t feel like... It should be easier, by now. The healing cuts on her arms, Lexa’s words when they last spoke, it should all make opening the drawer and taking out the pot of gold paint feel like something she is owed.

Her fingers are too trembly to hold the brush steady, and there’s no mirror she can see. It’s easier to use her fingertips, trace the paint along her temples and eyelids from the memory of how it felt rather than what it looked like.

She twists the pot closed, after, and as she looks down at it her grip only tightens.
She *is* owed.

Clarke shoves it deep into her one pocket, a pouch sewn into the waistline of her skirt. The pot bumps up against her thigh when she walks, but its outline isn’t visible against the fabric.

She has... it isn’t even an idea, it’s an impulse. She grabs the brush, the ivory handle slick against her sweating palm, and walks swiftly over to the side of Lexa’s bed.

There’s a feeling of terrible violence inside her as she looks down at the sleeping inhabitant. An instant which balances on a knife’s point, taking in the steady rise and fall of Lexa’s breath, her hair curling across her pillow. The shadows moving across her face, and living just under her eyes.

("Because we are what we are.")

... she doesn’t have time for this.

It’s like reaching inside her to find a switch: she looks down at Lexa, breathes in the sight of her, put her finger on the pulse of her surging emotion -- and turns it off.

Clarke puts the paintbrush on the mattress, inches from where Lexa’s hand is resting with fingers spread loosely. When she steps back, she feels something wrench.

She feels so empty afterwards she can practically hear her thoughts echo.

It allows her to turn around and walk away.

~*~

The guards don’t even blink when she walks out of Lexa’s rooms. Every inch of her skin is raw with anxiety and anticipation, her mind is nothing but white noise with the certainty that someone will reach out and grab her, or shout...
None of that happens, but she’s so preoccupied with the possibility she walks a good ten feet down the wrong corridor before the sound of Anya’s voice freezes her mid-step. Clarke turns, shaking, and tries to make as little noise as possible as she beats a retreat.

She feels almost numb by the time she reaches the cartographers’ rooms, like her overloaded system has just decided to stop relaying back the messages of sensation. She’s not sure if it’s colder or warmer in this part of the tower, and the sweep of her skirt with each step has faded out of her awareness. When the guards at the doors automatically move to block her progress, only to check themselves at the sight of the paint around her eyes, the only thing she’s really aware of is the stinging cuts on her arms and back.

*I’m owed this.*

The cartographers’ rooms are almost empty, their supplies and works in progress tidied away for the day. She takes a candle from storage and lights it using the banked embers of one of the braziers positioned around the room -- it’s easier to stoke them into fires in the early morning this way, and the bags of sand weighing down each base also serve as rudimentary fire prevention. It’s all the light she needs to find Sharla’s workstation and rifle through its contents. Sharla was working on things besides the maps of the territory where the Ark landed, but Clarke doesn’t have time to parse them. She grabs up whatever partial drafts and sketches of legends she can find, balls them up in her fist until the papers are creased and folded beyond saving.

*It doesn’t matter. They’re not what she’s really here for.*

She’s only been in the map room before with Lexa. It connects with the cartographers’ room, but they have little reason to go into it on a regular basis. The braziers inside have been allowed to die down to grey ash, and it takes some coaxing with Clarke’s candle to bring the one closest to a window back to life. The cold air from outside at first threatens, and then happily feeds the growing flame, until Clarke can toss the contents of Sharla’s desk on top without fear of it being smothered.

She watches the papers brown and then burn, limned in red just before they’re eaten away by flame. There’s kindling and logs stored in the base of each brazier, and Clarke feeds this to her new fire carefully before turning around to survey the room.

The fire gives more than enough light for her to blow out her candle. It’s not bright, but its glow touches the far corners of the room. Clarke has a sickening moment where she remembers the glow in Lexa’s eyes when she first showed it to Clarke, the way she touched the hanging maps and dioramas lightly, almost reverently. Clarke has seen her gifted in audiences with rich fabrics, precious metals, even jewels. She’s heard them promise Lexa tributes: teams of horses, the choicest selection from the harvest. She never saw Lexa look as pleased by mere possessions as when she stood in her map room, surrounded by the riches here.
Clarke pushes the memory down into the dark, roiling waters of her mind like she’s drowning it.

She knows where the maps she wants are kept. She’s seen them taken down and put away often enough, when Lexa was planning the initial campaign against the Ark. Copies were made to be used in the field -- she helped Sharla make them -- but these are the originals, reproductions of the terrain with breathtaking detail, delicacy, and skill. It hurts, just under her ribcage, to fold them up into a size she can slip underneath the bodice of her witch clothes, but at least the top is tight enough to keep them from falling out and the shawl will conceal any telling lumps. She fits one down her back and two more under her breasts: the territories around the Mountain, the greater view of the Woods Clan, and Azgeda.

She could leave, now. She has what she wanted.

She doesn’t.

Instead she goes from table to table where the models are displayed, and ruins them. She can’t throw them to the floor, not without arousing the suspicion from the guards outside, but: she crumbles forests of fir trees into dust under her palms, rips up rivers and lakes with her fingernails, flattens hills into plains with soft fists, scratches away snow and ice until it falls away in flakes she can crush beneath her feet. From the trickles running down her arms and back she knows a few of her stitches must have broken; she doesn’t care.

Next she goes for the flat maps. She doesn’t have time for all of them. But she remembers which ones Lexa showed her specially, those first commissioned when she became Commander, or the first ones of territories other than Woods Clan. The maps that show Lexa’s long and demanding rise to her current state of rule. Clarke remembers how Lexa’s voice softened, talking about what they meant to her: markers of memory in a culture with no written records.

Their protective coating makes them harder to burn, but Clarke is nothing if not determined. She feeds them into the flames one by one, watching as the open window sucks away the acrid smoke and tosses it into the cloudy night. And she feels nothing, nothing -- just a deep calm at the center of her.

~*~
It’s the same down at the stables: Clarke thinks they would have given her Storm regardless, since the stable master commanded it, but the paint on her face means they bring the horse out ready to be ridden in double-time. The fact she takes a long riding cloak and bag of foodstuffs out of supplies seems to make them a little calmer. A wood witch out riding in the middle of the night is strange, but this one is clearly on a mission of some sort.

And she is. She just hasn’t been given orders by the person they’re all assuming.

She has a moment.

It’s at the top of the hills, just before she enters the thicket of the orchards. She’s not leaving by the city gates -- it feels like tempting fate, and maybe it will confuse them once they figure out she’s escaped. This also brings her to the southern road faster.

From here she can see Polis as clearly as if she were looking down at another map. The marketplace is all closed up and still for the night, the houses and buildings beyond are dark. The tower is the brightest source of light, sporadic windows glinting with life and the business that never stops there, no matter what time of night. Slowly, slowly, she lets her eyes travel up its length to the topmost room. Those windows are dark so that its inhabitant can enjoy the rest that, apparently, escapes her.

*You have to go,* Clarke tells herself.

It’s still another minute before she can force her hands to pull on the reins and direct Storm on their way.

~*~

She has a few hours’ head start -- she figures eight, at most. She uses it. She rides Storm incredibly hard, taking the horse over rougher paths and unknown trails, hoping that will confuse anyone in pursuit. She’s forced to take a break at some point to let Storm recover, but Clarke doesn’t sleep. She knows once she allows herself to feel it her arms and back will be nothing but pain, and the rest of her body one deep ache. But she can’t relax, not yet, and she spends the downtime straining to hear the sound of hoofbeats following them.

There are grain cakes in the bag from the stables and she forces one down. Storm doesn’t share her trouble eating and chomps through half her supply, with a look in her eye that says *you owe me so*
big for Clarke. Once there’s enough room Clarke stores the stolen maps inside the bag as well.

She knows they’re spotted by Woods Clan scouts as they near the Ark. Her skin prickles with the feeling of eyes on her as they draw closer. She keeps waiting to be stopped, until she realizes: they have no idea what to do. What with Anya and Lexa away from camp, there’s no set procedure for a single rider wearing the paint that makes her the Commander’s favorite riding into the enemy’s camp.

But at some point even the strangest circumstances demand a response, and she can tell the moment they start to stir themselves, the gathering rustle around her of forces marshalling, coordinating.

Clarke presses her face against Storm’s neck in mute apology before urging her even faster, demanding that remaining bit of the animal’s energy. The horse complies, muscles gathering for one last burst of speed.

She thinks they’re probably safe from Lexa’s warriors as soon as they break through the treeline, but that’s when a gunshot cracks through the air and kicks up the dirt not too far from their feet.

Storm is too well-trained to go into a full rear, but she dances for a seconds, Clarke clinging with whatever she has left to the reins. Another gunshot, and she yanks her hood off.

“Stop!” she calls up at the Ark. Its fallen form is like a collapsed monster sprawling across the Earth. They’ve erected a crude wall and gates to contain it, and two figures patrol this side with their heads wrapped up to cut down on the sun’s glare. One of them must have shot at her.

She pulls the neck of her clothing -- Grounder clothing, Grounder colors, and she’s wearing Grounder paint -- even looser, trying to bare as much of her head as possible. “My name is Clarke Griffin. I’m from Alpha Station. I want to speak to the Chancellor.”

Who might be her mother. She hasn’t forgotten that little tidbit, she just hasn’t had time to process --

“Clarke?”

And this is what nearly undoes her, after everything. The sound of a voice she hadn’t dreamed, or dared hope, that she might be mistaken in thinking she would never hear again. “Wells?” She can only force out a whisper at first, and then a scream: “Wells?”
But he’s already clambering down from the ramparts. “Open the gate!” she can hear him yelling. “It’s Clarke, open the gate!”

Everything blurs, then, and she doesn’t remember walking Storm through the gate or how it closed behind them. Only seeing Wells reaching for her, once safely inside, and how she nearly falls off the horse in her eagerness to meet him. As soon as she’s out of the saddle the past few days descend on her like an avalanche: she can feel every bruise, every sore, every pull of her stitches. Wells’s arms go around her and her knees buckle at the pain, but she clings to him. The people who gather at the sight of their reunion aren’t immediately familiar, but their dark and worn clothing is. The way they carry themselves is: a little hunched and uneasy, like people used to confined spaces instead of the vast and open sky. Even if she’s never seen Arkers looking this gaunt, their desperation is nothing new. Or their fear. Or their distrust.

Clarke closes her eyes and gives herself up to Wells’s protective embrace.

She’s home.

Chapter End Notes

1. So, I know no one is going to believe me, but I actually wrote the spitting scene way, way back in the fall of 2015. That and the scene just after were the first things I ever wrote for this story and some of the first scenes I ever did for this pairing. I remember wondering if it was taking it too far, and then with 3x02 thinking: “Well, I guess I got their dynamic right.”

2. Anya was not joking. Lexa knew she was not joking, because every time they asked
Lexa what she wanted served for dinner Anya suggested a recipe that used tongue. Anya got shot down and chewed out for her trouble every time -- “Are you Heda now, to answer for me?”/ “Perhaps I will eat yours if you can’t keep it in your head.”/ “Anya, I don’t even like tongue, you know that.” -- but she didn’t care. Because somewhere around the fifth suggested recipe (tongue braised in wine with winter berries), Lexa smiled. Small, grudging, more anger than anything, but there. And that’s more than Anya saw since she told Lexa who the yellow-haired bitch really was.

3. These past three chapters took a really unexpected emotional toll on me, considering I’ve been anticipating the events in them from day one. It’s not a bad thing, but I feel... wiped out. Like I need to go and focus entirely on something else for a while so that I can come back to this story and be ready and refreshed for what’s ahead (and we still have a ways to go).

I realize this may be disappointing, especially if you’re not especially interested in the other stuff I post here. But hey, needs must, and right now what I need is to go write something where Clexa are sappy and sweet. And together. So, I’ll meet you back here when that’s done. (No, no idea, but don’t expect me earlier than June.)

You can find me at entirelytookeen on tumlr, where I am very ridiculous but (mostly) open to asks about updates.
“Where were you?” Wells wrenches free of their embrace. He doesn’t go far, placing his hands on her shoulders and shaking her. Clarke bites her lip against the pain and puts her own hands over his, not wanting him to stop being real. “Do you know what we went through trying to look for you? We thought you were dead, Clarke. Where did you go?”

“I got lost,” Clarke whispers. It’s such a small phrase to encompass what happened -- all that happened -- but it works. On every level. “I couldn’t find my way back to the dropship. I walked and walked, and then my wristband died --”

“Bellamy,” Wells says darkly. “He’s got a lot to make up for. But it’s okay, he knows it. Clarke, it’s been months -- where have you been?” He doesn’t let go, but he steps back to take her in properly. “You even look like one of them. You look exactly like --” He reaches for her face.

And then stops.

He turns his hand so that the light better illuminates the blood on his fingertips, his eyes going wide.

“Shit,” he breathes, and looks back at her face. “Clarke, what happened to you?”

But she doesn’t have enough left in her to respond. She doesn’t have anything left, and she’s only distantly aware that Wells catches her when her body sags to the ground. Her mind has already faded to a grey and gratefully empty nothingness.

It’s not like the other times, when she woke up confused. Even before she opens her eyes she knows exactly where she is. The smells and sounds of the Ark infirmary are one of the constants of her life.
Or they used to be.

The lights are dimmer than she's used to. Must be on auxiliary power. There can’t be much left in the generators, what with the ozone layer between them and the direct light of the sun. It’s quieter, too. Not as many machines running. And the low, steady thrum that used to permeate the ship, the feeling of all the biosystems and air filters and the engine running constantly -- that’s gone.

The Ark used to feel alive, and now...

Wells is sitting next to her bed, hunched over a datapad. From the steady movement of his eyes, she guesses he’s reading a book.

“Watership Down?” Her voice is scratchy.

Wells jumps a little before focusing on her. After a pause: “I guess I’m pretty predictable.”

You used to be. “You said it made you feel calmer.”

“Yeah, well.” He tosses the pad onto a countertop. “I figure I should take advantage of it while I can.”

Clarke looks down at her hand. There’s an IV drip taped to her wrist.

“I’m under orders not to let you remove that. I’m sure your mom will, you know, if you ask. But she doesn’t want you getting out of bed without her knowing.” He hunches further, lacing his fingers together. “I’m supposed to let her know when you wake up.”

Clarke examines him from the vantage point of her pillow. He isn’t meeting her eyes -- not directly, he’ll look at her and them flick his gaze away, nervous. Or guilty? His jaw is in a familiar stubborn set.

He never acted nervous, or guilty, before. He had no trouble meeting her eyes when she screamed at
him for betraying her father to his death.

Her anger burned itself long ago, back when she’d thought he’d died with the rest on the dropship. All that’s left now is what she never allowed herself to look at too closely, the thing that was hidden beneath her pain and searing grief:

Doubt.

“Are you going to call her in?” Clarke asks, watching his face for something, anything, that would explain the outlier of Wells -- Wells -- going behind her back to the Council. He’d never done anything like that. He’d ream her out up one side and down the other, he’d push and pull and poke her to confess, but he never forced her hand.

Maybe it was different with so many lives on the line. Maybe the knowledge she’d been so set in her decision, the awareness of no time to waste, had made him act out of character. Those were the arguments she told herself in solitary.

Maybe.

“Yes.” Still not looking at her. “I just thought you might want a minute.”

It never made any sense. But it had to be him. He was the only person Clarke had told about her father’s discovery.

“She’d be here already, of course,” he continues. “But she has Council business.”

Memory pricks at her. “Is she really Chancellor, now?”

She’s surprised, but not too much. Abby Griffin had always been more than a little ruthless when the situation demanded it.

... the only person Clarke told.
“Yeah,” Wells says. A muscle in his jaw jumps.

And Clarke knows.

“Oh,” she says, and her voice sounds small, even to her own ears. “Oh.”

Hating Wells kept her sane in solitary. She could spin herself a story: he’d finally, finally found a way to prove himself to his father. To show he deserved to be Thelonious’s son. It didn’t make any real sense, but neither did anything, anymore. Her father had been killed for trying to save everyone. She’d been thrown in prison for trying to speak the truth. Given all that, what was her best and only friend becoming an enemy?

But the cracks in that reasoning had appeared with Wells on the dropship, his promises to stick by her. None of that fit. The cracks widened with every time he had her back, until Clarke hated him even harder in self-defense. Because some part of her must have known what she would see when the facade crumbled to dust.

Clarke sits up, stomach roiling. Blackness veils her vision for a second, and she feels the cup against her lips before she focuses and sees Wells standing to hold it to her mouth.

“Dehydration’s the worst of it,” he says as she swallows the water. “You’ve got all those cuts, but they’re not even infected.” He waits until she finishes and puts the cup down, so he’s not looking at her when he says: “You gonna tell us where those came from?”

“I was attacked. I was under the protection of someone important, and they tried to hurt me to hurt her.” If she wants to broker some kind of treaty between her people and the Grounders, she probably shouldn’t lead with torture. And of course it’s not an outright lie, or even untrue, but the look Wells gives her says she hasn’t gotten better at deceiving him after all this time.

Doesn’t matter. It was always good enough for everyone else.

“Okay.” He picks up his datapad and drums his fingers against it. “I’ll... tell them you’re up.” He steels himself a bit. “I know you don’t want to hear it from me, but I’m glad you’re alive. I’m glad you’re back.” He turns.

“Wells.” When he looks back the words dry up. She opens and closes her mouth, trying to find what
words could bridge the gap of... “You let me hate you.”

He understands instantly. His eyelids flutter and his whole body sags, like he’s letting go of an impossible weight. “Yeah.”

“Why?” her voice cracks.

“I didn’t know what you thought until you accused me on the dropship. And then, I don’t know, screaming the truth as we descended to our possible deaths didn’t seem like the best time.”

“But after?”

Wells sighs. “You guys were happy,” he says after a moment. “A real family. You’d already lost your dad, and... You know, I used to be jealous of you? You didn’t always get along with your parents, but it was better than...” He grimaces. “A piece of me felt guilty, maybe, for wishing you knew how good you had it. And I. I guess I knew you’d figure it out eventually.”

And if he could give her that much longer of not hating her mother, he would. He doesn’t have to say that out loud.

“I’m sorry,” she says, already crying.

“No.” He shakes his head. “Clarke. I’m sorry. I’m just -- so sorry.”

She doesn’t know if she reaches out, or he steps to her, but somehow they end up hugging. It doesn’t bring her dad back or make Abby less of a murderer. It doesn’t erase the last few months or ease the long road ahead. But a small, cold corner of her soul feels good again, to have her best friend back.

Wells rubs her back, careful of her cuts, and whispers: “Welcome to the unhappy families club.” Clarke just clutches at him harder.

~ * ~
Her mom shows up soon after that.

“Clarke,” she chokes out as soon as she crosses the threshold. She moves in, puts her arms around Clarke. It’s awkward. Clarke can’t remember the last time she hugged her mom, and now it feels...

Abby is crying as she pulls back, smoothing the hair away from Clarke’s face. “Hi, baby.”

The anger in Clarke is hot, and dark, and thick as ground fog. It sits at her sternum with a weight she would swear is physical. Her cheeks prickle with the urge to open her mouth and start screaming.

Just as her lips part, she remembers.

They’d been in meetings for almost a full day; up before dawn in order to squeeze in all the different parties involved, so that each felt they had enough time and individual audience with... They barely had time for breakfast, lunch had been bolted between sessions, and Clarke had been tired, because by meeting number three it’d been obvious how many people were lying to them about this border dispute. They were lying, hoping this appearance of unresolved conflict would force... someone... to bribe at least one party into complacency. They probably planned to split the windfall as they went on sharing the land like always, and the sheer, outrageous, insulting hypocrisy was enough to make her --

And then the person sitting next to her in those awful meetings had slipped slim fingers around her wrist in a light hold. Clarke had caught herself, slowed her breathing. She as aware -- they both were -- that knowing, and not being known, was the greatest power of any situation.

She can almost feel the pressure now around her wrist. She can guess the words that come with it: *Wait. Listen. Watch.*

She can be angry. Or she can be smart.

“Hi, Mom,” she rasps.

Abby’s mouth wobbles. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry. If we’d known where you were -- that you were alive -- we would have never stopped until we had you back.”
Wells filled her in as as quick as he could before hitting the button that called Abby, promising to go into detail once they could talk in private. She has the basics: except for a few, every soul that came down in the dropship has gone missing. Wells and the others searched for them but were captured by Grounders. They were questioned about their presence in Woods Clan territory -- and about where the rest of their number had gone. They only escaped because one of the Grounders guarding them fell in love with Octavia: crazy love, the kind that inspired boring, Earth Before-style plays where everyone talked too much and then died stupidly. Octavia’s Grounder had freed them and then swore that her people were his people. Although to hear Wells tell it, Octavia was only waiting for relations to improve with the Grounders to swear off anything and everything Arker. “She’s gone pretty native,” were his exact words.

Clarke has made the conscious decision not to have any opinions or... feelings, about that situation.

Anyway.

From the questions posed to them, they realized the Ark must have also landed. They’d managed to make it back to safety and explain everything that had happened since they’d been launched with the dropship.

Only no one believes them.

“Mom,” as Clarke struggles to sit up, “we need to talk about the Grounders.”

“Do you know where the others are being held?” Abby asks. “Did you see them? There haven’t been any demands or ransom messages, but with you back there’s hope they might still be alive --”

“Mom. None of the kids from the dropship were captured by Grounders. I don’t know where they went, but the Grounders don’t have them.”

Abby sits back, her mouth in a disappointed pinch. “Oh, Clarke.”

There’s a flutter of panic in her stomach. She has to remember not to act too excited, or eager, or -- what was that thing in their textbooks called? When a captive starts defending their captor.
Yeah, she can’t be that.

Clarke takes a moment to take a deep, calming breath. “I’m not saying they’re not a threat. But I was living... in the same building as their leader, and I overheard things all the time. She had no idea where the Arkers from the dropship disappeared to. It worried her, too.”

“We know they’re a threat,” Abby says dryly, ignoring the rest. “They’ve kept us penned in since the first few days after we landed. They shot Callie full of arrows -- she’s fine, but it was a shock. Finding out there were people living on the Earth was... if only they weren’t all war-hungry savages. They speak English, but they can’t be reasoned with.”

“You’ve met with them?” Clarke asks, heart banging away in her chest. “Who?”

“Several of them in a contingent, but they all deferred to a very fierce young woman who wasn’t much older than you. Onna. No... Onya.”

“Anya.” Clarke’s mouth is dry. Anya definitely wouldn’t leave the best impression.

“We were supposed to meet their true leader, or, their version of a Chancellor -- another young woman, I’m told? I suppose we should be grateful they haven’t regressed completely. But she never showed up, and they never told us why not.”

Because an assassin had tried to carve Lexa’s heart out from under her rib cage, and Anya had sent her back to Polis to be patched up. Clarke had never thought about the timing before -- attacks on Lexa’s life came and went, didn’t they? Is she reading too much into it, now, or had someone actually tried to keep the Arkers and the Grounders from meeting and coming to terms?

“Things didn’t go well with Anya,” Clarke prompts, because of course they didn’t. Anya is loyal and intelligent, but she’s not Lexa -- she looks for hidden agendas, not solutions. She doesn’t get creative.

“She refused to believe we weren’t allied with -- Clarke, did you know there are survivors in Mount Weather as well? But they’re totally different. They’re like us. Except they suffer from terrible radiation poisoning from sunlight, no genetic tolerance. It's amazing.”

“Yeah.” That was the sickness she’d heard about so long ago, in the throne room at -- “Wait,” she says slowly. “How do you know that? I heard you told them you weren’t allied with the Mountain.”
“We weren’t.” Abby’s eyes are hard. “Then.”

~*~

Abby Griffin as Chancellor.

Brave new world.

She promises there’s no set alliance in place with the leaders of Mount Weather -- not yet. And Clarke will be given a chance to speak to the Council about her experience with the Grounders as soon as she feels well enough. They are, officially, still deciding what their next move will be.

“But it doesn’t seem to be much of a choice, Clarke,” Abby warns her, helping her out of the infirmary bed and unhooking her IV. “Between the Mountain that welcomed and celebrated us, and the barbarians laying siege to the castle, so to speak? It will take a lot of convincing to make them believe your Grounders have anything to offer.”

She wants to keep Clarke in the infirmary overnight, but Clarke puts her foot down. She’d been imprisoned in a small room for too long this week already. She wants... too much to tell. But mostly to go home. So Abby lets her go back to the suite of rooms officially owned by the Griffin family, and promises she’ll be back there herself later in the evening.

It’s so strange to come back. It’s been over a year, but their home is just how she left it. Well, no that’s not true. It looks like a giant picked it up, shook it, and dashed most of the contents over his shoulder -- the effect of the Ark’s rocky landing. Someone has swept most of the debris into tidy piles, at least

Their entertainment system didn’t survive the crash. Another memento of memories with her father, gone. Along with most pictures.

She doesn’t want to think about that. She just wants to wash off the last few days.
Happily, she can. Abby told Clarke they were lucky the water purification/recycling system was only minimally damaged -- in between missing teenagers, antagonistic natives, and adapting to becoming earthbound, at least they still have some smaller creature comforts.

Clarke steps inside the shower and it’s second nature to pull in her elbows, minding the confines of the cramped space. The hard, lukewarm spray is exactly what she remembers from the first seventeen years of her life: slightly scouring, and especially effective with the antibacterial additive. It’s over quickly -- they haven’t dismantled the conservation measures.

Seventeen years. Seventeen years should be bulwark against a few months. There’s no reason for her to be thinking of pleasantly scalding water refreshed with steaming pitchers, lying back and breathing in aromatic herbs. Sticking her toes out of the opaque water and wriggling them so she could hear laughter from the other end of the room as L--

She shakes herself free of the memory with violence and wraps the rough towel around her. Ark showers worlds better than nothing at all, as she painfully remembers from the first days on the ground, and she’s especially grateful for them considering she’s still healing. Clarke squares her shoulders: she should probably look at the damage for herself.

There’s a small mirror in her room, always has been. Now it has a crack clear across from one corner to the other, but otherwise it’s intact. Clarke has to twist around a bit to see what she wants, in the low overhead light, but all in all...

... actually, it looks pretty bad. Worse than it feels. Probably because Gustus was aiming for a lot of pain without creating lasting damage, but he covered a lot of ground.

She’s surprised she can look at the red slices cobwebbing across her arms and shoulders and think about it so coolly. She still has her anger. She can feel it, banked and sleeping. But it’s almost like there’s no room for it, in these tiny rooms and low-ceilinged corridors of the Ark. Not here. Not yet.

And she really is glad there isn’t any deeper damage. Her arms barely twinge as she combs her fingers through her wet hair. They snag on something that doesn’t yield, and wincing, Clarke brings the tangle out from behind her ear to better pick it apart.

It’s not a tangle. It’s a braid.

Clarke has a bad couple of seconds: her stomach swoops as she remembers... She closes her eyes
and breathes, in and out, until she can open them and look again. Without screaming.

Funny how it hasn’t come loose or washed out by this point, she manages to think calmly. Advanced Grounder braiding knowledge. Oh well.

She pushes down... whatever’s in danger of rearing up inside her... and feels along the length of it for the knot where it was tied off.

She can’t find it.

She could cut it off.

Clarke has a mental image of finding a dull knife or a pair of scissors and ripping through the same strands slim fingers wove together with such care. Or shearing it off at the root, leaving it limp and lifeless in her hand. Again, nausea washes over her.

... she’s such an idiot.

But even knowing and acknowledging that, she prefers to turn away from the mirror as she climbs into a set of her old clothes. They don’t fit well -- they’re looser around the waist, tighter in the shoulders and thighs. But the real source of her discomfort is the imagined tingling sensation of her scalp, just behind her ear, where she’s shoved the thin braid back under her hair.

~*~

It’s late for evening meal. But even the small number of Arkers on the mess deck -- no, they’re not in orbit and never will be again, she should start calling it a cafeteria -- seem uncomfortable with her presence. They start and stare when she enters, and even if she can’t feel their eyes on her back she can hear the swell of whispers every time she turns around.

And it’s too small in here. Too close. Too dark. No wide windows to let the light of the moon or stars in, no candles burning. Suddenly Clarke knows if she doesn’t get out, she’s going to have a panic attack.
She grabs the food off her tray and hustles through the corridors, ignoring the attention she draws as she passes. She always had their attention -- she was Abby’s daughter, Wells’s friend, people liked her father -- but this is different. This is as if --

Stop it, she tells herself once she’s finally outside, drawing the chill night air into her lungs. Of course you belong here. This is your home.

Clarke readjusts her grip on her food and focuses on finding somewhere to eat in peace.

When the Ark landed it half-buried itself in the earth. The kickup has since settled, and Clarke supposes there was an effort to pack dirt down instead of trying to clear it free, just so they didn’t have to worry about further shifts or slides as they set up the rest of the compound. The end result looks as if the wreckage had always been rooted to the soil -- had grown from it.

Which will only make it harder to pack up and move, if someone decides not to cede this particular piece of their territory, something whispers in the back of her mind.

They’ve rigged weak and flickering lights to allow them to patrol the wall at night. She doesn’t like it: it makes everything just outside their reach that much darker and more impenetrable. Clarke swallows down the impulse to go over to the guards and explain it, tell them about the surprising brightness of moonlight and starlight and how their eyes can adjust, given time.

She ends up in one of the darkest corners of the courtyard still enclosed in the wall. She isn’t surprised to find Octavia and her Grounder -- what did Wells say his name was, oh, Lincoln -- there was well. She knows him by not knowing him, since his is the only face that doesn’t look even vaguely familiar. And because, well, they’re sparring.

But very, very gently. It’s nothing like the all-out roughhousing she remembers between Lexa and the spectators at the infirmary, or the less complex but still lightning-quick practice of growing nightbloods. Lincoln will assume a stance and give an order and Octavia will follow through with an attack. Lincoln has no trouble countering her, but from the number of repetitions he puts Octavia through, Clarke guesses the point is to build up her muscles, and muscle memory, rather than simulating a real fight.

For all his gentleness, he’s not going easy on her. Octavia follows his instruction again, and again, and again, and just when she seems about to tire Lincoln switches her to a slightly different position or angle and starts over again.
It’s not very interesting to watch, but it’s soothing. Even the cold and the dark are less unnerving than the stillness and silence of the Ark. Clarke settles down with her meal: a vacuum-sealed pouch which was dehydrated from fresh anywhere from a few months to a few years ago and now reconstituted with water. It’s not the best the Ark facilities have to offer, but it’s a familiar option from whenever they try to conserve power, usually during cycles when the bulk of the Earth blocked their solar panels from the direct light of the sun. She’s eaten meals like this -- exactly like this -- thousands and thousands of times. She’s not sure why it feels so… off.

Until she’s able to identify the odd aftertaste of minerals. Groundwater.

She has a flash of cool water and a warm hand pressed to her lips, the sound of rain just beyond the window --

Clarke pushes the memory away, and what’s left of her meal with it.

Clarke has to give Octavia credit: Lincoln is the one who puts a stop to the exercises, even though when Octavia comes to sit beside Clarke she’s sweating and breathing hard.

“Princess isn’t too pleased with the new castle?” Octavia asks, raising an eyebrow.

Clarke shrugs. The nickname used to sting, although she was always careful not to show it. She’s surprised to find it doesn’t hurt anymore. Maybe because now it no longer feels even the littlest bit true.

Lincoln is going through exercises on his own, quicker and surer than when he squared off with Octavia. There’s a beautiful fluidity, familiarity, to his form that makes the back of Clarke’s throat ache.

“Sorry,” Octavia says after a second. “Force of habit.” She draws a deep breath, and Clarke sees her hands flex out of the corner of her eye. “Lincoln says I need to learn to evaluate, and then strike.”

“He’s a good teacher.”

“I --” Clarke can almost feel Octavia rein it in. “Yeah.”
“Are you going to go with him and be Trikru when this is all over?” Clarke knows the English name for it, but the real one is... it feels closer to the essence of the meaning.

Octavia starts. “Wow, you really were with them all this time. I didn’t think otherwise,” she rushes to assure Clarke, “Wells told about how you came back. I just, it’s weird.” She frowns to herself. “You must have been through a lot.” She shakes off the thoughtfulness and finally answers: “Yeah, guess. I mean, it’s not like I really have a place here. Even after everything.”

“They expect a lot from their warriors. You’ll be starting from a disadvantage. But,” as Octavia opens her mouth, “they give a lot of chances.” She thinks of the apprentices bringing her food and water when she wouldn’t get out of bed, their patience when she didn’t understand their language or way of life. “If you show you’re willing to work for it.” The ache is back. Clarke clears her throat.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s what Lincoln says.” Octavia combs her fingers through her hair with a half-smile Clarke doesn’t think she’s conscious of wearing, her gaze turned back to the figure practicing in their corner of the courtyard. His movements are so quick Clarke can hear the quiet wfff of air resistance when he swings his fists. When she looks back at Octavia the other girl has pulled out a long braid from her mass of dark hair, holding the end to her lips like a secret.

When Octavia catches Clarke looking, she actually blushes.

“I guess you know what this means, too,” she says, wagging the braid at Clarke before tucking it back into her hair. She bites at her lip but it doesn’t stop the smile spreading over her face.

“Yeah. I. Yeah.” Clarke’s heart is beating fast. She pulls out the skinny braid from behind her ear, barely thicker than a lock of hair. “I need to, um. Undo this.”

Octavia’s jaw drops.

“Can you help? I can’t figure out how.” The other girl is still staring, and panic begins to boil up from Clarke's gut as she whispers: “Octavia, please.”

Octavia immediately reaches out. “Okay.” Her fingers are gentle on the braid, and if Clarke cared to think about it -- which she doesn’t -- she thinks that might be pity in the other girl’s voice. “It’ll be okay, Clarke.”
Clarke closes her eyes and feels the tugs against her scalp as Octavia examines it. It’ll all be over in a second. No, it’s over anyhow, this is just. Closure.

But: “Um.”

Clarke opens her eyes to a noticeably rueful Octavia, even in the dim light of the courtyard. “I’m sorry, I can’t... is it okay if I ask Lincoln to help?”

Clarke should say no. Go back to her room, find her scissors. Get it over with.

She nods.

Octavia waves, and Lincoln starts to walk over to them. “There are lots of ways to secure a braid,” Octavia explains. “People develop their own styles and flourishes, a combination of knots they use in their own hair? So when they braid someone else’s hair, people know who did those braids. Because they’ve seen it before. Right?” she asks as Lincoln comes close enough to hear.

He nods and smiles at her. It’s not showy, but there’s such obvious pride on his face, Clarke has to look away.

“Clarke can’t get a braid undone, and we’re all feeling awkward about it,” Octavia tells him brightly.

Lincoln shakes his head as he sits on his heels. “There’s no dishonor in dissolving a union.” His English is beautifully precise, just like... “Love is a gift that passes from hand to hand.” He touches Clarke’s shoulder lightly, the better to angle her toward the low light as he moves her hair aside. “It’s only natural if --”

He stops.

Clarke shuts her eyes again. Stupid. Stupid. She should have guessed.

When she looks at him his eyes are incredibly wide, his hand still frozen between them as he looks at
the braid now laying over her shoulder.

“What?” Octavia looks between them, reaches out to clutch Lincoln’s arm. “What’s wrong?”

Her tongue still feels clumsy and thick when she does this, but she’s not sure she can bear Octavia understanding when she asks Lincoln, “You know the Commander?” in his native language.

Octavia jumps, but the words relax Lincoln. His arm drops down by his side, and he schools his expression as he replies in the same language: “A little. I knew Costia better.”

And that’s when all the blood drains from his expression and he looks at her, and Clarke knows, she knows what’s coming, even before he breathes out: “Wood witch.”

~*~

“Stories travel fast,” Lincoln begins, later, when they’re sitting in the mess deck. Cafeteria. The night outside took a turn for the colder, and the look in Lincoln’s eyes had left Clarke with the shivers. Octavia was unnerved as well, so no one had objected to moving back inside.

They still have privacy. Everyone gives the three of them a wide berth. Clarke take note of those that throw them -- throw Lincoln -- the unhappiest looks as they walk past.

“Especially stories about the Commander,” Lincoln adds, and Clarke brings her attention back to him. He has both forearms on the acrylic tabletop, looking down at his large hands. He’s even taller than most Grounders, but among Akers the contrast of his vitality, his strength, feels almost perverse. Clarke had been too busy trying to stay alive when she first discovered there were survivors on Earth to get much farther beyond that, but she wonders, now, what it must be like for the others on the Ark -- first to know not everyone had died, and then to see how some of them had thrived. Did they look at Lincoln’s height and think of the low ceilings and cramped spaces they’d lived with? Did they see the bulk of his muscle and think about the limited meal portions, or how generations had lived and died on the Ark without tasting anything fresh and growing?

How much of that unhappiness, their clear distrust, was rooted in envy?
“So, what,” Octavia says, impatient with the slowness of this reveal. “Clarke spent the past few months with with the leader of all the Grounders? And no one suspected who you were?” she directs this last question to Clarke.

Clarke shifts in her seat on the long bench across from them. “There wasn’t any reason to.”

“Your clothes,” Octavia says, as if she’s stupid.

“I had different ones by then.” She circles her wrist with her fingers where her father’s watch used to be. Will she ever get a chance to go back and retrieve it? “I was, um, taken in by a bunch of kids. They dressed me in cast-offs from the village so I would be warmer.”

Octavia’s frown deepens. “They knew about us, though. Why didn’t they connect you back to the dropship?”

“I was more than eight days’ walk away by that time.” All that walking, and without rest. How much ground had she covered? “They thought I was from something called the Dead Zone.”

Lincoln nods slowly, not meeting her gaze. “It would have been closer than the dropship if you were heading east.”

Octavia can’t seem to decide if she wants to stare at Clarke or Lincoln more. “What’s the Dead Zone?”

“It’s a blight,” Lincoln answers, once it’s clear Clarke won’t. She never found out for certain, anyway. “A hard existence. The only people that choose it are... tainted.”

“Do people wander in and out of it a lot?”

Lincoln shrugs. “Yes. Usually to steal whatever they need, and the desert can’t provide, from neighboring settlements.”

Octavia glares at Clarke. “But you didn’t understand their language.”
“I learned.” Enough to get by. And then enough to be better.

“You speak English.”

“I couldn’t speak at all. I was starving and I ate something -- some kind of root? I lost my voice for a long time after.”

Octavia looks at Lincoln, eyebrows raised.

"I've heard stories," he says slowly. "But from clans much to the west of us."

"I was following a river," Clarke reminds them. "Maybe it carried something from that area? Apparently there’s so much fear about genetic mutation, even regular disabilities make some people flee with their children to the Dead Zone. The fact I couldn't talk just made Lexa more certain that's where I was from."

Lincoln flinches, and Clarke bites her lip when she realizes.

“The Commander,” she resumes, “saw a mute, starving girl wearing Grounder clothing who had to rely on children to feed and arm her. You guys had weapons. You were days away. And I bet you looked organized from a distance.” She can’t help that waspish note, remembering Bellamy’s approach to leadership. “There was no reason for her to think I was anything else.”

“So... she... took you home with her?” Octavia waits for either of them to deny it before sitting back in amazement. “Oh, shit.”

“As I said, it wasn’t long before the story traveled beyond Polis,” Lincoln picks up the thread. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it spread much farther than that. Our people are hungry for news of the Commander. And those who didn’t know what it meant to capture a wood witch were soon told.”

He hesitates briefly before adding, “I don’t think there’s anyone left in the clans who hasn’t heard about you.”

“They thought Clarke was a witch because she couldn’t talk?”
“Because that’s the tale the Commander wanted to be told.”

“And because she found me wandering in the woods,” Clarke says. “There’s some kind of legend, or belief, right? About forest spirits who are... lacking something.”

“Eyes that see, ears that hear, or a voice to speak.”

“Right. And they steal those things to blend in with regular humans. But if you find one and know what it is, before it’s finished or something, then you get a mascot.” Half-forgotten bitterness warps the line of her mouth. “Protection from harm.”

Octavia winces. “She showed you off, didn’t she. That’s what they always do in stories -- no use having an enchanted shield or whatever if you don’t let other people know. That way half of them don’t mess with you to begin with.” Again, she hesitates. “This Commander. She was probably upset when she found out the truth.”

Clarke looks away. The skin across her shoulders and arms feels hot.

“She knew I wasn’t a witch, just like she didn't tell people about the kids who found me first,” she says once she knows her voice will be steady. “It was about the story. Like you said, she was just... using it to her advantage.”

“Yeah,” Octavia says. She turns back to Lincoln: “So, what’s the catch?”

He blinks at her. Clarke wonders how much of Grounders’ English education covers idioms. “Catch?”

“Bellamy would turn this stuff into bedtime stories. I used to think the heroes were stupid to take the magic boots or wings or flying horses in the first place, because there’s always a price to pay. You get the good stuff, but something trips you up in the end, every time.”

Lincoln, for the first time, looks genuinely uncomfortable. He shifts in his seat, clenches and unclenches his hands, all the while avoiding Octavia’s gaze. When he sees that Clarke is waiting on his answer as well, his eyes widen. “You don’t know?”
“It didn’t come up.” Clarke dimly remembers wondering about it as she stood in Lexa’s throne room, what feels like several lifetimes ago. But there had been so much else to learn and do in being Lexa’s wood witch, and she’d forgotten the myth behind the day-in day-out reality.

He stares at her.

“Lincoln,” Octavia says, impatient.

“A witch steals what they need,” he says, still staring. “But once they’re captured, and known for what they are, they can only take what is freely given. That’s the only way they can finally possess all they were lacking. Once they have it, though, they’re no longer bound to their captor -- they can escape.”

Octavia raises an eyebrow. “Someone has to give them working eyes or ears, or whatever?”

“A heart. Another person’s heart completes all that the witch lacks.”

A second later the light dawns in Octavia’s. “Oh, you mean someone falling in love with them.”

Horror stiffens Clarke features as she meets Lincoln’s stare.

“But it has to be the person who captured the witch, right?” Octavia continues, oblivious. “That’s how those things work. It can’t be just anyone with a crush, that wouldn’t play into the theme of...” She trails off, noticing Clarke and Lincoln’s unresponsiveness. “Am I missing something? That’s the tale the Commander wanted to be told.

She hasn’t forgotten why Lexa decided to make Clarke part of the spectacle of Polis -- another figure of dread and mystery in the Tower, like Titus with his shaved head and robes. She can remember the scene at the infirmary in heartbreaking detail: the smell of the freshly-laundered linens, the breeze coming in through the open balcony, the careful consideration in Lexa’s voice with I should find a way to put the healing on display, rather than the hurt?
Clarke had thought she meant physical healing. *Just* physical healing.

But Lexa’s leadership had been questioned for other reasons. Clarke remembers the subtle needling from certain clans during those first audiences together.

What was it Roan said in the dungeons? A very convincing performance.

In the wake of Costia, Lexa had become what people wanted of her: emotionless, heartless, no longer vulnerable to the kind of attack which had almost stopped her incredible momentum.

Lexa made her wood witch a part of that. *Knowing* Clarke was just a girl, not a supernatural creature who would regain her voice. Knowing there was no magic spell to be broken.

Believing in her bones that part of the story would never come true.

No wonder she had kept Clarke so secret and hidden, after. Clarke’s origins were bad enough, but if anyone in the tower had heard her speak...

But she’d escaped. The second part of the legend. And the sentries watching in the woods heard her yelling to be let inside the gate.

“Come on,” Octavia breaks the silence, noticeably subdued. “So they start thinking the Commander is in love with Clarke. I mean -- *float* me, but what does it change?”

She *had* been in love with Clarke.

When Clarke had been a lie.

“It’s not about what the Commander feels,” Lincoln tells her. “It’s the story that’s told.”

Clarke knows this, too. Half -- or more -- of the reason Wells had been miserable in his father’s house was he hadn’t been *allowed* to be miserable. Jaha couldn’t have a family divided against itself -- if he was going to be the last and ultimate authority of the Ark, his story had to be one of certainty
and control. And so he exercised and showcased that control on his son until Wells was managed almost into a footnote of a person; not known for himself, his character, his potential, but for being his father’s son.

But Thelonious Jaha was one of the longest-seated Chancellors in Ark history.

And Clarke has known Lexa too long -- too well -- to think she’ll allow such a glaring contradiction of her power. Her legend.

No, she will never allow that to stand.

“Well, Clarke escaped,” Octavia says. “So what kind of story is this?”

“A senseless damn tragedy,” Clarke says, her voice thick. She pushes away from the table and walks out.

Chapter End Notes

Housekeeping notes:

1. Hi, guys. I missed you (and this).

2. Clarke is an uncouth heathen, but I love Shakespeare’s plays, so don’t @ me.

3. There’s a bit of a side story about what’s going on back at the Tower, you can see it
by clicking on the new series title "Destruction and other stories."
Chapter 20

~*~

It isn’t her fault.

That’s what Clarke keeps telling herself, listening with half an ear as the Council questions her and discusses her answers amongst themselves. She’s seated at one end of a long oval table, her mother presides at the other. Abby Griffin’s voice cuts through the dissent now and again, but whenever Clarke looks over to her mother she finds an equally considering gaze meeting her own.

It isn’t her fault. Lexa made that choice. Lexa put Clarke forward, made her a symbol of Lexa’s own self-control. Lexa let everyone think Clarke really is a wood witch.

But you used it, a voice whispers inside her head. She took the power and advantages it offered. She used it to escape. She even took the paint with her -- she claimed her role in Lexa’s empire, even as she ran away.

It isn’t her fault. But she was a part of it -- she’s still a part of it -- and her stomach has been churning ever since her talk with Octavia and Lincoln last night. It’s like an invisible, intangible cord connecting her back to everything she thought she’d abandoned. Tying her, inextricably, to Lexa.

“Damn,” Representative Kaplan says, standing to get a better look at the rough sketch Clarke drew, at their prompting, on the erasable board that takes up the far wall. She only drew in what she could recall from memory of where the clans have staked their territory, but it did the job in impressing upon the Council members just how seriously they should take their predicament. That, and the map she’d taken -- stolen -- from the Tower, showing how Lexa’s troops had them surrounded.

That map is laid on the long table. It looks wrong, in the midst of the familiar Ark. The table itself is of some plastic-bonded material, made to endure but still pitted and scarred with age. The map uncurls over it elegantly, the paper scraped clean and bright so that the dark lines of ink could be laid down without fading or bleeding. It’s elegant, even under the low, energy-conserving lights, and almost feels... alive. If she reached out to touch it she might smell the wood pulp of the workshop, hear the low rustling sounds of the cartographers at work.

She curls her hands into fists until she can feel her nails cutting into her palms.
“Amazing,” Kaplan continues, shaking his head. “To have spread so far, after... well,” with a shrug. “It has to be true, what we’ve been told, about their being affected on a neurological level.”

Clarke gives a slow blink. She’s had a rough couple of days, she’s not following their discussion as fast as she -- “Neurologically?” And told by who, exactly?

The older Council member grimaces. Clarke remembers him -- Tesla Station, elected as their council Representative for the past ten terms at least. Entrenched, but not ambitious enough to hold much sway within the Council itself. Which explains why he hadn’t gone down with Diana Sydney. “There had to be some kind of reaction after being exposed to so much radiation. Perhaps it knocked them down a rung on the evolutionary ladder, from homo sapiens to homo sapiens idaltu. That would explain their ability to persevere, even while their society never evolves past savagery --”

“They’re not any different from us.” Visions of Lexa bleeding black fill her mind’s eye, and she gives her head a shake as if to clear it. “I mean they’re not... devolved.”

“They live like primitives,” another Representative says. “Their technology has severely deteriorated since the great wars.”

“They had to rebuild the entire world.” She looks disbelievingly at the faces around the table. “In ninety-seven years, have we innovated or invented anything, with all our access to tech and information?”

“We were focused on surviving,” someone protests.

“So were they. And they still --” Her hand is reaching out before she knows it, but she only brushes the edge of the map with her fingertips. “They still manage to make things like this.”

She can see it doesn’t impress them. They’re used to datapads and touchscreen interfaces -- none of them have ever spent time bending the natural world to their whim.

No, she’s wrong -- there’s a flicker of consideration over one of those impassive faces. Not her mother’s, she doesn’t have that kind of hope. But the dark-haired, beak-nosed Councilperson who was often at loggerheads with Abby over Council policy... what was his name? Kane.

“Thank you, everyone,” Abby speaks up from the other side of the table. She rises to her feet. “Now,
I’m sure Clarke has given all of us a lot to think about. I say we reconvene tomorrow afternoon. If there are no objections?"

There aren’t, not with that tone in Abby’s voice. Clarke recognizes it, and the unspoken command to remain seated while the others file out of the meeting room. Even if she didn’t, Abby’s gaze keeps her pinned until the door clicks shut, and they’re finally alone.

“Clarke,” Abby says.

That’s all it takes. Just her name, just her mother saying her name, and Clarke is on the precipice of seventeen and watching the guards as they lock her into solitary. Disbelieving. Helpless.

Furious.

“Nothing I said mattered, did it,” Clarke says flatly.

Abby braces both palms against the table. “It’s a lot all at once. You’re asking a lot of people who have lost almost everything.”

“I’m not asking them. I’m asking you.” Her Chancellor, her mother.

Abby sighs. Her entire demeanor speaks of someone dealing with an impossible situation -- or a child who refuses to listen to reason.

Again, Clarke wants to scream in Abby’s face: you’re sentencing us to death, just like you did with Dad. She wants to do it. Her teeth itch with the impulse.

Again, a soft voice inside her warns: Don’t throw away your best weapon in a battle already lost.

“Mom,” she tries again, “I know these people. I lived with them.”

Abby’s eyes flash. “And look what they did to you.”
Clarke resists the urge to put her hands over the healing cuts on her arms, hidden by her sleeves. “I don’t -- Mom, they don’t have a Skybox, and throwing people out into space is a lot less bloody, sure. But do you really see a difference?”

“You’re not defending what they did to you,” Abby says, in a truly terrible tone of voice.

No. “No.” Clarke swallows. “But you can’t refuse to treaty with them for that when the Council has done worse. To me, even.”

Abby raises a skeptical eyebrow, but Clarke meets her eyes. Three days of pain versus a year of isolation? Easy choice.

“As much as I’d like to hold the Grounders and their... Commander... accountable, it’s not just my child they hurt,” Abby says. “Except for yourself and a handful of others, they’ve kidnapped everyone from that first dropship and they show no sign of returning them. Not even for ransom.” Her expression hardens. “Which makes me suspect those kids might not be alive to be bartered for.”

Clarke bites down on And whose fault is it they were vulnerable and abandoned on Earth in the first place? and tries to swallow her ire. “You have no proof it was any of the clans that did that.”

“Who else, Clarke?” Abby spreads her hands wide, palms out and fingers outstretched. “Tell me who else could have taken them.”

“... I don’t know who --”

“No,” her mother cuts in, “you don’t. Because there is no one else. And because the people you are so intent on defending,” here she points -- toward nothing, but Clarke knows she’s indicating the warriors watching them from the surrounding forests, “have treated us as enemies from the start. Maybe you can forgive what they did to you, Clarke, but have you considered what they did to Wells? Can’t you show your loyalty to your best friend, in the face of that?”

The kind of loyalty you showed Dad? Just admit it isn’t people you care about, it’s the Council.

She had to literally bite the inside of her cheek to keep from saying it. She ducks her head to keep her
mother from seeing the rage she’s not sure she can keep off her face, hiding behind the curtain of her hair as she tastes blood.

The worst part is that she doesn’t know how to prove Abby wrong. She doesn’t believe the others from the dropship ran away on their own -- even if they had, she doesn’t believe for a second they would have been able to escape Anya’s surveillance.

Anya. Hadn’t she believed the Mountain took the others? “It must have been a rescue.”

Anya was paranoid, of course. And Clarke had thought she knew better, then. Thought there was no way. She didn’t know as much about the Mountain, then, but what she did know... Lexa, pale as death and bleeding from a gunshot wound, a bullet with toxic poison in its tip; these things made it impossible for Clarke to link anything of herself, even her people, back to the people inside Mount Weather.

But if they’d been taken instead of rescued?

For what purpose? And if the Mountain had that leverage over the Ark, why weren’t they using it to force a treaty? Clarke can have suspicions, but Abby is going to demand the reasoning behind them, the cold logic that can trace a line of action and reaction between events. Clarke’s instinctive repulsion won’t be anywhere near enough.

(When did she start thinking of clan allegiances as her own? When did she start to feel like their enemies were hers?

If that invisible cord were something she could actually feel, she would be convinced it was tightening.)

“Clarke.”

When Clarke raises her eyes, Abby has the same look on her face she did when Clarke first left solitary.

“There’s something else you need to know.”
Oh. Oh, she can tell she isn’t going to like this.

“After we first met with the Wallaces they invited us to take a tour of their labs. They said we deserved to have all the information before we decided where to place our alliances. There’s a reason Representative Kaplan was so... vocal, in his theories about. De-evolution.”

It’s as if her brain becomes a dead radio channel filled with white noise and static. A soundless hum that almost blocks out her mother describing what the scientists of Mount Weather showed them: a raving, mindless animal that had once been human. How they had, so sadly, told the Council this is what they become, eventually. They’re not like us. This is what they really are.

The memory of Sanga’s voice as they stood over the dead ripa together is much clearer, cutting through the buzz: Look. This one was Woods Clan before the Mountain got to it.

It’s not just one lie or one misdirection. It’s dozens. Maybe more. It’s that same sensation she had just before she burned the pictures she would have shown to Lexa. There’s something here, something like a beating heart at the center of all this, and so much bigger than Lexa convinced the Akers are aligned with the Mountain, or Abby convinced the missing kids were taken by Grounders.

It’s a thick, sticky net of conspiracy. Maybe it’s possible to untangle -- but she doesn’t have that kind of time. She needs to cut right through.

If she can only figure out how.

“You trust them?” Clarke asks, watching her mother’s face. “The Wallaces?”

Abby’s face falls into lines that answer yes even before she opens her mouth to amend: “I think Cage is a little... impetuous. But the President is a good man. Clarke, these people are like us. Don’t you see that?”

“No,” Clarke says, but there’s a cold at the center of her that says she suspects what her mother is about to explain.

“They have the same vision for the world. They’ve been waiting for us -- well, for people like us, for almost a hundred years. They’ve saved as much of the old world as they could. Clarke, you should see it, you would love the art from the old masters they managed to save. And books! And all the
sciences and medical techniques... A whole legacy, waiting for us on the ground.”

Just like the Arkers had been promised.

Oh, never in words. No one ever said the words “we are the heirs of humanity, the Earth is our birthright.” They didn’t have to, though, did they? What was the point of it all -- conservation and hardship and rationing food and water and oxygen and children -- if they, or at least the descendants they were allowed, didn’t take the final prize?

So, here they are. Only to discover the Earth’s bounty is already being enjoyed. That people -- other people -- had survived and shucked off all the old ways, had built new cities and new legacies. Had rendered everything Clarke’s people suffered into so much wasted effort.

Sure, the people of the Ark had things to offer: medicine, knowledge, memories. But they were no longer the anointed.

And that wasn’t the world they’d been promised.

“Mom,” Clarke says, struggling to keep her voice steady even as dread sinks into her bones, “you haven’t made any agreements with the Wallaces yet, have you? It’s not decided. Not yet.”

Abby shakes her head. “No, not yet.” She hesitates before adding gently: “But a decision has to be made. Soon.”

She walks out, leaving Clarke to sit alone in the meeting room. It has the same smell as the rooms they used to use for classes: stale air and old plastic.

“When did the dinosaurs go extinct?”

It was a question Mr. Pike had asked them. He liked to do that: give them a problem to solve or a project to construct, let them work as a class in their own way as he paced the perimeter of the room, listening, supervising.

That was the question he posed one afternoon, and then unlocked the informational databases for
their perusal. It should have been an easy exercise, but as they threw out the theories they uncovered -- meteorite, changes in the food ecosystem, volcanic ash -- he shook his head as the clock ticked away their time.

Who was it? Atom. Atom had finally shot back “There’s no real answer, is there.”

But Mr. Pike had smiled, and told them there was. He let them waffle a few minutes more before giving in to their pleas that he just tell them, already.

“Because the world changed. And they couldn’t.”

~*~

Eventually she shakes off her foreboding and goes to the cafeteria. She needs all her faculties, even if she’s never been less hungry in her entire life.

It’s worse during regular hours. Everyone looks tired. Trapped, her mind supplies, and she can’t deny that the felled Ark feels more confining and restricted now than it ever did floating in the vastness of space. Running on reserve power only serves to heighten the claustrophobia: the lights above their heads flicker and buzz, casting shadows that make the open room of the cafeteria look smaller.

She breathes a sigh of relief when she spots Wells over in one corner, and is halfway to him before realizing who he’s sitting with. She stumbles over nothing, regains her footing quickly.

She can do this.

“Hey, Wells,” she says. She grips the edges of her tray a little tighter before she looks to the person sitting beside him. “Hey, Bellamy.”

He looks so different. She’s not sure she would have recognized him. But Wells has come by every night since she was released from the infirmary, catching her up on everything she’s missed in the months she spent in Polis. They often fall asleep in the middle of the night on top of her made bed, still in their clothes -- like they used to in the weeks before career-determining exams in school. It’s
been the only thing that feels truly familiar since she arrived.

“Clarke.” She can still see shadows at the corners of his mouth and jaw -- souvenirs from Anya’s careful handling. Even when accounting for the bruises, though, there’s a striking new gauntness to Bellamy’s face, a seriousness in the way he holds his mouth, which transforms him. It’s hard to picture him like he was back at the dropship, shirtless and cocky.

“Things got bad fast, after you disappeared,” Wells told her during one of those late-night sessions in her room. “That acid fog thing scared them, and people were getting dehydrated and lost walking out too far trying to find you --”

“Trying to find me?”

“They liked you. Okay,” after she pulled a face, “they liked your plan to find Mount Weather, once they started getting really hungry. And they liked that you stood up to Bellamy, because no one else would.”

“You did.” He didn’t need to tell her that. She knew him.

“Yeah, but they hated me.” He shrugged before she could protest. “I’m used to it. Or I thought I was, until you left. When we couldn’t find you right away I went to Bellamy.” He rubbed at his face, looking embarrassed. “I kind of lost it on him.”

“I wish I’d seen it.” Wells rarely expressed the extent of his temper, but whenever it happened it was pretty spectacular. When it was happening to someone else, anyway.

“No, you don’t,” muffled behind his hand. “At one point I shoved an assault rifles into his chest and said if he started shooting it would save everyone a lot of suffering. And that it would come to the same thing, the way he was going.”

Clarke grimaced.

“Yeah, well, he agreed we needed to try other things. Not Mount Weather, not yet, but other stuff -- guarding in shifts, working in teams, that stuff. For a while it was working out. I was the idea guy, and Bellamy would sell it to the others on charm.”
“... and then?”

He was silent a while, eyes distant as he was lost in memory. “We finally started trying to find another route to Mount Weather,” he said, “not taking the trip, not yet, just scouting how to get there without...”

“Getting speared?”

“Yeah. Bellamy didn’t want everyone to know because -- it really did get bad, Clarke. A little girl cut herself on a knife Bellamy gave her, she didn’t tell because she was scared of everyone, it got so infected... I swear I tried everything, but she didn’t make it. She died screaming while I was trying to hold her down.”

She put her hand on his wrist. “It’s not your fault.”

“If you’d been there --”

“Maybe,” she cut him off. “Maybe not.” She gave him a brief squeeze.

“After that,” Wells resumed, clearing his throat, “Bellamy was... and when people found out where she got the knife, I really thought there’d be a mutiny. They were already scared and hungry, a bunch of them hadn’t paid attention in Earth Skills and weren’t careful about water, so they were sick. I think that was when everyone realized this was real. No one was coming to help us.”

“So Bellamy agreed to look for Mount Weather again.”

“But we had to plan for it, and he wanted us to go when no one else would miss us. He still wouldn’t let me go alone, because he didn’t really trust me,” Wells said with a mirthless smile. “Octavia caught wind and came with us. We stumbled on Raven and Finn halfway there -- they’d left on their own days before, but they got lost. We got caught out in another fog, and when we got back everyone else was just gone, Clarke. The whole camp was deserted. Except there were people we didn’t know, tattooed and dressed like... they were searching the place so we had to hang back. We thought maybe they’d taken everyone, but they seemed as surprised as we were.”
“You told all this to the Council?”

“Yeah, of course. We searched for them, we found all these other villages, but...”

“No one from the dropship.”

“Not even the clothes they disappeared with.”

“You told the Council?”

“They don’t think we’re capable of --” He cut himself off by pressing his lips together in a hard line. “We were sent down as human test subjects. That’s all they think we’re good for.”

She gave him a hard stare. “You sound like Bellamy.”

“I know what you think of him. I remember what he was like, too. But he’s changed.” He met her stare. “Haven’t you?”

She’s not quite sure she really believed it until now. But Wells had -- has -- a good point.

Which brings her to the person sitting across the table from her best friend.

“Hi, Finn,” she says.

He hasn’t changed. He still looks... the way he does.

But Wells is right: she has.

She can barely remember what she used to feel when she looked at Finn. He’d seemed exciting, then. Exciting. Reckless, but not unkind. He’d felt easy, if she was being honest. A nice-looking boy who wasn’t so nice to her he felt boring. Intelligent and quick-thinking enough to earn her respect.
Back then she’d thought that was what she wanted: easy. Something she could slip into when she needed it, and out of once it became too inconvenient to ignore.

For half a second she really hates Lexa for ruining Clarke on easy.

Finn stands but he keeps his eyes on his food tray. “Hi. I...” With a quick, guilty look in her direction -- oh, she hasn’t forgotten those big puppy eyes -- he picks it up off the table and mumbles something about the infirmary. Then he’s gone.

“His girlfriend’s still recovering,” Bellamy says as Clarke sits where Finn just vacated. “You hear about her? Raven?”

Clarke nods. Unbeknownst to her, Finn hadn’t been so easy after all. Not that it mattered, anymore.

“How is she?” she asks.

“You mom says she might lose the leg.” Bellamy’s expression is inscrutable. “But she’s out of immediate danger.”

“Good.” Raven sounds interesting from Wells’s stories. “You did a good job keeping her alive.”

Bellamy’s face only darkens. Clarke means it, though -- Wells said none of them were spared in Anya’s questioning, but that it hadn’t taken the Woods Clan general long to figure out the easiest way to get Finn to talk was to apply the knife to someone he loved.

Maybe when Raven gets out of the infirmary, she and Clarke can compare scars.

She’s more than a little surprised, hearing what happened when Wells, Raven, Finn, and Bellamy had been captured by Grounders, that none of them seemed to carry much of a grudge. To hear Wells tell it, they weren’t exactly eager to deal with any Grounders ever again, but there was a surprising lack of recrimination, or talk of payback. When she mentioned this, Wells’s mouth had twisted with bitterness: “We might know next to nothing about surviving down here, but we know when we’re punching out of our weight class.”
“How’d it go with the Council?” Wells asks her now. He doesn’t look like he’s expecting good news.

“Bad.” She picks up a fork and stabs at her food. “It’s like you warned. They dismissed everything I said.”

“You don’t think they really care about finding the others.”

Clare looks over at Bellamy. She remembers this -- his anger, his venom -- but the fear in his eyes, the resolution in the way he squares his shoulders, that’s all new.

“They’re using it to push a treaty with the Mountain. To scare everyone else into line.”

He’s challenging her, daring her to say otherwise. To defend her mom’s leadership.

“Yeah,” she says, and he starts in shock. “I agree. But listen,” and she hunches forward over the table, lowering her voice, “we care, and if we can convince enough people this allegiance with the Mountain is misguided, and putting us in the middle of their war, it could force the Council’s hand. It’s happened before.”

“Okay,” Bellamy says, begrudging. Wells just watches her. “So how do we do that? Your Grounders haven’t gone out of their way to sit down and talk things out.”

Her stomach clenches at your Grounders. “What about Lincoln? They’ve seen him with Octavia, they heard how you were rescued -- doesn’t that make a difference? Doesn’t that prove they don’t have to be our enemies?”

Bellamy is already shaking his head. “It’s not enough. They know people do crazy things when they’re... in love,” he finishes with visible effort. If there wasn’t so much else at stake, Clarke would be in a better position to enjoy the sight of Bellamy thwarted in his mission to be the most protective older brother in the world. “And the rescue only makes him the exception that proves the rule. He’s not high enough up the power hierarchy -- and too many of them know what it’s like to have their lives dictated by power-hungry dictators to trust he’d be able to make a difference.”
“The Commander isn’t like that.” He’s trying to insult her mom, of course, but Clarke refuses to be
distracted. “She’s spent her entire rule trying to prevent unnecessary conflict between the clans. She
doesn’t want to wage war on another front, she just thinks we’ve joined the one she’s in with the
Mountain.”

“You said we weren’t, though, and she didn’t believe you,” Wells says.

“She had the same problems taking my word for it as everyone else does Lincoln’s. And it turns out
she was right,” Clarke finished. She doesn’t have enough in her for bitterness about it.

The corners of Bellamy’s mouth turn sharply downward as he slumps. Wells continues to watch her
closely. There’s a crease dividing his forehead that says he’s looking at something that worries him,
though Clarke has no idea what about her would suddenly prompt it.

“If only she were here.” The words practically force themselves out of her. There isn’t any one
emotion prompting the confession but a storm of them, too thick and dark for Clarke to begin to
pierce. “The rest are acting on her orders, and they won’t deviate without her say-so, not even if we
prove...” She crosses her arms so tightly over her stomach it hurts. “She could still be in Polis for all
we know. She’s the only one who can change things, and we can’t be sure when she’ll get here.”

She sits, stewing in her own juices, until the responding silence prompts her to look up. Both of the
guys are giving her wide-eyed looks of astonishment.

Wells is the one to finally ask: “Nobody told you?”

~*~

“It started the day after you arrived,” Wells tells her as they climb up the rickety stairs to the crow’s
nest built into the wall surrounding the fallen Ark. “We didn’t use to see anyone, not even when they
attacked anyone who ventured beyond camp. Just their weapons.”

“What did you do when you saw her?” Clarke asks.

“Nothing,” comes the answer from across the way, as Clarke hadn’t been keeping her voice down.
She looks to see Kane standing with his back to the compound. “We didn’t know who she was, until you gave us a description. We still don’t know what it means.”

Clarke looks out from their vantage point. They’re at least fifty feet off the ground, maybe more - from here they can see the surrounding forests, the ominous swell of Mt. Weather in the near distance. “It’s been the same thing, every night?”

“As soon as the sun touches the horizon, she’ll appear,” he points, “there. It’s out the range of regular weapons.”

“She knows,” Clarke tells him. “They know from... conflicts with the Mountain.”

Kane nods, looking thoughtful. “We have other, hmm, resources, of course. There didn’t seem to be cause for it just yet.”

“What does she do?” Clarke looks at the direction he pointed in. It’s a slight break in the trees where the ground swells a little higher -- barely a hill, but still the high ground.

“Nothing. She sits on her horse until it’s completely dark, and then she disappears. It lasts about half an hour, forty-five minutes, total.”

Clarke swallows, but it’s difficult when her mouth is this dry. “Can I stay and watch, tonight?”

“Of course.” Kane’s tone seems deliberately mild, a contrast to how closely he’s watching her face. “She might recognize you from over there. It’s not as far as you’d think.”

And Lexa has good eyesight. Very good. If she’s looking in their direction, she’s probably already made out Clarke waiting with the rest of them.

Clarke grips the edge of the parapet and breathes out shakily. Behind her Wells shifts his weight, and she can feel his eyes on the back of her head. Kane goes back to scanning the horizon.

They don’t have to wait long at all.
When Lexa rides out from the cover of the trees, Clarke has a sickening wrench of *deja vu*. It’s not just the dark designs on her face, or even the wink of the metal ornament Clarke hasn’t seen in... she can’t remember. It’s not just the horse, either, or the long coat, or the paldron. It’s everything, and something on top of all that she can’t quite put into words.

This is the Lexa she saw first -- the warlord that dragged Clarke home like a prize and locked her up in the Tower.

Clarke has seen so many versions of Lexa since then. She can almost categorically say this one is her least favorite.

“That’s new,” Kane murmurs, and Clarke forces herself to focus. Lexa’s carrying a torch: a massive thing, flames licking at least a foot upwards. Clarke is surprised it doesn’t seem to spook the horse. But Lexa has good horses.

Clarke sends a quick glance down to Storm’s makeshift paddock inside the wall. She hasn’t spent much time there -- just enough to see that Storm is being spoiled rotten by any Ark child who can sneak something appealing out of the cafeteria and offer it between the slats of the fence. Freeze-dried fruit is the rumored favorite.

When she looks back toward the horizon, Lexa is turning in a careful circle -- Clarke can see the strain of muscle as Lexa holds it aloft. She faces the compound where the Ark fell, and then to the right, away from them, and then to the left.

“Making sure she has our attention,” Kane says.

Lexus nudges her horse into a gallop.

It takes a few moments to build speed, cresting over and down from the hilltop. The momentum, finally, seems to take its toll, along with the weight of the torch, as Lexa leans to the side as she struggles to stay upright.

No. Wait.
That’s not what’s happening.

They’ve known all this time the Grounder warriors were hidden, just behind the tree line, but no one has actually seen them. Now they can just make out the shapes of people, stepping out from the cover of shadow. They don’t go far. But there’s a lot of them -- they stand almost shoulder to shoulder.

They’re holding unlit torches.

Lexa isn’t tipping over. She’s leaning out, the speed of her passage not enough to threaten the fire she carries.

The flame catches.

It forms an almost solid ring of fire as Lexa rides around the perimeter of the compound, Lexa’s warriors holding their now-lit torches high. And as she goes, they turn...

... and light the torches of those standing behind them. And the warriors behind them, and behind them, and --

It ripples out with the Commander’s passage: a sea of flames flicking deep into the forests. Out, and out, and out , almost too far to see the pinpricks of light.

Beside her, Clarke hears Kane swear.

Clarke has been studying the map she brought them for days. She could sketch it with her eyes closed: the strategic positioning of troops, places where their surveillance thins out where it’s least needed. Those same gaps in their siege are what allowed her to reach the Ark in the first place.

They’re gone.

This isn’t a careful allotment of manpower with an eye for military maneuvering. This is naked, uncompromising numbers. More than twice the warriors from the original plan. Maybe even more than three times that.
This is the army you bring when you want to crush your enemy into dust.

Lexa finishes her lap around the compound, and her horse climbs up again to the top of the low hill where she’s waited these past nights. It pauses, hoofing at the earth. Lexa looks straight up at those watching from the tower.

She looks at Clarke.

Their eyes meet. For a heart-stopping second it feels as if the safety of the distance between them dissolves, and Clarke can almost smell the sweat and paint of her, hear the pull of her breath.

No, it isn’t her fault. But Clarke played her part, and she was as much the architect of this -- this moment, this outcome -- as the warrior across the field with flames crackling above her head. She was never going to be allowed to turn, or run, away from that.

Lexa nods once, as if in response, and disappears into the trees.

The other torches go out in the same wave they appeared, until the surrounding landscape is covered only in the shadows of dusk.
“Was that for you?”

“Drop it, Wells.”

He persists, following as she clatters down the stairway. “I think it was. I think that’s the reason she’s done nothing but wait on that hill for the last few days -- not because of strategy, not because of some weird Grounder mysticism. It wasn’t for Kane, he’s been up there every night, and she didn’t put on a show when your mother was watching. She knew you’d hear about it eventually, and she was waiting for you to come up and see.”

She whirs on him once they’re back on solid ground. “Keep your voice down.”

He looks her dead in the eyes. “That was for you.”

Clarke checks to see if there’s anyone close enough to overhear. Thankfully, no one’s even looking in their direction.

Why should they? To them, Clarke and Wells are just a couple of kids.

“Yeah, I think so,” she admits under her breath.

Wells stares at her for a long minute.

And then explodes.

“Dammit, Clarke! Have you managed to make this somehow worse? This is the woman who
ordered us tortured, who has sent arrows into anyone who gets close to the woods -- did you manage to make the bloodthirsty warlord who has us terrified of every shadow *even angrier*?"

Clarke draws in a hard breath. “Not here,” through her teeth. She turns on her heel and strides off without checking to see if he follows.

~*~

“You said you lived with their apprentices,” he says, once they’re back in the relative privacy of his room. Clarke had been going to hers, at first, until she remembered -- her mother could be in their suite. “You said it was a kind of... commune, for people who worked in the Tower.”

“I did.” Clarke sighs. “At first.”

“Then what?” His eyes are hard.

Clarke looks down at the hands in her lap. “I ended up -- don’t ask how, it’s a long story -- playing a more personal role for the Commander. They were training me to be her doctor. She gets hurt a lot,” she ends softly.

“Uh huh. What else are you leaving out? We thought -- you let us think -- that she tortured you because she found out who you are.”

“That was why.”

“But is that all of it? Because that display outside didn’t look like someone who’s upset she has to find a new *doctor*.”

His expression says he has her number, but Clarke can’t resist one last attempt to dig in her heels. “Nothing happened.”

“... I know we’ve been apart for a while, but I can still tell when you’re lying.”
“No, I mean...” It occurs to her that sex probably constitutes as something happening. But that’s not what she means when she -- “We weren’t really together. We couldn’t be.”

“Who made that decision?”

Clarke has to swallow a few times. “Lexa.”

He works his jaw for a long time. She can tell he’s trying to find the words, find a way to express... he looks angrier than she ever expected. “Is this why you didn’t try harder to come home?”

It steals the breath out of her. “What --”

“Yeah, sure, you didn’t know where you were, you didn’t have a voice, they kept you watched.” He shoots her a look that rips at her heart with guilt. “I know you. None of that would have stopped you for long.”

“I’m sorry,” it spills out of her, like the tears. “I thought you were dead. They told everyone you were all dead. I guess they were lying to keep everyone calm, they thought you were connected to the Mountain and they didn’t want a panic. I’m so sorry.”

It stops him in his tracks. And then his shoulders slump. He sighs, and he looks... older. It’s like she can see all that the last few months have added to his face, all at once.

He scoots until his back is against his headboard, holding one arm up in invitation.

Clarke goes. They haven’t done this in a long while. But when Clarke was fourteen she went through a rough patch with her mom for a couple month that never seemed to abate. It got so bad her dad swore off getting between them, and Clarke would run to Wells for the comfort she craved. She’s missed it, she realizes as she curls up next to him, her head on his chest, hearing his heartbeat. She’s missed him so much.

“I’m sorry, too,” he says. He puts his arm around her shoulders. “It must have been hard.”
“I couldn’t even ask for more information. I only knew what I heard in rumors.”

His hand loosens its grip on her shoulder and drops to rub against her back. “I don’t know if I could have pushed through that.”

“I almost didn’t.” The memories barely feel like her own, filtered through the past haze of desperation and hatred. “Lexa was the one who... she didn’t know what was wrong, not really, but she made me get out of bed and be with other people, and...”

Clarke sits up. The wounds on her arms and shoulders prickle with awareness. She takes a few moments to calm herself, and the storm of opaque emotion that threatens -- it feels like -- to cross the boundary of where it’s contained safely in her skin to envelop her for real.

She can’t afford that right now.

And she can... it’s possible to acknowledge the different facets of Lexa without actually dealing with them.

“I know what it all looks like, from your perspective, from the perspective of almost everyone on the Ark,” she continues. “But you have to believe me: she’s not what they’re calling her. There is a whole world of people out there, and they’re not warriors, they’re farmers and children and craftspeople, and -- Wells, she’s like this because it’s her job to protect them. From people like us.”

He folds his arms over his chest, looking skeptical. “From us? All we did was look for our own people. You weren’t the only one tortured,” he says, pointedly, “and Raven could lose a leg because --”

“I heard you burned down a village. Is that true?”

He gapes at her.

“Wells. I know none of you meant it, but -- could that have happened?”

When he shuts his mouth his teeth come together with a click. He sits up as well. “They did accuse
us of... Clarke, we were so out of it by then, we were hungry, exhausted, and terrified, and then we were captives of these crazy people who dressed like something out of an old film, and they kept saying....” The hollows beneath his eyes seem deeper when he turns to ask her, voice hoarse: “Did you say burned down?”

“Yeah.” She’d forgotten about it, until she had to relive the memory of those early days. But that was the rumor.

“Raven made rockets,” he says slowly. “Out of practically nothing. It was amazing, she puts scraps together and we -- we were desperate to let the Ark know we were still alive. That was way before we had any idea there were other people out there. Even with Jasper dying, we thought maybe there’d been some kind of trap he triggered... Clarke,” with genuine horror in his eyes, “We sent up rockets, and we never checked to see where they came down.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, because the first time you find out you’re a murderer isn’t easy. She remembers that.

She’s sorry for herself, too. For all of them. For the Grounders who died, and the Grounders who were so used to these horrors that they never questioned it was all connected back to --

“The Mountain,” as she clears her throat, “is the real reason, though. They’ve been fighting it for almost a century. And we speak their language and carry their guns, and -- that’s who Lexa thought we were. That’s the reason they’re ready to fight us now.”

He hunches over a little as he frowns. “How do you know the Mountain is the bad guy? No, hear me out: those Grounders had us trussed up and knocked out before we could blink, and I get that they thought we had already picked a team.” He swallows. “I get that we’d already struck a blow, kind of. But they weren’t interested in figuring out what was going on -- just how much we could give them. What if these people are so stuck in cycles of retaliation, they only see the world in those terms? How can we know who’s in the right or wrong, of if anyone is?”

“Do you remember the fog, when we got separated? The one that burned like acid?”

“Yeah.”

“The Mountain does that. Lexa said they especially like to use it near the end of winter, when the Grounders’ food runs out and they either risk exposure or starve.”
He flinches, hard. Retaliation is one thing, but it's hard to excuse something so deliberate.

“There’s so much more, Wells. I’ve seen the corpses of Grounders they... honestly I don’t know what they do, but they take human beings and turn them into monsters. And then they set them loose.” She grips the coverlet tightly. “I heard they showed the Council one of those -- things -- and said it’s what eventually happens to Grounders, that they de-evolve. It’s a lie. Wells, why would they lie like that if they didn’t have anything to hide? If they can do it to Grounders, what’s to keep them from experimenting like that on us?”

“They don’t have any reason to,” Wells says after a moment. “We’re -- we’re more like them than...”

“Than the savages who can still tolerate the Earth’s atmosphere?” She knows Wells, she knows he’s arguing just to hash out all cogent angles of the situation, but it still stings to hear him talk about the clans like... well, like the Council does. “Do you really want to be allied with people who can do that to other human beings?”

“No,” he says, and the look he gives her is a touch wounded. “Of course I don’t. But the Council...”

“I know. I tried.”

“Yeah, well, you probably made it worse.”

“Made it --”

“Do you have any idea what you look like when you talk about her? The Commander?” He sounds tired.

“I...” Her stomach churns. She’s never felt like Wells was someone she needed to shield pieces of herself from, protect her vulnerable underbelly from. Before. “A lot happened. But that’s not... None of it matters right now. What’s important is finding our people, and making sure we don’t end up in a war.”

The corner of Wells’s mouth dips down and digs into his cheek. “I’ve got nothing. What about you?”
Clarke sighs.

~*~

Do you have any idea what you look like when you talk about her?

Noted, she thinks the next afternoon as she takes a seat in her mother’s office. No talking about Lexa.

That shouldn’t be hard. Her awareness of the braid hidden under her hair is like an itch on her scalp. But she’s not thinking about Lexa. Not if she can help it.

She can recall, with amazing clarity, her last real sight of the Commander: her slack and sleeping face, hair curling across her pillow. The instant in which she decided she couldn’t afford to feel... anything, about those features, that person. Not if she wanted to get anything done.

She still hasn’t done what she wants. There’s still so much, obstacle after obstacle in her path. She doesn’t have the luxury of feeling.

She has to keep reminding herself that until it’s over.

“I hear you had a front-row seat to last night’s performance,” Abby says as she walks inside. “You didn’t come home, afterward.”

“... no. I was with Wells.”

“Well, that’s.” Abby takes a seat. “I’m glad. There’s been so much upheaval, I’m glad the two of you can support each other. I did hope... maybe sometime soon, the two of us will have time to reconnect, as well.”

Clarke’s gaze dips down to the surface of the desk between them. It was badly scuffed and scratched
in the Ark’s landing, but is otherwise intact. The picture of her and Jake used to live right here. She wonders what’s happened to it since. Maybe Lexa burned it, in retaliation.

“Clarke.”

She looks up.

“President Wallace sent a message this morning.”

She waits.

“With the threat of the Grounders now in force, he’s urging a decision on the alliance within the next few days.”

“You mean he gave you a deadline.”

Abby is silent for a long moment. “This is how politics work, Clarke. We weren’t prepared for what we would find on the ground, and now we have to deal with the consequences.”

“There are other options.”

“Are there?” Abby asks softly, as if to herself, and she sits back from her desk. “The resources we had already stockpiled won’t last forever, and the solar panels don’t generate the necessary levels of energy with the Earth’s atmosphere between us and the sun. We can last a couple more weeks like this, maybe. If the Grounders don’t decide to outright attack.”

“What were Anya’s terms when you met?”

“Surrender. Complete and utter.” Abby’s mouth presses into a hard line. “I know you admire them, Clarke. But I can’t hand over our people without any kind of protections in place.”

“President Wallace offered you protection.”
“If we formally ally ourselves with the Mountain, yes.”

Clarke pushes her nails into her palms and tries to think like the person she used to be, her mother’s daughter, raised according to her values. She knows that’s why her mother is telling her all this -- Abby wouldn’t have any compunctions about doing her job without Clarke’s input, but she is trying. And they used to talk about these things, sometimes.

“What does the Mountain get from an alliance with us?” she asks finally.

A flicker of what might be relief passes over Abby’s face. "I mentioned before that the people of the Mountain have a very strong sense of legacy. They want to restore the world as it was, Clarke. They know we can help them.”

“With our databases?”

“Yes, their computers weren’t as extensive in capacity. Their focus was on saving things -- paintings and art -- less on information. And they didn't have the same attitudes of conscious preservation that we did on the Ark, no rituals to remind ourselves of our cultures and history. They’ve lost things that we could give back to them.”

“And that’s all?” Clarke asks slowly. “They’re refusing to help us until we give them access to our databases?”

Abby clears her throat, laces her fingers together. “Well, we also share the common interest of broadening the gene pool.”

Clarke stares. “Mom. What the hell, did you promise them marriages?”

“Stop being dramatic. You’ve taken basic biology, you know this has become a real concern over the last generation.”

Clarke bites her lip to keep from protesting. She also knows about the couple who had been floated three years ago, after defying the Council’s refusal to grant them a partnership licence. Their families had been too intermixed, but the couple hadn’t cared. Later, they thought the woman’s pregnancy
would gain them leniency.

It hadn’t.

“President Wallace is optimistic that Arker DNA might counteract their concerns with solar radiation,” Abby says. She hesitates before adding: “Of course, that could take several generations. Unless there’s some kind of medical breakthrough.”

Dread trickles down the length of Clarke’s spine, but she’s unsure why. “A breakthrough, like... new information? From Ark records?”

“That, or...” Abby sits back in her chair. “If we agree to it, I’ve been told the President’s son has a cadre of doctors and scientists who have been researching a cure for their vulnerability to the sun, and they think it might be found in us. Our bodies. A transfusion, perhaps, or organ donation.”

The dread pools in the center of her, icy and dark. “They want us for experiments.”

“Clarke.” Abby sighs, closing her eyes. “Do you have to be so -- all medical improvements are the result of experiments. And no one will be forcing us into anything. Strictly on a volunteer basis.”

“You can’t be sure of that.” Not after they move down into the Mountain, their supposed haven from the Grounders -- by then they’ll be surrounded. Caught.

“To be honest, if it were just Cage we were dealing with... but Dante Wallace is a very reasonable man. He truly believes in their legacy, Clarke. I truly think he wants to bring our people together in harmony.”

Clarke unclenches and clenches her hands into fists. “What about Farm Station? They’re still missing, and if we go underground so soon, they won’t be able to find us again.”

The corner of Abby’s mouth tics downward, and her eyes go a little bit distant. “I mentioned that to the Wallaces. I understand their eagerness to move us into Mount Weather, and I’m sure most would want to go, but we discussed the possibility of leaving a contingency behind. I told them, if anyone could find their way through that wilderness and bring our people back, it would be Charles Pike.”
Clarke searches her mother’s face. “What did they say?”

“They agreed.” Abby clears her throat. “But then they -- they have surveillance cameras set up around their own perimeter, so they can anticipate any attacks.” She pauses.

Clarke already knows what she’s going to say.

“They saw a man being chased through the woods. He wasn’t dressed like a Grounder. He’d been -- they say they could see arrows in his back and thigh. He managed to hide, but he wasn’t in good shape. After the Grounders passed, President Wallace sent someone up to recover him, but they have to put on protective suits first. They were too late.” There are lines around her mouth that speak of genuine regret. “They say he fit my description of Pike.”

Clarke’s eyes are dry with her refusal to blink, or look away from her mother’s face. “They’re lying.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Mom --”

“It was several weeks ago, right around the time the Commander failed to treaty with us. The woods were filled with her people, Clarke. If you’re right about the power she wields, then she ordered him taken. She ordered to have him killed. She could have ordered all of Farm Station to be hunted down like animals.” Abby’s expression is one of terrible pity. “How do you know you’re not the one who was lied to?”

... no. Lexa isn’t kind. But she doesn’t kill for sport.

“Mom, you don’t even have any proof. All you have is a story.”

But Abby is already reaching for one of the drawers of her desk.

“They burn their dead under the Mountain,” Abby is saying as she takes out a wrapped package. “But they saved some of his effects. They’re humane, Clarke. Unlike --” She shakes her head, once. “I wasn’t going to show you this. I haven’t told anyone outside the Council about this, I was afraid
of attempts at retaliation. Charles Pike was well-loved. And I know you liked him very much.” She unwraps the thick fabric away from its contents before pushing it across the desk to her daughter. “But it’s time for you to face the truth.”

It’s an Ark jacket. When Clarke touches it, she finds the fabric stiff with dried blood. The name tag reads: C. PIKE.

~*~

Her mom has Council business, so she leaves Clarke alone in their suite. To her credit Abby says nothing even close to I told you so.

Clarke sprawls out on her bed and gazes, unseeing, up at the cracked ceiling.

You can’t fake an Ark jacket. They’re old. They look it, they feel it, they smell it. Everything on the Ark has been restitched and refurbished and redistributed until it’s rags. Sometimes enough materials are scrounged or recycled to make a brief run of new pants or shirts, but the jackets are heirlooms. Everyone who went up with the Ark got a military-issue jacket, and they’ve been preserved by families since. They only thing that changes with each new owner is the name tag.

So. Pike is dead.

Maybe he was killed under Anya’s command, and she didn’t think it was important enough to pass on to Lexa. Maybe Lexa knew. Maybe Clarke has been fooling herself, like her mom says. Certainly, if you’d asked Clarke before, she’d never have guessed that Lexa would allow Gustus to - -

Clarke slams her eyes shut, forces her breathing to slow. In, out. Until that waiting storm of feeling subsides and sinks beneath her skin.

With Pike gone, there’s nothing -- no certainty that Lexa will ever see the Ark as separate from the Mountain. No link between Farm Station and Azgeda. All of Clarke’s efforts to keep him alive, the betrayal of Lexa’s trust that convinced her Clarke was a spy, all pointle--
Clarke sits up in her bed, heart pounding.

She told Pike to disguise his clothes with dirt. She remembers that. She thought it would help him seem more like an ordinary Grounder.

*He hadn’t been wearing his jacket.*

She would have had him take it off, otherwise. She would have had him leave it behind. No Grounder wears English letters on their clothes. It’s a sign of the Mountain. He had to have left it behind, or had it taken off him, somewhere, long before he’d been caught and imprisoned in Polis.

So how the hell had President Wallace gotten his hands on it?

It all falls into place with a *snap* that Clarke can actually feel in her bones.

The Mountain already has an alliance.

*With Azgeda.*

~*~

“Wait, wait.” Wells holds his hands up. “Start over again, please. From the top.”

Clarke draws in a deep, impatient breath. But the faces of the others -- Bellamy, Octavia, Finn, even Lincoln -- don’t look much more understanding. So she lets it out slowly.

“Okay, so first off,” Wells begins without her, possibly because he recognizes her frustration, “you lied, before.”
“I didn’t --”

“As good as,” and with a start, she realizes he’s furious. “You’ve known where Farm Station is? This whole time? And you never said anything?”

“...I...”

“You knew it would prejudice us against them,” Wells says, his voice tight with anger. “You knew - - Clarke, if they have Farm Station, they might have everyone else from the dropship.”

“No.”

“It’s possible.”

“It’s not,” she shoots back. “The dropship landed in Woods Clan territory. Azgeda can hide what happens in theirs, but Lexa would know what was going on in her territory.”

Wells still looks doubtful, but he doesn’t fight her on it. “Fine. But you didn’t tell the Council they have Pike locked up somewhere, which is just as bad. Anything we do here, they could take out on him.”

They only place where they could trust not to be overheard is outside the Ark, the same place where Lincoln and Octavia train. The sun is almost directly overhead, but the days are so short now the ground radiates with cold. Clarke jams her hands deep into her jacket pockets to keep them warm.

“They don’t have Pike,” she says.

“You were just telling us --”

“I got him out. He had some injuries, and they asked me to take care of them. I gave him a way to get back to the Ark.”
“Are you kidding me --” Wells realizes his near-shout is drawing attention and turns, stalking a few steps off to press his palms to his forehead in an attempt to calm down.

The others are confused. Except for Lincoln, who’s looking at Clarke like she’s a bomb that might go off at any second.

Wells abruptly drops his hands and steps back into their circle. “So. You engineered a prisoner’s escape.”

“It wasn’t like --”

“You engaged in sabotage.” He meets her eyes. “And that had nothing to do with their -- reaction,” he gestures at her torso, “to finding out who you were?”

“Yeah, okay, that might have been part of it.” She can feel the stubborn set of her own jaw. “Does it really matter right now?”

“So you didn’t tell the Council about Farm Station, or Pike,” Finn says, in a blatant effort to get them back on track. “Why not?”

“Because it didn’t suit her narrative,” Wells snaps. “The story about the kindhearted Commander who rules with absolute power, the one who can get us out of this mess--”

“Ruling is never like that, and you know it,” Clarke says, finally losing her temper at him. “How many Council deliberations did our parents make us observe for extra credit in government classes? How many times did we watch negotiations fall through because Geo-Sci wanted a bigger piece of the energy allotment, or because Hydro Station couldn’t deliver by deadline without serious repairs?”

“So what are you saying?” he asks. “That our people are being held captive by the equivalent of Aero Station in the middle of a tantrum?”

“I’m saying your dad’s was Chancellor for almost our entire lives, and Diana Sydney still managed a mutiny. The Coalition’s been in place for only a few years. Azgeda’s attempts to seize power don’t mean we need Lexa’s help any less.”
“Ice Nation,” from Lincoln.

She turns. “What?”

“Ice Nation is how you say it in your language.”

It feels like a rebuke. From the way he’s looking at her, it might be.

“You didn’t tell the Commander about the Ice Nation’s prisoners,” he continues, and oh, yeah. He’s angry.

“They thought Pike was a Mountain Man,” she says. “And after -- she wasn’t going to believe me, Lincoln. Not without proof.” He opens his mouth as if to argue, but she hurries on with: “Queen Nia is capable of it, though, isn’t she. She hates Lexa enough to ally with the Mountain.”

The rest of them watch him work through it in his head. “I... yes,” he says reluctantly. “I think she does.”

“Why, though?” asks Finn. “If Grounders hate the Mountain, and vice versa, then...?”

“Here’s what I think happened,” Clarke says. “The Wallaces saw Woods Clan warriors advancing on the dropship -- Mom says they have surveillance cameras, and we initially landed much closer to their perimeter. They stage a rescue, because of... legacy,” the word itself bitter on her tongue, “but also because we can tolerate the Earth’s current levels of radiation, and they can’t.”

Octavia frowns. “So can the Grounders.”

“Exactly.” Clarke looks to Lincoln. “That’s why they’ve never tried to wipe you out entirely, isn’t it? They use the fog and the reapers, but only as containment. They do other things, don’t they.” It'd been the only logical conclusion after hearing of Cage's experiments. If he was willing to try it on the Arkers, there's no way he'd felt any compunction toward Grounders.

He grimaces, and nods. “They use our blood to cure their sickness from the sun. No one has survived it -- we're used as a harvest.”
If Clarke is going to get through this, she needs to push aside how the thought twists her stomach. “Right. Because your people acclimated to the new level of radiation. But what if we,” she looks to the rest of their group, “surpassed that? We didn’t even have the atmosphere to protect us, just the Ark’s structure. What if they started to suspect that Arkers had something even better to offer? Pike said they separated the kids from the adults, and then the adults began to slowly disappear from where Ice Nation was keeping them prisoner.” She licks at dry lips. “What if they were being traded for something?”

“How would the Ice Nation know the Mountain wanted Arkers?” Finn asks.

“I think the Wallaces approached them. I think once they figured it out... okay, factor in the time it takes for Cage to persuade the President to run serious experiments. And then proving the results.” Octavia’s hand is already creeping toward her mouth, but Clarke can’t spare them. Not if they want to get this right. “But there were only so many kids on the dropship. Maybe it’s not enough to cover the entire population under the Mountain, or even those in command. Then the Ark lands. They hear that we’re missing a Station. They can easily track the trajectory to see whose territory it landed in.”

“Why the diplomacy, then?” This from Bellamy. “Why not just round up the rest of us?”

“We can defend ourselves, for one thing. Strong-arming might lead to loss of Arker lives, and they want us alive.” She shakes her head. “And maybe Mom’s right, maybe President Wallace thinks we can ultimately come together in the end as a united force. But they’re hedging their bets.”

“What does the Ice Nation get out of the alliance?” Wells is frowning, but he’s listening. “Even if they don’t know what the Mountain is doing with our people, what’s enough to entice them to betray the Coalition to the point of no return?”

Clarke draws another deep breath, the cold air stinging the back of her throat. “I think the Mountain is giving them an army.”

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Lincoln has to explain reapers to them. The others look like they’re going to be sick. When Clarke explains the shaking bridge across the ravine, her theories about the attack on Blue Cliff, Lincoln looks even worse.
Octavia takes one look at him and makes a decision. “We’re finishing this later,” she tells them. Finn’s about to protest, but Octavia takes Lincoln by the elbow and glares daggers at Finn. “We’re not going to get anything else done tonight,” she hisses. “I’m calling a timeout.”

She half-drags, half-bullies Lincoln back to the Ark. It’d be funny, if Clarke didn’t see the mask slip for a second or two, exposing how worried Octavia really was.

“We might want to make a move tonight,” Clarke says as soon as they’re out of earshot. “The Wallaces gave the Council a deadline, we need to do something as soon as --”

“What are you planning to do?”

There’s a note of something Clarke doesn’t quite recognize in Wells’s voice, but she doesn’t have time to analyze it. None of them do. “We’ve tried the Council and we’re tried my mom. Our only choice is talking with the Commander.”

“The woman who had you tortured? The woman who nearly started a forest fire to make sure you were paying attention?”

“What other option do we have?”

“You mean what option do you have. You want to put yourself in danger. Again.” His voice cracks. “After we finally got you back. Did you know what it was like for me, thinking you were dead?”

“Wells, listen --”

“No, you listen to me,” he says, his quiet intensity bringing her up short. “If Farm Station survived, there’s a chance – a chance – my dad survived. That he’s out where they are. Held captive like they are, which is why he never found us.” Clarke realizes, with dull shock, that tears are filling his eyes. “And you never said a word.”

Clarke opens her mouth. Shuts it.
It’s not that she never made the connection, once she heard what happened to Thelonious Jaha. But she never -- it didn’t feel like --

... she really is Abby’s daughter.

Wells can read it on her face. Tension draws every muscle in his body tight like a bowstring. He gives her one more quick, slashing glance before he turns and walks back to the Ark.

“I...” Finn also breaks free of their circle. “I’ll try to go -- talk to him,” he says before following.

“He’ll get over it.”

Clarke looks over her shoulder at Bellamy, who moves to stand beside her.

“He’s just not used to it,” he tells her as he crosses his arms, both of them facing the lights of the downed spaceship. “You know. Being deprioritized. He talks a good game about needing to rattle the Council, but I think he’s still waiting for them to wake up to the danger. He’s still trying to be one of the good kids.”

It makes a lot of sense. Things are different now -- before Earth she only had one context to understand everyone she knew, and even the dropship’s landing had been a continuance of those understandings, those roles they played. Not much from the Ark has actually changed in the last few months, but Clarke has. Clarke is the new context makes everything old and familiar feel new again.

“I didn’t mean to make him feel like he wasn’t a priority.”

“Sure you did,” Bellamy says, without rancor. “You’re Alpha Station. It’s what you do best.”

She looks at him, and he raises an eyebrow in silent challenge.

“I’m just saying,” after a moment. “It doesn’t surprise me you ended up involved in Grounder consolidation of power central, or whatever. All I want to know is whether this is about them, or your mom on the Council, or if this is about...” A muscle in his jaw clenches. “Farm Station. And the others who came down with us.”
And if a big part of Wells is still trying to be the perfect son his father can’t help but love, then a big part of Bellamy Blake is still the kid who hid an illegal sibling under the floor for almost two decades; someone who looks at the doomed scenario, the case with a five percent survival rate, and stakes his heart on it.

The real question is, what does that make Clarke? Is she her mother’s daughter? Is she the Commander’s wood witch?

Or has she managed to become something new?

“I want it to be about everything,” she tells him. “All of it. The world is so much bigger than we thought.”

She watches him chew it over. “Yeah,” he agrees finally. “But eventually you have to prioritize someone.”

You would think that, she doesn’t say, you’re Factory Station.

It’s not fair, anyway. It’s a nasty stereotype to begin with -- Factory Station is all but lawless, even the guards from there are corrupt, they’re only out for themselves -- but even when there’s merit, who taught them that when the chips fell, there’d be no one to protect them?

Maybe that’s the problem with focusing on the greater good. Humanity is made up of individuals; sacrifice them, one by one, even for the best reasons, and the humanity of your endgame bleeds away as well.

The wind picks up, and Clarke shivers. The skin across her shoulders and arms is still sensitive with healing.

... so, what then? The Gounders don’t want Lincoln or Clarke. The Arkers don’t care about Octavia, or Finn, or Bellamy, or Raven. Or even Wells without his powerful father. Do they wash their hands of it? Steal what supplies they can, sneak away in the night? Try to rescue Farm Station on their own, maybe. Find that leader to that has no love for Lexa -- the safe one, the place where Lexa planned to hide her wood witch. Isolate themselves from a world that constantly forces them to choose between their humanity and their lives.
Maybe.


But that’s not who she is. Maybe it’s selfish of her not to be, considering how many other lives are at stake. But the person she is -- the person who tried to continue the mission that floated her father, the person who attacked the assassin in Lexa’s tent long before Clarke knew she deserved saving -- doesn’t know how to cut her losses and run.

At least, not when she has one last card hidden up her sleeve.

“What if I told you I can get the Commander to talk to me,” she says, so quietly she’s not even sure Bellamy can hear her, given the long pause that follows.

“I’d say there are easier ways to kill yourself, if you’re that interested.”

“I mean it.” She risks a glance over at him. “As long as I can reach the trees without anyone from the Ark sounding an alarm.”

He finally deigns to look at her “Clarke...”

“Do you have any ideas?”

He presses his lips together in a thin line. “I know a bunch of the guards who do patrol,” he says, because of course he does. “Some of them were friends with kids from the dropship. They’ll look the other way if I ask.”

“Okay.” Clarke can’t stop shivering, now, but it’s too late. She knows what to do.

“Patrol will be light tonight, anyway, with the celebrations.”
“What celebration?”

“Didn't you notice?” His smile is mirthless. “Today is Unity Day.”

~*~

It takes her four tries to get the paint right, her hands are shaking so badly.

“Here.” Bellamy takes something out of his pocket. It’s a shard of mirror slightly smaller than his palm. “See if this helps.”

It does, as long as he holds it for her. When she asks, he talks about how they salvaged them from the dropship, used the way it caught the sunlight to signal safety to each other as they explored the woods. The stories help even more than her dingy reflection: they keep her hands steady.

They took the pot of gold paint off her, and her witch clothes, after she collapsed and had to be taken to the infirmary. They took the map she’d carried, too, but that was the only thing they didn't return. They didn’t see the use of the rest.

She steps into the clothes. When she pulls the shawl around her head, it still carries the scent of burning from the map room.

“You look like them,” Bellamy says.

“That’s the point.” She swings herself up into Storm’s saddle. She couldn’t wear this getup around the Ark without someone figuring something is up, hence the quick costume change inside Storm’s makeshift stall.

“No, I mean...” Bellamy does a vague hand gesture that takes in the way she sits on the horse. Then his hand goes to touch his own eye. Then he shrugs. “You really look like you’re one of them.”

Later, riding on Storm and halfway to the trees, her hands restart their shaking. She yanks her shawl
down as she gets close, and grips the reins too tightly. It’s fully dark now. She’s too far to be seen from the Ark, but she’s hoping the gold paint on her face will be seen before she’s killed outright.

*It’s a respected tradition,* she remembers Lexa’s voice, Lexa’s soft touch, the first time she applied it. *And it will protect you. I promise.*

When she crosses the tree line and the first Grounder warrior steps out of the shadows, Clarke’s lungs feel like they’ve frozen in her chest.

It’s a woman. Older than Clarke, dark hair cut short against her scalp. The dark paint on her cheeks affords Clarke as much relief as she can feel, right now, because it means she’s Woods Clan. Clarke isn’t sure she has the wherewithal to remember any other Grounder dialects in this moment.

And as they stare at each other in silence, the warrior doesn’t spear Clarke through the heart. Another sign she’s probably Woods Clan.

“I want to speak to the Commander,” Clarke tells her.

Without dropping her gaze, without blinking, the warrior shifts to the side in a way that indicates in what direction Clarke should ride.

Maybe they prepared as they saw her coming, maybe they passed the news on as she went. But every time Clarke is in danger of wandering the wrong way, a warrior makes themselves known amongst the darkness and the trees and points her where to go. It doesn’t take her long to reach camp. The warriors there are just as silent as she approaches, all talk and movement ceased as she rides through. Their eyes glitter with dark wishes, hands tighten on weapons as she passes by.

But they let her pass.

It’s worth a moment. Just a small one, as she climbs down from Storm in front of the biggest tent in camp — a size and structure she recognizes from memory. A moment of pressing her face into Storm’s mane, and feeling the triumph of her gamble.

Lexa’s promise to her holds true: no one raises a hand to the Commander’s favorite but the Commander herself.
She recognizes Gustus as well where he stands guard at the tent’s entrance.

“When Heda is ready,” he says, and she pauses in the middle of walking past him, almost close enough to brush against his arm, “I have asked her permission to finish what I started, and slit your throat.”

Clarke walks inside, where Lexa sits on her gnarled throne with a naked blade in her hands.

Waiting for her.

(next chapter)

“I remembered what you said.” Clarke has to force the words through a throat tight with fear. "None of them can harm me when I wear the mark of your favorite.”
“True.” Lexa's eyes are dark as she says, with terrible softness: "But I can."

Chapter End Notes

Hey, who's going to be at Clexacon? Because I am. :D

I'll be helping out at blindwire's booth for the most part. I definitely urge you not to miss out on her gorgeous art, and if you've also wondered "is this font of angst and Clexa trash a real person or just a cleverly-disguised sea witch" you're welcome to come and check me for tentacles.

(In all seriousness: if you'd like to say hi please don't hesitate, it would give me the thrill of a lifetime. I'll be updating my tumblr (entirelytookeen) for most of that weekend, check it out.)

Works inspired by this one

Cover for "(my) Destruction Within Your Mouth" by KL Morgan by RunawayMarbles

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!